

**EDITORIAL**

Reaching its 10<sup>th</sup> iteration in 2023, the international conference *Japan: Pre-modern, Modern, Contemporary* is one of the biggest academic and scientific events focusing on Japan Studies in South-Eastern Europe. Each conference was followed by the publication of a special issue of the hosting institution's academic journal, with a focus on Japanese studies.

This issue of the *Synergy Journal* represents the ninth volume edited by the conference organizers, in what is currently the longest standing publication connected to Japanese studies in Romania. The academic papers included in each volume do not represent conference proceedings, having been collected after a separate call for papers, and carefully peer-reviewed by our international collaborators. In an attempt at being inclusive and at offering both experienced (and often widely known) researchers, as well as young academics a platform for sharing their research, we do not propose a unified theme for each conference iteration/journal issue, but accept submissions from various fields, such as anthropology, business management, cultural and media studies, (intellectual) history, linguistics, literature, philosophy, visual and performing arts.

The current volume is, as usual, an eclectic selection of papers from the fields of business management, musicology and ritual studies, intellectual history, and philosophy.

In *Reconstruction of the National Theater of Japan and Kabuki: Contemporary Interdependencies and Prospective Challenges*, Annegret Bergmann discusses not what happens on stage, but the stage itself. Her article examines the redevelopment of the National Theater of Japan (a project scheduled to be completed in 2029) as a phenomenon suggestive of what is happening on the wider stage of the Japanese society, a locus impacted by cultural heritage policies, pressure to enhance tourism potential, and the relationship between the private and the public sectors. A Kabuki expert, Bergmann's concludes by referring to the importance of viewing this reconstruction project as a venue both for new, innovative forms of theater, and at the same time, as a place that supports the preservation of the classical Kabuki – an enterprise requiring better cooperation between the National Theater and the traditional Kabuki venues, the Shôchiku theaters.

*Journey as Self-Reflection – Kaikō Takeshi's "Escape" from Japan* by Nina Habjan Villareal analyzes a travelogue and a series of essays by Kaikō Takeshi, a well-known writer of both reportage and fiction, in an attempt to prove that his early experience abroad had a major influence on his later career, making him understand that the border between non-fiction and fiction is not fixed, but flexible. Habjan-Villareal proves that the specific style of journalistic writing that Kaikō Takeshi is

known for has deep roots in his first experience at writing reportages of his visits in China and Eastern Europe (Romania, Czechoslovakia and Poland) in 1960. While the lesson that he learned during his travels to all these communist countries showed him that truth is not easy to find, all the experiences that he accumulated helped him find a new type of creativity, leading to his writing about the multiple realities he experienced throughout his lifetime.

In *Research on the Impact of Telework on Work-Life Balance in Japanese Human Resources Management*, Ikuya Kano addresses a topic of high interest especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic: working remotely and life-work balance in Japan. Approached from the perspective and with the tools of business management, his paper represents a valuable insight into Japanese society from a sociological and anthropological point of view as well. His study looks into changes affected by the international health crisis, together with globalization factors which inevitably influence the Japanese way of thinking, and the way people respond and adapt to such changes. One of the positive effects of this study is that the often pre-conceived perception of the Japanese workplace may receive a fairer judgment, showing how Japanese society has become less insular and more apt to moving in the same direction as the international community.

*From Noh Plays to Modern Anime: The Role of Peony Flowers in Japanese Cultural Imagery* by Yoko Matsumoto-Sturt looks into the symbolism of the peony flower, connecting it to female demons (*kijo*) in traditional and contemporary media. Starting from the image of the peony on the demon fan used in Noh theatre, Matsumoto-Sturt proves that the peony is an attribute of *kijo*, in a demonstration that incorporates both linguistic and cultural perspectives. The second half of the paper focuses on an analysis of the traditional visual motif of peony, symbolising both the beauty and the immortality of demons, in the contemporary anime *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*, proving that the motifs are reimagined to enhance the narrative and that their integration into modern media shows the relevance and adaptability of cultural symbols, at the same time creating bridges between traditional and contemporary audiences.

In the *Pictorial Maps and the Rise of Modern Resort in Ōiso in the Mid-Meiji Period*, Mengfei Pan discusses the relationship between three pictorial maps that were produced at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan and the transformation of Ōiso, a town located on the Tōkaidō highway that was connecting Edo (modern-day Tōkyō) to Kyōto, into a modern resort. The paper follows a less explored approach, looking into the social functions of these maps. Pan argues that the three Ōiso maps were produced as souvenirs but they also were created and produced by local shop owner and administrator in order to create a public desire for the lifestyle of high society. By adding clusters of villas, modern elements such as railways and electricity poles to the pictorial maps, or by marketing them as souvenirs, the author demonstrates that the three maps were created with the intent to enhance tourist experience and to function as a referent of status.

In *The Teacher with the Dragon Tattoo: Between Vulnerability and Empowerment in the Life Story of a Japanese Language Teacher*, Roman Pașca examines the life story of Dana, a non-native Japanese language teacher and researcher, with a particular focus on the tattoo as life story. Starting from the assumption that the value of a life story is intrinsic and that its significance resides primarily in it being told - without representing a pretext for generalizations - Pașca explores the role of Dana's dragon tattoo in order to examine the function it plays in constructing her identity. Arguing that the tattoo represents a thin border between the self and the other, while being, at the same time, a canvas onto which Dana projects herself, the author concludes that Dana's story is first and foremost a story of personal growth in which she chooses to make her vulnerabilities visible in order to confront them, thus trying to solve the clash between social and cultural expectations and her true self.

In *The German Idealist Conception of Freedom in Modern Japanese Philosophy: A Survey*, Dennis Prooi looks into the transmission of liberalism in Japan during the later Meiji period and analyzes its role in the development of the Kyoto School of Philosophy. Prooi focuses on three moments in Japanese philosophy when the German idealist concept of freedom gets a central role in shaping other conceptions of the same idea. The author proves that while the scholars of the early Meiji period embraced the Anglo-Saxon perspective of freedom, a second generation of Meiji intellectuals adopted and adapted to the Japanese context the German idealist concept of freedom, which later became the core element of several prominent representatives of the Kyoto School, such as Kitaro Nishida and Keiji Nishitani. We thus witness a transition from a passive appropriation of the concept to an active search for *true* freedom, questioning the way in which the concept was constructed.

Michiko Urita's paper, *A Song of Continuity: Kagura Secret Song and the Vicennial Renewal of Ise Jingū on the Eve of the Modern Period*, is a unique, multidisciplinary (musicology, history, ritual studies) approach to the Shinto rituals performed at the Grand Ise Shrines. She focuses on a particularly significant ritual in the history of the Ise Shrines, the 1889 vicennial renewal, in an attempt to demonstrate how historically recorded tradition was kept alive by Shinto priests through ritual performance. Her paper is not only an in-depth analysis of the ritual which is central to the research, but also a trove of explanations regarding ritual practices and Shinto traditions that can become extremely useful tools for the understanding of Japanese religion, and for future research. The study can be seen as a must-read for academics interested in Shinto and Japan's cultural history, as well as for those who may want to ascertain her conclusions by observing the next renewal ceremonies in 2033.

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