



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## An investigation into cultures, concepts and understandings of Japanese studies in the UK

**Citation for published version:**

Perkins, C & Reig, J 2020, 'An investigation into cultures, concepts and understandings of Japanese studies in the UK', *Japan Forum*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2020.1822907>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/09555803.2020.1822907](https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2020.1822907)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Japan Forum

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Japan Forum on 4 November 2020, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09555803.2020.1822907>.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.





THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## An investigation into cultures, concepts and understandings of Japanese studies in the UK

**Citation for published version:**

Perkins, C & Reig, J 2020, 'An investigation into cultures, concepts and understandings of Japanese studies in the UK', *Japan Forum*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2020.1822907>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/09555803.2020.1822907](https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2020.1822907)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Japan Forum

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Japan Forum on 4 November 2020, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09555803.2020.1822907>.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# An investigation into cultures, concepts, and understandings of Japanese Studies in the UK

Chris Perkins, University of Edinburgh  
Júlia Reig, independent Scholar

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

I often feel like that maybe it's just me being confused but it feels like the Japanese studies itself it confused like, how to approach Japan, because sometimes they are trying to make it look like I don't know, Japan is just bat-shit crazy and completely different than our society, and then they have this other point of view that, "Oh, they are not really that different and they are just people as well and whatever." So, it's – I don't know, I just find it a bit confusing.

4<sup>th</sup> year Japanese Studies Student<sup>2</sup>

One more thing, this is of course something which should be the goal of every university education, mainly that the sort of critical stance or detachment in general but also to your own position. Always questioning your own position of what you do in Japanese studies. This probably might be something which is also an essential now in Japanese because people are very, very self-conscious of what they do.

Japanese Studies Practitioner

We open with these quotes because they illustrate two very different perspectives on Japanese Studies. The first, taken from a focus-group with 4<sup>th</sup> years students conducted as part of this research project, is from a student who wants clarity about the goals of Japanese studies. What are we trying to do: explain difference or seek similarities? And when they do not get this clarity, they are left asking what is this Japan that we are teaching and learning about, and how do we systematize our knowledge so that it is stable? The second quote, from an academic at the same institution, takes a very different view. Instead of worrying about 'confusion' the academic actively embraces reflexivity; indeed, the quote denies the ability and even desirability of producing the sort of stable knowledge the student appears to seek. Here are two very different views regarding Japanese Studies, each with their own tacit assumptions about knowledge, inquiry, academic practice, and ethics. It is these assumptions, and their relationship with the practice of Japanese Studies, that we investigate here.

While there is a large literature on Japanese language pedagogy, investigations of Japanese Studies (JS) as it takes place in universities are sparse. What exists generally falls into one of two categories: either histories of the development of the subject area, or accounts of teaching strategies (for the former see Cortazi and Kornikci 2016, for the latter see for example Refsing 1992). Of course, both approaches bring something important to the table. We need to know how and why the infrastructure of JS has evolved to the point it has today so we can make good decisions about the future of the subject area. Furthermore, as Eyal

---

<sup>1</sup> This project was made possible by a grant from the British Association for Japanese Studies. We would therefore like to thank BAJS, as well as Daniel Hammond whose input was very important in the formulation of the project. We are also indebted to the two reviewers for Japan Forum who provided very useful and detailed comments.

<sup>2</sup> As we are not conducting critical discourse or conversation analysis, which would necessitate careful reproduction of all utterances of our interviewees, we have edited all quotes for readability. All informants have been anonymised. Practitioners are referred to as Px, students by UxSx, where U stands for University and S for Student.

Ben-Ari (2020) has cogently argued, it is also vitally important to acknowledge and understand how the relationships between JS, the disciplines, and the languages in which those disciplines are taught shape the distribution of power across academia, not least in determining who decides 'what is worthy of study' (16). Finally, and just as importantly, there is a clear need to share good practice, so our classrooms continue to be lively, dynamic places for students to be.

This paper, while sharing aspects of both strands of activity discussed above, is not intended as an addition to the historical or institutional analysis of JS, nor is it a case study of good practice. Instead we draw on approaches in Education Studies (ES) that emphasises the social, negotiated and situated nature of learning and teaching in higher education to ask questions about how JS is conceptualised on the ground. Rather than viewing learning as transactional or simply the internalisation of existing disciplinary values, these ES approaches view learning and teaching as taking place within 'communities of practice' (Anderson and McCune 2013; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). On this view, learning is a process of ever-increasing, and increasingly more legitimate, student participation within a community of skilled practitioners. The community itself is 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world' and participation in the community 'is the condition for the existence of knowledge' (Lave and Wegner 1991, 98). The community provides a framework and boundary for making claims, and it is within the community that the legitimacy for claims is assessed. The benefit of this approach is that through it we become sensitive to the ways in which taken-for-granted classifications, scripts and schemata pattern behaviour and grant authority to modes of performing in institutional settings. This framework enables us to ask questions about how institutions regulate conduct, how they are constitutive of individual and group identities, and how authority and power operate in the shaping of legitimate activities within the community (ibid).

