

Main Characteristics of the Japanese Studies Programme at the University of Ljubljana and Historical Contingencies That Shaped It

Andrej Bekeš

University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts

The Japanese Studies programme at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana has been established on October 1, 1995. Its main characteristics are: 1) a double major programme with a possibility to combine it with about 60 other double major programmes in humanities and social sciences, 2) openness, with 50–55 students enrolled every year and with Japanese language courses for non-specialists, 3) in close co-operation with the Chinese Studies programme, a wider East Asian perspective, 4) lively international exchange based on co-operation agreements with several major Japanese universities. These characteristics are the result of historical contingencies, necessity and available possibilities. With the curricular reform along the Bologna guidelines, a possibility for further improvement has been offered.

Introduction

The Japanese Studies programme at the University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts is a small-to-medium size programme, with about 50–55 students being enrolled every year. It is a double major programme and can be combined with about 60 other double major programmes in humanities and social science, offered by the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Social Science and Theological Faculty of the University of Ljubljana.

At present, there is (still?) no substantial Japanese direct investment observed in Slovenia, neither is the amount of direct trade between Slovenia and Japan very conspicuous as compared with trade with other EU countries or countries of former Yugoslavia.

Thus, the main *raison d'être* of the programme is “to enlighten”, i.e. to widen the cultural and perceptual horizons, by providing a direct access to East Asia, one of the focal areas of the present cultural and economic developments. As in many other

universities, it was conceived in pair with the Chinese Studies programme, with which it is sharing its basic characteristics.

Background

The programme of Japanese Studies has been established on October 1, 1995, together with the Chinese Studies, both being the sub-programmes of the cover East Asian Studies programme. From the very beginning, it has been located at the University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts, organized under the Chair of Japanese Studies at the Department of Asian and African Studies established at the same time. Even before this date there has been a lot of activity in the field of Japanese Studies and East Asian Studies going on, which sometimes profoundly influenced the way Japanese Studies in Ljubljana were finally shaped.

The whole idea of EA Studies as a university programme was a natural outgrowth of a kind of the *Zeitgeist* that appeared after WWII, i.e. the vivid realization that there is more to the culture than the “European” tradition everybody of us was brought up in. During the more liberal and economically more prosperous sixties, these perceptions sipped across the border into then socialist but politically neutral (unaligned) Yugoslavia, and Slovenia as the westernmost republic in it often served as a conduit for these ideas. The immediate reactions were, for example, a conspicuous interest in haiku and Tang dynasty poetry. While Chinese poetry was only admired, haiku was also practiced, with some of the best homegrown haiku poetry being produced in sixties and seventies. Less poetic, or perhaps poetic but also more adventurous minds decided to travel to the “exotic” lands, such as India, Nepal, Middle East, also Africa and South America. For traveling around Europe or going to America, there were basically no restrictions, but suddenly it was not enough to satisfy such minds. Absence of travel restrictions (non-alignment helped) and cheaper life in the “East” – more thrill per dollar – was perhaps also influential. Yet, even then, EA was perceived as forbiddingly far, with few people besides diplomats and sailors being able to visit the places there.

Most of those adventurously minded were satisfied with visiting the “East” or “South” either through literary works translated via one or another of the world’s languages, or by going there directly. Some though have decided that an intimate knowledge of language is crucial for a more genuine knowledge of the culture and societies they were interested in. Thus in seventies, a small core of people who went to India, China, Japan, etc. to study began to form in Slovenia as well. Mobility obviously worked in both directions since this was also the time of the first attempt to open a Japanese restaurant in Ljubljana (failed) and teaching karate (brilliant success) by Japanese entrepreneur minds. It was also a time when first experiments in international marriages began with one of the partners from Japan (some successful and some failed).

These are the circumstances that led to the establishment of the first systematic teaching of Japanese and Chinese languages in Slovenia (the first attempts in teaching Japanese (as private tutoring) had been going on considerably earlier, in thirties, by – also the first – Japanese lady who got married to a Slovene).

As far as the attendance is concerned, these courses have been a success, as was also karate and even from an earlier date have been judo and go. The reason for this success was the *Zeitgeist* and the fact that the two-way traffic between Slovenia and East Asia was increasing. There were more possibilities of studying in Japan and later also in China, first students were returning from studies there, new students were preparing to go, students were also coming from these countries and, also, people were getting married.

All these circumstances and a healthy dose of inquisitive spirit contributed to the fact that people who attended these courses were highly motivated. The first positive result was a number of people who became intimately related to Japanese and Chinese Studies, some becoming later teachers in these fields or got deeply involved with respective countries in other ways.