This interactional and relational view of learning provides the broad foundations for our investigation of Japanese Studies, but our concrete questions were informed by recent work in education studies that looks at how taken-for-granted classifications, scripts and schemata shape the educational experiences of students and teachers (Barradell, Barrie and Peseta 2018; Barradell and Kennedy-Jones, 2013; Barradell, 2012; Cousin, 2010, 2006; Meyer and Land, 2006; McCune and Hounsell, 2005). Broadly put this literature tells us that there are both ontological and epistemological aspects to the learning process within communities of practice. Ontologically, there is now broad recognition that 'ways of thinking and practising' – how a subject area tacitly organizes itself, its knowledge base, methods, modes of evaluation, values and so on – play an important but often invisible role in shaping student and tutor experiences and outcomes (Barradell, Barrie and Peseta 2018, 267). Epistemologically, research has drawn attention to how certain bodies of conceptual knowledge, dubbed 'threshold concepts' (Barradell and Kennedy-Jones, 2013; Barradell 2012; Meyer and Land, 2006), act as gateways through which students must pass to reach higher levels of understanding and achievement. With these debates firmly in mind, this project set out to investigate 'ways of thinking and practising' in Japanese Studies in the UK and learn more about how conceptual knowledge functions in our teaching.

Finally, we wish to state clearly that our intentions are neither to produce a comprehensive map of JS in the UK, nor to be prescriptive about JS practice. While our findings do suggest

that certain activities may have a positive impact on student experience within JS departments, the real marker of success for this project will be the extent to which it stimulates discussions with colleagues and students about what we do as Japanese Studies practitioners, how we do it, and why it is important. We are also not suggesting that JS in the UK is a uniform community of practice. We recognise that JS takes place in a range of institutional contexts within the Higher Education sector, and that those contexts will have an impact in shaping local experiences of JS (see Meyer and Rowan 2006). As such, the findings presented below should be seen as a starting point for conversations with the potential to inform student-staff collaborations on curriculum design, support investigations into the assumptions that form specific departmental cultures, and help students recognise and talk about their achievements within the subject area as they move into the job market. Therefore, as much as this paper is the outcome of a piece of research, it should also be seen as a resource for provoking discussion in the classroom.

### **Analytical Framework**

As discussed above, our investigation into UK Japanese Studies begins with the recognition that what we call Japanese Studies (JS) is not a thing in itself, but takes place within, and is constituted by, communities of practice. On this view JS is brought into being by routinised methods of conceptualizing, speaking, acting, evaluating, and performing, and it is through those routines that JS is maintained and propagated into the future.

The education studies literature has come to understand these methods as ‘ways of thinking and practising’ (WTP, McCune and Hounsell 2005). This literature observed that different academic disciplines tend to have norms, language and practices associated with them and that these non-formal aspects of the student learning have a large impact on student experiences. It is worth quoting Hounsell and McCune’s (2005, 257) initial definition in full:

[WTP describes] the richness, depth and breadth of what students might learn through engagement with a given subject area in a specific context. This might include, for example, coming to terms with particular understandings, forms of discourse, values or ways of acting which are regarded as central to graduate level mastery of a discipline or subject area... WTP can potentially encompass anything that students learn which helps them to develop a sense of what it might mean to be part of a particular disciplinary community...

WTP, then, sees the learning process as one of socialization into a community of practice. It is a big picture approach to student learning that prompts us to think about our degrees in a holistic and integrated fashion (Barradell et. al. 2018, 268). Knowledge, how we talk about that knowledge, and our values and attitudes are on this view seen as inseparable parts of learning as a whole. WTP is also about students’ sense of belonging to a disciplinary community. The WTP literature argues that for students to feel they belong to a department or subject area that they need to master the underlying rules of their academic discipline (Perkins 2006). Thus, we see that WTP fosters an expansive view of our subject areas that goes way beyond the formal curriculum and the classroom.

But how can this expansive view be put into practice? In a recent overview of the WTP

literature Barradell et al. (2018) have pointed out four ways in which the WTP framework can help us think through the complexities of experiences in higher education. First, as a broad view of the students' experiences of learning, WTP helps educators shift focus away from individual courses or course combinations, and towards the programme of study. Second, the WTP approach breaks down the artificial barrier between knowledge and skills. By viewing knowledge as a product of the disciplinary community, we can ask questions about how that knowledge is produced, tested, discussed, and disseminated (ibid, 269.). Third, WTP reconceptualises the learning process as one of induction into a disciplinary community. It therefore recognises that the learning process is not just about the accumulation of knowledge and skills, but also about changes in attitudes and values that make up students' identities. Finally, by placing emphasis on norms, values and methods of communication, a WTP approach can help us think through how practices in a subject area community align (or do not align) with concerns beyond the university (ibid, 272).

A second convergent strand of education studies research informs our investigation, namely work on 'threshold concepts'. Emerging out of investigations of the discipline of economics (Meyer and Land 2006, 2005, 2003), this research found that academic educators viewed some concepts as central to the mastery of their subject – they were 'thresholds' through which students needed to pass to reach higher levels of subject area mastery. But more than the outcome of the accumulation of knowledge, once mastered these 'threshold concepts' can be transformative for students in that they bring about a wholesale shift in the way they view the world. In this way threshold concepts are like portals. Once passed through, connections that were once hidden become visible to students leading to the ability to ask questions that would previously have been impossible (Meyer and Land 2003, 1). Due to their implications for the worldviews and even identities of students, however, threshold concepts often present as 'troublesome knowledge' (Perkins 1999) – knowledge that goes against common sense intuition and is therefore resisted by students. It is not just the trickiness of the concept that makes it troublesome – there may be real emotion reaction towards these new ideas that prevents students from developing their understanding within a subject area (Cousin 2006, 4).

As Barradell and Kennedy-Jones (2015) have pointed out, WTP and threshold concepts are complementary. For if we see the mastery of threshold concepts as transformative for students, both in skills and in their 'worldviews', the outcome of that transformation is further induction into the WTP that underpins a subject area community (ibid, 541). Thus, when taken together, these two conceptual frameworks offer a powerful way to think about curricula, student learning and academic practice. They enable us to ask questions about how the tacit assumptions of subject areas shape learning and teaching, they can help us clarify what ideas, knowledge and theories are viewed as 'must have' by educators, and they enable us to ask big picture questions about what degree programmes are for and how components link together to form coherent student experiences.

With these theoretical observations in mind, we set out to understand and explore how Japanese Studies is conceptualised by investigating threshold concepts and departmental WTP from the perspectives of both practitioners and students.

## **Methods**

The theoretical framework set out above led us to ask two core questions of Japanese Studies in the UK. First, we were interested to determine whether there were WTP associated with Japanese Studies and to what extent those WTP varied. Second, we asked whether it was possible to identify any threshold concepts within JS, and if so, what those threshold concepts are and how they function.

There are varying conceptualisations of precisely what makes a concept a *threshold* concept and of the best way to go about identifying WTP (see Barradell 2013 for a review ). In both cases, however, researchers have opted for qualitative research methods such as semi-structured interviews with staff and students, surveys, investigations of course materials, or participant observation. We have taken a similar approach to data gathering but have opted to proceed along grounded theory principles (Charmaz 2014; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

We say *principles* because the ‘theory’ in grounded theory can be misleading. At its heart, grounded theory is a structured method for gathering, systematising, and interrogating qualitative data. It is a process that begins with collection of rich data (in our case through semi-structured interviews), proceeds to coding of the data by incrementally more abstracted themes, and ends with the establishment of connections between those themes (Charmaz 2014). The benefits of this approach are that rather than becoming caught up in ideal-type conceptualisations of WTP and threshold concepts, a grounded theory approach helps us place emphasis on interpretation of how student and practitioners actually talk about their experiences and develop our observations from there. Thus, according to these principles, threshold concepts and WTP were used as ‘sensitising concepts’ to help guide our analysis but do not determine the outcome (Charmaz 2014, 133). On this note, it is also important to state that we are not claiming, again as the *theory* in grounded theory might suggest, that our observations are generalisable. Indeed, rather than providing a static picture of UK Japanese Studies, our goal is to help facilitate an empirically grounded, theoretically sensitive conversation about what we do in the subject area and how we can better shape our curricula to guarantee excellent student experiences. Our core research questions were the following:

- How do students and staff conceptualise Japanese Studies as a subject area? What language is used to describe activities in Japanese Studies and what implications does that language hold for academic practice? Are there differences in the use of language, and if so how can they be accounted for?
- How is value allocated to the different skills involved in studying Japanese Studies?
- Is it possible to identify any threshold concepts for Japanese Studies?

To answer these questions, we conducted interviews with individual academics and student focus groups (1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year) at seven UK HEIs with Japanese Studies programmes (see figure 1). The interviews were transcribed, inputted to nVivo and coded according to the grounded theory principles as noted above. We also asked students to complete a short questionnaire once the focus groups were concluded.

Figure 1. Map of UK universities where we have done our research.



Figure 2. Table of research interviewees (the numbers correspond to the number of interviewees in each category).

Interviewees	Number	
Practitioner	14	
Students	1 <sup>st</sup> year: 9	4 <sup>th</sup> year: 15

## Discussion

Much like the student quote at the beginning of this article, in simple terms we found that students looked for unifying knowledge of Japan and the Japanese that would provide the basis for a holistic understanding. This unified understanding of Japan was almost universally articulated through the concept of ‘culture’, which took precedence over and unified other aspects of Japanese Studies, such as history or politics. But for practitioners, the opposite was the case. If students were trying to construct methods for understanding Japan, practitioners were focused on criticality, reflexivity and recognition of position. This section delves into our interview data to explore this tension in more detail. Through our examples we map out and articulate the relationships between several key concepts including language, culture, nuance, understanding and the ethics of doing Japanese Studies.

### *Language and legitimacy*



Our first question in all interviews and focus-groups was simply ‘what do you think Japanese Studies is?’ Perhaps unsurprisingly most students and staff interviewed indicated that the most important, indeed defining aspect of a Japanese Studies degree was the language component. Students and practitioners alike almost universally rejected the idea that it was possible to do Japanese Studies without a high-level of Japanese language competency (although the threshold for competency was never defined), and it was the ability to speak Japanese that set them apart as Japanese Studies people.

For practitioners, JS was generally conceptualised as an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary subject area rather than as a distinct discipline of its own. According to our interviewees, what binds the area together is not just the focus on Japan, and indeed not just focus on what we now consider the geographical area of Japan, but that research must be conducted through Japanese language. This sort of definition is representative of the general perspective on what JS is for academic practitioners:

... the enquiry into all aspects of Japan, from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, but informed by a solid knowledge of Japanese language, so to be able to work with various primary materials. [P1, 00:01:34]

Likewise, another interviewee spoke to the same theme but from a different perspective. Again, engagement with primary sources in Japanese is defined as core to the WTP of Japanese, but this time as a method of differentiating what can and cannot be published in the subject area:

Yeah, I think [language] is important for it to be Japanese studies. If you publish something, you would have to use some sources in Japanese. Otherwise I think people would not consider it Japanese studies. They would consider it whatever discipline you're in. [P2, 00:03:31]

The importance of direct access to primary materials and Japanese informants was noted by most interviewees since it allowed them not to rely on translation and interpretation and avoid possible bias. Language is also crucial however in order to engage with the academic literature produced in Japan, which may not be translated into other languages as P3 noted:

(...) I wouldn't find comfortable [sic] in doing my research without knowing Japanese... it may be different in other fields, but in religious studies, a lot that has been written by Japanese scholars is not usually translated into English and if it's translated, it's just a very minor part of what is produced in Japan. [P3, 00:09:34]