Intensive courses of Japanese and open chair of Japanese

As I have mentioned above, the first systematic teaching of the Japanese language in Slovenia was done at the Japanese Language Course at the Slovene Orientalist Society, SOS (established in mid-seventies) as an embodiment of the cultural trends mentioned above. It was free (the teacher was not paid and the students did not pay) and a big success. SOS found a free classroom at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and in October 1982 the first class of beginners started its work. The first teacher was Ms. Chikako Shigemori Bu ar, married in Slovenia and a student of Slovene, German and English at the University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts, at present assistant professor of Japanese Studies at the same faculty.

Additional help was provided by Andrej Bekeš (the author), at that time enrolled in graduate school in Japan studying Japanese linguistics. Initially he provided additional classes during the vacations. As will become clear later, these were the beginnings of a pattern that is persisting until today, namely the special teaching training sessions for Japanese students specializing in Japanese as a foreign language and one of the bases for student exchange programmes with universities in Japan.

After Bekeš returned to Ljubljana for good in 1986, the Japanese language course – still free – expanded. Beginners, upper beginners and intermediate course were offered at the same time. Bekeš and Shigemori Bu ar rotated the courses among themselves. This idyllic arrangement did not last long, though. In 1989, Shigemori Bu ar left for the graduate school in Japan, and Bekeš followed her a year later, to teach at the University of Tsukuba.

The period 1989–1990 coincided also with the deepening of the economical and political crisis in Yugoslavia and with the failure of the first attempt to establish EA studies programme at the University of Ljubljana. Dispersal of personnel began also in the Chinese Studies camp. The stimulating atmosphere at the courses and highly motivated participants and deep awareness that being dispersed might influence the success of any further attempts to establish Japanese Studies were a reason enough to try to provide some kind of continuity even during the absence of main actors. Thus, the regular spring (March) and summer (July) intensive courses of Japanese begun in earnest.

These courses were well attended and continued in the same form all the way till 1995. During the first few times, author's Japanese colleague teachers participated as volunteers. After 1992, we decided to give bright graduate and later also undergraduate students specializing in teaching Japanese as a foreign language a chance to teach. This is how the regular intensive Japanese language courses, intended for teaching practice, finally came into being. A kind of mutual attraction was soon established, reflected in the willingness of former trainees to join the teaching staff after the Japanese Studies were established in 1995.

These intensive courses were continued even later as part of the Open Chair programme, offering the first contact with the Japanese language to all interested members of general public as well as a chance to regular students to brush up their language.

The benefits of this arrangement were manifold. First, the continuity of teaching Japanese was preserved even during the "dry years" of the early nineties. Many of the participants of these courses were also highly motivated and later continued their studies or professional work in Japan.

Second, the strong interest to and continued attendance of these courses were the best proof that the situation was ripe for the establishment of EA studies, including Japanese studies when the second, this time successful, attempt began in 1993.

Third, after the intensive courses, informal as they were, achieved the character of traineeship courses, they provided a good stepping-stone to expand so far informal contacts with some Japanese universities into full-fledged co-operation agreements. Thus, at present, there is a total of about 6 to 8 student trainees from Japanese universities doing their teaching traineeship under the tutelage of the teachers at our Department every year, while a total of about 3–5 students of Japanese studies per year have a chance to study at these universities as exchange students. To sum it all up, from the beginnings until now, some 60 students from Japan have participated in these courses and some 40 students from our Department went to study for a year to Japan.

One other development is also the Open Chair of Japanese Language, offering lessons in Japanese to both students and non-students at the beginners and upper-beginners level during each academic year. The Open Chair is based on the positive experience with the Japanese language courses in the framework of SOS

during the formative years in the eighties and early nineties. The Open Chair is now functioning formally as a so-called “lectorate” (a formal introductory and intermediate Japanese language course). Japanese language lectures at this course can be chosen as a noncompulsory subject by all students of the University of Ljubljana. These lectures are well attended by the students of science and engineering as well as students of humanities and social science. The Open Chair is thus contributing towards greater familiarization with Japanese language and widening the potential for interdisciplinary studies.

Japanese Studies as a double major programme

From the very beginning, the two options offered at EA Studies programme, the Chinese Studies and the Japanese Studies, have been conceived as double major programmes. Initially, the reason was the scarcity of teachers and the actual impossibility to carry out two full-fledged single major programmes. The understanding was that once there was a sufficient number of personnel the single major option of each programme would also be offered.

Yet in the retrospect of ten years since the establishment of these programs, it is now turning out that what was thought to be a temporary weakness of the nascent field of studies actually seems to be an advantage, at least in Slovenian circumstances.