Another interviewee went as far as to articulate language in terms of methodology:

Of course, nobody who does not speak the language is taken seriously in the same way as nobody who hasn't done a certain methodology in another discipline is taken seriously. So that would be the first prerequisite which defines a Japanologist. [P5, 00:03:07]

A majority of the interviewees remarked that language competence transfers value and trustworthiness to the work produced, like P1, P4 and P5 here:

I think you can't claim—I feel quite strongly that you can't claim to analyse a foreign country unless you can understand the way in which people talk to each other in that country in their own language, you know. [...] with the exception of perhaps a very few things where you can ride purely on

statistics, and even that's possibly challenging. Then, unless you can understand how people talk, what their ideas are that they exchange with each other, then I don't think you can claim to *understand* a country. [P1, 00:15:36; our emphasis]

Well, I don't think you can study Japan if you can't read Japanese or speak to people in Japanese and that's just the simple reality of the fact that the vast majority of work or material that's produced in Japan and about Japan is in Japanese. So, if you want to understand what's happening in Japan historically or in contemporary ways it's very difficult to do that without a knowledge of Japanese. And also, I think it's undesirable. I mean there's always a bit of attention for people who are studying a place that is not where they're from so I think there's a fundamental ethical obligation to *understand* as best as you can that place and that requires an engagement with the ways in which people are talking about themselves and their communities and their histories and so on, societies, in their own languages. [P4, 00:23:43]

I grant that there might be people, of course - there are instances of people who do not speak another language in probably in politics or in law and so on, and have something interesting to say. I don't say that this is not being taken into consideration (...) But it often shows that people who do this tertiary stuff are not really being socialised into the discipline again and have, still hang on to those many stereotypes which we try desperately try to dispel (...) [P5, 00:03:07]

The quotes above bring in two core aspects of the WTP of Japanese Studies: the importance of language competency firstly as a way of mitigating ethical *risk* and secondly to give *legitimacy* to a researcher's work. Without language, the practitioner puts themselves at risk of missing nuances, and is in danger of trading in stereotypes. Thus, language competency is core to the trustworthiness, and therefore value, of the work produced in the field.

All these attributes are then bound up in P5's last quote with a claim to legitimacy of *understanding*. Indeed, all the quotes above make statements about the legitimacy of Japanese Studies as a mode of inquiry and grant special status to the knowledge the subject area produces. Language is, again in the words of one of the interviewees, 'the gold standard... everyone has to speak Japanese' [P5]. It is the language that enables access to primary materials and to understand the way people talk about each other in their own language while not relying on translation and interpretation. Knowing the language also allows academics to engage with the native scholarship and, eventually, avoid dangerous trading in stereotypes. As A5 puts it, not speaking the language is like 'studying by remote' [00:03:47].

But how do students conceptualise the subject area, and to what extent does their view of Japanese Studies resonate with the quotes discussed above?

As noted in the introduction to this section, students were also unanimous in singling out Japanese language proficiency as the core component of Japanese Studies WTP. In fact, for some students, degree titles that included the word 'studies' gave them pause to consider the implications for their experience at university. For example, students in one first year focus-group reflected on what the term 'study' signalled to them before starting the degree:

S6: I was quite wary when I was looking for courses, of choosing something that was called Japanese Studies because it seemed to be a broader kind of aspect and wider looking [...]. So, when I saw Japanese Studies, I was kind of like, "Err, maybe I should look for something that makes me think more language and less so weight in opposite modules".

S2: I was the same.  
S5: Yeah, I did the same thing.  
S7: Yeah, I didn't want to do Studies because I thought that wasn't maybe as deep, like it wasn't going to go into as much depth in the language.  
S6: That's kind of my pre-defined idea, when I see 'Studies' that's what I think.  
S7: Yeah, 'Study' has lots of different paths that maybe not have as much depth into a specific path. They probably go into a lot of depth for about Japan as a whole but maybe not so much into the language or into, I don't know, pop culture and that kind of thing.  
S5: I just think the sound of the name 'Japanese Studies' it doesn't sound like we'll get the same degree of influence in the language or you won't understand all the nuances in the grammar as you would with Japanese Studies where you get more history but if you're a language sort of person, I think you tend to prefer to be doing Japanese BA. [U1Y1, 00:15:11]

However, once at university most of the students interviewed did see the value in the Studies aspect of their degree, although language remained central. As with our academic interviews, we asked students to think about the relationship between the language side of their degrees and their understanding of Japan, and whether it was possible to become expert on Japan without language skills. This notion was roundly rejected, and when pushed to articulate why language is so important to area expertise, we found students making comparisons with other forms of academic enquiry. Take for example this discussion with 4<sup>th</sup> year students:

PI: (...) do you think it's possible to become an expert on Japan without learning the language?  
S3: No.  
S2: No.  
S3: No, 100% no.  
PI: Why? That's a very strong reaction.  
S3: Because it's a complete...it just makes no sense. There's no way you can learn any sort of part of any sort of history without learning at least a tiny bit of the language.  
PI: So, even if I read all of the literature in English...on Japanese history, I wouldn't be an expert?  
S3: You would still...there is no complete...there are some untranslatable words in Japanese. There are some words...there are some concepts you can't translate. [U1Y4, 00:42:05]

There are a few things worth noting about this exchange. The first is the quick, almost visceral response of two students to the suggestion that it is possible to become an expert on Japan without language skills. For S3 the idea is simply nonsensical, leading to the exaggerated claim that it is impossible to learn any sort of history without some language skills. When pushed on this point by the interviewer, who notes it would be possible to read histories of Japan in English, the response is that 'there are some concepts you can't translate'. At this point another student joined the conversation with a surprising intervention:

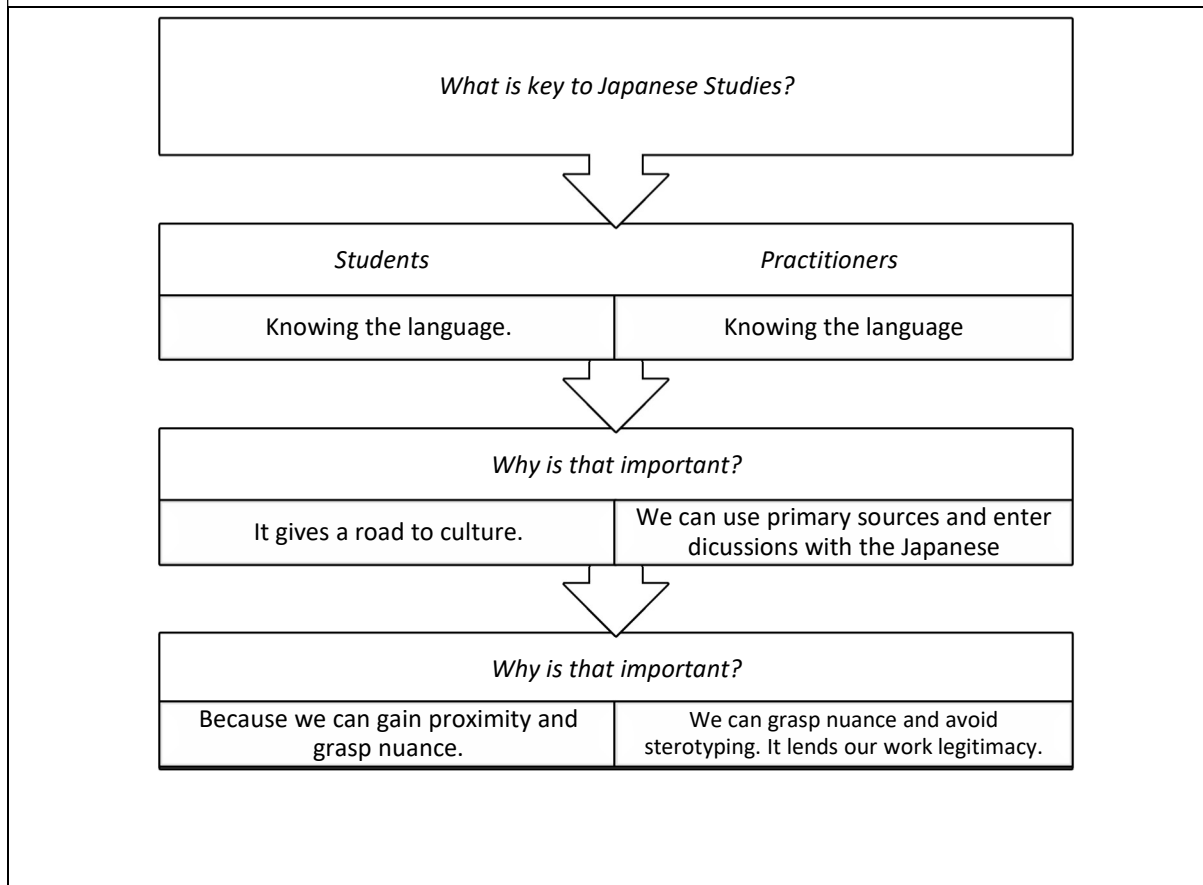
S4: But, like you can be an expert on dinosaurs and not speak dinosaur.  
S3: But, that's because dinosaur is not a language primarily.  
S4: (...) I think that you can become an expert on something that doesn't have the language to do it, like people are experts on rocks and mountains. So, I think....  
S3: It's because they don't have a language.  
S4: Yeah, yeah. But there aren't people in the world that don't have a language. So, probably compared to people, but....  
S3: It is...it's not a thing...you can't...you can write....  
S4: I think you can be an expert on Japan, but maybe not Japanese people. [U1Y4, 00:42:45]

If we take a step back and ask what is going on here, we see that the students are in fact, via dinosaurs, working through the debate on emic and etic methodologies and their application to the study of societies (see Befu 2009, Kuwayama 2003). In this discussion S3 is arguing for the primacy of an emic approach to the study of Japan: a position which maintains that the structure and content of language reflects social relations, and that understanding a society and the people within that society can only proceed through analysis of native linguistic concepts (Kuwayama 2010). Understanding is thus in this case conceptualised as ‘understanding as a native would’, coupled with a tacit assumption that such understanding cannot be grasped via other languages – S3’s ‘there are some concepts you can’t translate’. Indeed, we found in our interviews with students that language was often conceptualised in emic terms: metaphors included language as a ‘mirror of culture’ and language as a ‘road’ for culture. Language skills grant a ‘proximity’ to culture that students see as otherwise impossible for non-Japanese speakers to attain:

S3: (...) I think language is important because I think culture is also very much tied up into language, and what language we use, dialects, all of those things. And I feel like if you’re missing out from that language part, you’re also missing out on like a *road* or a *part* of culture as well, for example, hierarchy, formal, informal language... All of that is tied up in culture things as well, so if you like, miss out a few, you can’t have one with all the right few. It’s also really interesting because in my class on minorities and marginalities, we have like people who don’t study Japanese studies, so they don’t have that language knowledge and they don’t have the knowledge of having been to Japan, and a lot of concepts to them seem very foreign and alien, and sometimes they misunderstand things or they take things as a fact because they – either the material is a bit out-dated or it’s translated material so they can’t have the first-hand knowledge of it. [U2Y4, 00:05:36; our emphasis]

Thus, a simple model of understanding would look like Table 1.

*Table 1. Contrasting Student and Practitioner Conceptions of Japanese Studies*



Much like with practitioners' comments discussed earlier, if we consider this model in the context of WTP we can also interpret the students' statements as constructing a structure of legitimacy for the practice of Japanese Studies, although the basis of that legitimacy is articulated differently. As such the statements are not just about understanding but are about the identities of students who study Japanese and the ways in which those students attach value to their activities. In this conversation, studying Japan without language skills is akin to palaeontology – it is possible to say something about dinosaurs through scientific observation but only because dinosaurs have no language; it is less possible to do so about a living society with language.

The flipside of this model is a form of gatekeeping whereby contributions by disciplinary experts who do not speak Japanese can be devalued because of their lack of 'proximity'. This gatekeeping function of Japanese language as 'methodology' or at least ID card for admittance into the Japanese Studies club has been discussed in the literature, notably by Harry Harootunian and Sakai Naoki (1997) and Ian Reader (1998). As Reader (1998, 238) argues, this critical intervention posited that linguistic competence and translation skills had become the sole methodological basis for the field, which had the unfortunate side-effect of leaving Japanese Studies decidedly untheoretical. Of course, since this debate, Japanese Studies has moved on, and it would be inaccurate to describe the work being done in the field today as lacking the sort of critical and theoretical texture that Harootunian and Sakai called for. Nevertheless, it is clear from our interviews that, for both students and

practitioners, Japanese language competence remains the central defining feature of the field. As such, sensitising students to this debate, via the work cited above, may help with critical re-evaluation of their own position vis-à-vis language as method and language as boundary.

### *The question of culture*

When analysing our interview data it quickly became apparent that in response to the question 'what is Japanese studies', students were far more likely than academics to respond that it is about the study of 'Japanese Culture'. This is an intriguing difference in the language used by students and academics to conceptualise Japanese Studies which is worth exploring in more detail. Below we argue that there exists a lay-conceptual understanding of 'culture' in student's discourse on Japanese Studies but, if left uninterrogated, this understanding may lead to more confusion rather than greater clarity when it comes to understanding Japan. In this respect, drawing on the work of Steven Reed (1993), we argue that while our data suggests that, other than perhaps language, Japanese Studies does not appear to have any clear threshold concepts, critical engagement with the concept of culture may help students steer clear of overgeneralisation and reductionism in their studies.

Culture is, of course, one of the trickiest academic concepts to get to grips with: Raymond Williams famously defined it as 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (87). But there are also factors specific to the subject area that militate against the use of culture in the classroom. Part of the explanation can be found in suspicion of reductionist explanations of Japan. Popular media depictions tend to reduce Japan down to simple catchphrases such as 'both modern and traditional', which of course describes most societies, but seem to take on a special significance for Japan. When pushed to explain the contradiction the answer will no doubt be 'it's because of the culture,' which is akin to saying, 'it's because they are Japanese'. What is in fact happening here is an appeal to a specific conceptualization of culture, what Steven Reed (1993, 37) calls 'mythical culture'.

Mythical culture is the idea that there is an unchanging core of Japanese-ness, and that once this unchanging core is grasped, much like a threshold concept, it becomes possible to explain what once was mystifying behaviour. It is attractive as a method of explanation because mythical culture looks suspiciously like a threshold concept, which once grasped promises to reveal the hidden workings of Japan. Again, as Reed (1993, 37) has suggested, part of the appeal of this form of cultural explanation is that it is simple, and that it can be applied to explain pretty much anything. Such simple concepts likely also grant a sense of ontological security in at least two ways: they take complex social processes and make them intelligible, and by doing so they grant the student a sense of power over their learning, the subject matter, and even over Japan and the Japanese themselves.

It is with power and control in mind that such theorisation, with the publication by Ruth Benedict in 1944 of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, began. Following Benedict there was a long history of trying to generate such concepts (for overviews see Robertson 2008 and Ryang 2002). The Japanese cottage industry of *nihonjinron* (*Theories of Japaneseness*), which gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, added its own slew of concepts, whether

they be the idea of vertical relationships (Nakane) or relationships of dependency (Doi), that promised to usher the western observer across the threshold of Japanese cultural understanding. These theories of uniqueness prompted a strong counter literature in the 1980s and 1990s, which has since given way to important historical investigations which have identified the factors that gave rise to so much self-theorisation (see for example Borovoy 2012 and Hata and Smith 2007). But the battles over the proper place of 'culture' in Japanese studies have left their mark and appeals to culture as explanation have duly fallen out of fashion.

Nevertheless, students who have not been socialised into the debate on culture summarised above reach for culture first when discussing how they view Japanese Studies. Here are some examples of how first year students conceptualised culture:

I was just thinking it's like *behaviours*, the behavioural norms are like the cultural norms in a way and a lot of culture as well is built up from history, things that they've been doing in the past, even things that have changed, have kind of created the culture today and the culture will change overtime. Any sort of culture changes over time. [U2Y1, 00:15:37; our emphasis]

I think while we're learning to *function* in a Japanese society, we're also learning to understand the thought processes that go with it. Because a lot of different cultures have different like comment [sic] and opinions on certain things, and different ways of seeing the world, so we're kind of learning to do things from their point of view. [U1Y1, 00:7:51; our emphasis]

When we take conceptualisations of culture into account, we can extend the model of understanding detailed in Table 1 to include the practical outcome of functioning in Japanese society. Grasping culture for students of Japanese is linked to their goals of functioning in Japan as a nominal native. And as the end goal is pragmatic, culture is seen as a map which, once grasped via language, grants practical mastery of negotiating contemporary Japanese society. Such an understanding of culture as roadmap for action is of course, at one level, quite right. People in Japan do behave differently in certain situations to people elsewhere, and as a student of Japan knowing how one should act, and why, is important. However, stopping with that level of understanding may leave students with the sort of essentialised view of Japan that practitioners actively reject.