The double major approach is more flexible regarding the employment. Good and motivated students tend to find work related in some way to Japan or go on to graduate school and continue their study related to Japan, while the others still have a possibility to find work in the other field they majored in.

The double major approach also turned out to be more flexible regarding the specialization in various fields within Japanese Studies. For good students, a combination with another major provides a strong theoretical and methodological framework in which they can pursue a more thorough study related to Japan. During the last ten years, students with serious interest in research on Japan in the fields varying from political science all the way to musicology emerged and are now enrolled in various graduate programmes at Japanese universities.

Since the “Japanology” does not and cannot constitute an autonomous field of scientific research with its own specific methodology, it is in any case necessary to acquire the appropriate methodology for serious work in any field related to Japan. Otherwise, one ends up with the kind of 19th century orientalist-like experts, Jacks of all trades pertaining to Japan and masters of none. Thus, a combination of broad linguistic and cultural approach in the Japanese Studies programme, combined with an autonomous methodological framework of some more specific field of humanities or social sciences, seems to be at least as reasonable an approach, if not more, as the classic “Japanology” approach.

In addition, the double major approach provided a good experience for the more interdisciplinary oriented curriculum reform along the Bologna declaration guidelines.

East Asian regional perspective

One further characteristic of the Chinese and Japanese Studies programmes is the regional, East Asian orientation and perspective. The simultaneous and closely interwoven beginnings of both study programmes have much to do with this orientation. This orientation is reflected in a number of common subjects taught in both programmes, such as the methodology of cultural studies, introduction to the history of East Asia, introduction to Chinese literature, introduction to Chinese philosophy, and introduction to classical Chinese language. It, too, is as much the result of deliberate decisions as also the consequence of the severe shortage of teachers during the first years of the programmes.

Methodology constitutes the most natural common framework for both programmes whose goals and needs are identical. The choice of the other subjects, though, is not so automatic. In the case of history, within the limited amount of teaching hours available in the double-major framework, it seems more appropriate to provide students with a global outlook on historical developments of the whole area than to delve immediately into particulars of each “national” history.

As for Chinese literature, Chinese philosophy and the classical Chinese language, the perspective from the point of view of internal – Chinese – developments seems a reasonable foundation on which to expand in further developments specific for Japan.

Whatever the circumstances, in the retrospect, the orientation seems to be right. Slovenia, even as a small country, does need a direct “window” into East Asia. Yet, at the undergraduate level, systematic education of “generalists” with the basic understanding of developments in the whole area framing the more specific knowledge of developments in the country chosen for study seems to be more important for its immediate needs and also more easily achieved than breeding a domestic crop of China and Japan specialists.

Yet, at the present level of contacts between the countries, the desirable goal at the undergraduate level and in the double major framework seems to be a person with the following qualities. It has to be knowledgeable about Japan (or China), possess a reasonable command of modern language, and, last but not least, possess a basic understanding of developments in the whole region to provide the framework for the more specific knowledge of developments in the country chosen for study. This goal is not only more reasonable but also more easily achievable than the goal of educating a domestic crop of narrow China and Japan specialists from the beginners level on.

Openness of the programme

From the beginning, efforts to establish Japanese Studies have been oriented towards two goals. One is to sensitize people to the rich cultural and historical traditions and developments outside the Western cultural sphere by making Japan, its

language, culture and society more accessible and familiar. The second goal, after the establishing the Japanese Study programme, was also to provide the basis for serious study, professional and research interests in the fields related to Japan.

The view behind this approach is that in the global age we live now, familiarity with particular cultures, such as China, Japan, Korea, and Latin America, Arabic world, Indian subcontinent, etc. should be on par with knowledge of Europe and North America. It is thus not a domain reserved for a narrow elite of specialists, but also a necessary part of general education.

In the present circumstances, with no curricula at the level of high school and lower, this goal can only be attained by making special language and culture courses available to the public at large within the framework of university education. On the other hand, it is also necessary to open possibilities to those who decided to pursue Japanese Studies as their vocation and have the necessary talent to achieve their goal. With no graduate programme yet, the most reliable way to achieve this goal is to enable such students to continue their studies at reputable universities in Japan. With the decreasing availability of various scholarships on bilateral basis, one of the ways is to maintain mutually productive relationships with a manageable number of universities in Japan.

With this topic, we move to the next section.

Lively international connections

From the very beginnings, the Japanese Study programme has been through personal contacts connected with several universities in Japan, Europe and the USA, the most prominent being the University of Tsukuba. University of Tsukuba is the place where several of the staff have studied and achieved their PhDs and MAs. Bekeš also used to teach there for five years in the first half of the nineties. This connection turned out to be a precious boon for the newly established programme.