That being said, there is clear evidence that later in their degree programmes students experience changes in their understanding of culture. For example, one 4<sup>th</sup> year student talked about their experience of cultural change as two parallel processes – exposure to difference and the denaturalisation of that which was once taken for granted:

I think also when you go to Japan... because it's so diverse I think it actually gives you the opportunity to create your own culture as well, especially when you come back to the UK after going abroad... it kind of broadens your thinking, you know for me I gained interest in other Asian cultures whilst in Japan myself, but also when I came back to England I was blown away like, "Oh my god, this castle is so different." (U2Y4, S4, 00:10:35).

With this relationship between language, culture and nuance, students also saw an ethical component to their studies. For example, in a discussion with 4<sup>th</sup> year students about what to do in the classroom when non-Japanese Studies peers make problematic statements about Japan, one student responded:

I usually inform people that it's not quite right because I feel like – because it's an actual like, living people today. I think it's important to remove stereotypes and ideas, just because those people in my classroom might go out of the classroom with a totally wrong idea of what Japan is like, what Japanese people are like, so I think it's kind of important when I have that possibility to teach people that, “No actually, it's not this way” (U2Y4, S2, 00:06:55).

As 4<sup>th</sup> years, both students quoted above are reflecting on changes that occurred after their year abroad in Japan. But are there practical methods of jumpstarting this critical reflection on culture early on in degree programmes? One option might be to use what Anderson and McCune terms ‘hybrid discourses’ in the classroom. Such discourses build on the ‘interplay between taking out an expert’s view of a subject to students, in terms that novices are likely to understand, and drawing in students’ [everyday lexis and] more common-sense understandings towards expert positions’ (Anderson 1997, 191 cited in Anderson and McCune 2013, 291). Having these conversations with students early in their degrees may help foster the critical orientation seen by practitioners as a valued aspect of the WTP of Japanese Studies. A good example of these hybrid discourses at work can be found in the following explanation of how a practitioner works with such dynamics in class:

P6: We need to understand what we’re talking about, so understanding as far as possible, the culture, the history and the language of what we’re looking at is hugely important.

PI: (...) how can you teach that to your students?

P6: With great difficulty [laughs] I try to take them *back to first principles* (...) Largely to students who don’t speak Japanese and know nothing about Japan, we go back to first principles, so I don’t start by teaching them about Japan, I start by asking them questions like, “*What is culture? How do we study another culture? How do we study another place in the world?*” And I find students really, really get excited about those kinds of questions because those are useful not just for studying Japan but for also studying anywhere else in the world. And we think about the power of relationships between the student, the researcher and the culture they’re researching – so we think about Orientalism and different forms of power relations, we think about the researcher’s position a lot and we think about what kinds of questions you can and cannot ask if you have or do not have certain kinds of knowledge and skills and access. And so, my students tend to come up with very carefully defined essays that are very specifically about the types of sources they’ve been able to access. So, they are very careful and very considerate about how they deal with Japanese culture by the end of the course because they spend a lot of time reflecting about that [chuckles]. [P6, 00:24:20; our emphasis]

We have explored this point in detail because questions of language and understanding, proximity, and relationships with other disciplines may offer fertile ground for discussion with students in the early stages of their degrees. Each step in the model of understanding set out in Table 1 can act as an opportunity to explore the assumptions sitting behind the statement.

### **Conclusion and implications of study**

What are the implications of our investigation for Japanese Studies as a community of practice? Here we distil our findings into three broad themes.

The first point is to acknowledge the gap between student and practitioner conceptualisations of the field. To begin with, at least in first year most students we interviewed held negative preconceptions of the ‘studies’ aspect of Japanese Studies degrees, seeing it as detracting from the primary goal of Japanese language acquisition.



Students also often talked of ‘language’ people and ‘studies’ people on degree programmes, suggesting that the division between these two aspects of the degree is quite entrenched. Furthermore, as shown above, there is a tension between student expectations of stable ‘whole’ knowledge of Japan and community norms that are sceptical of the possibility of such knowledge. Criticality and a reflexive awareness of position is core to the WTP of Japanese Studies, and it is therefore clear that reflection on these norms should feature prominently in discussions with students about curricula and programme learning outcomes.

The second point is that language – and not just Japanese! – matters. When discussing the characteristics that give Japanese Studies its identity and grant legitimacy to work produced in the field, practitioners and students all acknowledge the centrality of Japanese language skills. They are the ‘gold standard’ by which mastery within Japanese Studies is judged, and are the precondition for ethical and legitimate participation in the community. However, in justifying this position students, and to some extent practitioners, drew upon a vocabulary of nuance and cultural proximity that remained undefined. Students could spontaneously debate the relationship between understanding and language ability, and that this debate had meaning for their identities as people *doing* Japanese Studies. However, scaffolding these student discussions with conceptual toolkits – such as the emic/etic debate – may enable students to better articulate and develop further their own positions on what their skillsets enable them to do.