Former colleagues from study and work came to visit, deliver lectures or help, often on a voluntary basis, with teaching. The number of staff being small, these visits provided precious enrichment of the curriculum. These contacts grew into full-fledged co-operation agreements, first with the University of Tsukuba, followed by the Gunma University and recently the Japan Women University. Several other agreements are also being negotiated right now.

Student exchange

One important development was the establishing of short-term (3–4 weeks) and one academic year student exchange with several of these universities. Being a small country with a language spoken by less than two million speakers, Slovenia is not as attractive for potential language learners as some bigger countries like, for example, Poland. Thus, finding the fields of study interesting for both parties was of primary

importance. As mentioned above, offering a firm and reliable framework for the teaching traineeship of Japanese students specializing in teaching Japanese as a foreign language turned out to be very productive.

Another type of short-term exchange is done within the framework of familiarization with a foreign language and culture (*ibunka taiken*). This exchange programme has been going on an informal basis for eight years now, based on mutual trust, and is now being negotiated into a formal agreement of co-operation.

As a result, in total, a considerable number of students participated in such exchanges during the past ten years. At present, about 3–5 students annually participate in short-term exchange programmes, about 7–8 in one-year exchange programmes, joined with another few qualifying as students in official Japan-study exchange programmes (*nikkensei*).

Exchange of lecturers

Following the co-operation agreements, a more thorough exchange of lecturers has began, too. With the help of various financing sources, both domestic and foreign (here Japan Foundation often played a decisive supporting role), we were able to realize an average of two one-month visits per year in Ljubljana by teachers from universities in Japan and one visit of a teacher from our department at the partner universities.

Most of the lectures by the guests from Japan were given in Japanese. Some, intended for the junior years, were translated, while the lectures for the fourth year students were not. Since these lectures form a substantial part of teaching the so-called “cultural” subjects, they also automatically provided a clear-cut goal regarding the level of linguistic ability. After three years and about 750 contact hours learning Japanese, the students must know enough to follow the introductory kind of lectures by the native speakers of Japanese.

One important task that remains at present is to expand, rather lively, individual personal contacts with several European universities into bilateral or, if possible, multilateral co-operation agreements and / or schemes.

Cooperation in research

Some co-operation in research has been done on the individual basis, with staff from Ljubljana participating on projects by Japanese universities within the framework of cooperation agreements. It is an urgent task to establish stronger ties in this area, also including other European universities.

The role of institutional help

Domestically, there are some funds intended to support international co-operation. There are individual grants for research and bigger research programmes in which our

staff have been participating. There are also some very limited grants to further exchange of lecturers, but even though the sums are limited, they are difficult to get.

An important venue is bilateral agreement between governments on scientific and cultural co-operation. This can provide funding for visits of researchers from Japan or shorter visits by researchers from Slovenia to Japan.

Regarding the substantiality of the help and support offered, the most important role was played by Japan Foundation. With actual contacts between co-operating parties being firmly established, JF was often the organization providing the critical funding to carry out at least part of a particular project and thus enabling to get funding from domestic sources as well.

One important role performed by JF was also temporary financial support for locally employed staff, with the goal to secure a domestically financed permanent post. Particularly at the beginning, with the severely limited number of staff, this kind of aid was invaluable. The same can also be said about the aid in books and teaching material. All this aid made it possible to offer a reasonably functioning learning environment to our students from the early years on.

Conclusion: plans and tasks for the future

The reform of the curriculum along the Bologna guidelines is now in the centre of the activities at the University of Ljubljana, the Department of Asian and African Studies not being an exception. Even though there is a strong skepticism regarding the reform and its possible negative effects, it seems to be beneficial for the double major programmes such as Japanese Studies and Chinese Studies. In comparison with the present four-year double major programme, the reform with its overall five-year framework provides an additional year, thus enabling the redistribution of subjects so that a more thorough language study is possible during the first four years and more time can be devoted to cultural and social topics in the final year.

As a programme of Japanese Studies in a small country with little chance to expand within the country, it is vital for us to establish a close relationship with similar programmes throughout the EU, based on common points and complementarity. The meetings in Warsaw in 2003 and in Vilnius in 2005 are steps in the right direction, because personal contacts are crucial for successful co-operation – or networking, if one prefers the term.

Department of Asian and African Studies
Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
Ašker eva 2, SI 1000 Ljubljana SLOVENIA
Tel. 386-(0)1-241-1308, Fax 386-(0)1-425-9337
<http://www.ff.uni-lj.si/AzAfr/default.htm>