Third is the question of threshold concepts in Japanese Studies. At face value it would be tempting to assign language the status of Japanese Studies’ core threshold concept. There is compelling evidence to do so: learning Japanese is transformative, opens up new questions and areas of inquiry, and can ‘trouble’ students as they learn that language, social and interactions, and the hierarchies those interactions instantiate have an impact on how they will be perceived and, potentially, how they perceive themselves. But it would also be misleading to argue that language by definition grants the sort of ‘proximate’ or ‘nuanced’ understanding that students seek. Thus, given that the model of student understanding we presented hinges on the relationship between language and culture, and that this relationship is constitutive of many students’ worldviews, it appears important to spend time unpacking the implications of this worldview for participating in Japanese Studies as a community of practice. Students come to university with a lay-understanding of culture, and these understandings can be used as a jumping off-point for developing more sophisticated analytical toolkits. Such an approach can help develop students’ self-reflexivity and self-awareness from an early stage and make them conscious about their own biases and pre-conceptions, and how they may influence within the subject area and beyond. As another practitioner very well put it,

So, I think perhaps the solution to these problems is always the same, that you need to be very conscious of your own place, your own position, the degree to which your perceptions are going to be slanted by your own background and how that necessarily [affects] your status as a person looking from afar [how that] will impact and affect your understanding of Japanese culture and the phenomena that surround it. [P7, 00:15:32]

There should be no doubt about the need to reflect on what we do in Japanese Studies, how we do it, and why it is important. In fact, the need for this reflection is becoming ever-more

pressing. In the context of continued pressure on intensive language-based degrees in UK Higher Education, it is imperative for Japanese Studies to differentiate itself from other degrees, and be able to articulate those differences in language that resonates with, builds upon, and productively challenges student expectations of the subject area. But it is not just the institutional environment that presents a challenge to our subject area. For if the ability to conduct research in Japanese is the defining characteristic of the WTP of Japanese Studies, developments in online translation technology may begin to make that emphasis seem misplaced. Indeed, one of our interviewees reflected on the impact of technological developments which lower access to primary materials from Japan on values held as core to the WTP of Japanese Studies:

I think [Japanese language] is very important if you want to be a scholar of Japan. It is important to speak and read and try and make use of Japanese sources, I think that's important but I don't think it is the be-all and end-all, and I suspect that within the next 10 years we're going to find that online translation software totally breaks down barriers to entry for people and that people can do a lot more on Japan because that linguistic barrier might not be in the way anymore. That should be something we welcome, not something we're afraid of. [P6, 00:03:26]

Given these challenges it is all the more important to embed into our curricula opportunities to reflect on what we do in Japanese Studies, why and why it is important.

## References:

- Anderson, C. and McCune, V. 2013. "Fostering meaning: fostering community." *Higher Education* 66 (3): 283-296.
- Barradell, S., Barrie, S. and Peseta, T. 2018. "Ways of thinking and practising: Highlighting the complexities of higher education curriculum." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 55 (3): 266-275.
- Barradell, S., Kennedy-Jones, M. 2013. "Threshold concepts, student learning and curriculum: making connections between theory and practice." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 52 (5): 536-545.
- Barradell, S. 2012. "The identification of threshold concepts: a review of theoretical complexities and methodological challenges." *Higher Education* 65 (2): 265-276.
- Befu, H. 2009. The Emic-Etic Distinction and Its Significance for Japanese Studies. In *Constructs for Understanding Japan* edited by Y. Sugimoto and R. Mauer, 323-343. London: Routledge.
- Ben-Ari, E. 2020. "Area studies and the disciplines: Japanese Studies and anthropology in comparative perspective." *Contemporary Japan*, 1-16.
- Borovoy, A. 2012. "Doi Takeo and the Rehabilitation of Particularism in Postwar Japan." *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 38 (2): 263-295.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V. and McCune, V. 2014. "'It all just clicked': a longitudinal perspective on transitions within university." *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (3): 478-490.
- Cortazzi H. and Kornicki, P. 2016. eds. *Japanese Studies in the Britain: a survey and history*. Kent: Renaissance Books.
- Cousin, G. 2010. "Neither teacher-centred nor student-centred: threshold concepts and research partnerships." *Journal of Learning and Development in Higher Education* Issue 2 (February): 1-9.
- Cousin, G. 2006. "An introduction to threshold concepts." *Planet* 17 (1): 4-5.

Harootunian, H. and Sakai, N. 1997. "Nihon kenkyū to bunka kenkyū." *Shisō* 7 (July), 4-53.

Hata, H. and Smith, W. 2007. "Nakane's Japanese society as utopian thought." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 13 (3): 361-388.

Kuwayama, T. Japan's emic conceptions. In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture*, edited by Y. Sugimoto, 38-55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mccune, V. and Hounsell, D. 2005. "The development of students? Ways of thinking and practising in three final-year biology courses." *Higher Education* 49 (3): 255-289.

Meyer, J. and Land, R. 2006. eds. *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Meyer, J. and Land, R. 2003. "Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Linkages to Ways of Thinking and Practising within the Disciplines." *Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments Occasional Report* 4 (May): 1-12.

Meyer, H. and Rowen, B. 2006. *The New Institutionalism in Education*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reader, I. 1998. "Review: Studies of Japan, Area Studies, and the Challenges of Social Theory." *Monumenta Nipponica* 53 (2): 237-255.

Reed, S. 1993. *Making Common Sense of Japan*. London: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Refsing, K. 1992. "Japanology, Japanese studies and the teaching of Japanese." *Japan Forum* 4 (2): 345-352.

Robertson, J. 2008. Introduction: Putting and Keeping Japan in Anthropology. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, edited by J. Robertson, 3-16. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

Ryang, S. 2002. "Chrysanthemum's Strange Life: Ruth Benedict in Postwar Japan." *Asian Anthropology* 1 (1): 87-116.

Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.