

THE TEACHER WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO: BETWEEN VULNERABILITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE LIFE STORY OF A JAPANESE LANGUAGE TEACHER

Roman PAȘCA¹

Abstract

This article, the second part of a larger project focusing on identity construction for non-native Japanese language teachers, examines the life story of Dana, with a particular focus on the tattoo as life story. I explore the role of Dana's dragon tattoo in order to examine the function it plays in constructing her identity. My conclusion is twofold: firstly, I argue 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. Dana's story is also 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. Secondly, with regard to methodology, I suggest that by incorporating the tattoo into life story research we can identify and unpack a deeper meaning to the story.

Keywords: life story, Japanese language teacher, tattoo, empowerment, vulnerability.

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2024/20/1.08

1. Preamble

This article represents an examination of the life story of Dana, a non-native Japanese language teacher. It is the continuation of a previous paper (Pașca, 2017) in which I analyzed Dana's identity focusing on the dynamic relation between the two facets of "language learner" and "language teacher". There, my conclusion was that these two facets are in a constant interplay, situated along a spectrum of different identities (that include, for example, Dana as a woman, as a Romanian living in Japan, as a researcher in Japanese philosophy etc.), with Dana constantly sliding between them. Drawing from Armour 2000, I called this process "identity slippage" and described it as an ongoing negotiation whose *enjeu* is ultimately the construction of the self. When discussing Dana's "slippage", I used the metaphor of the tuning knob on an old radio and suggested that Dana is always trying to fine tune her identity by turning the knob between her different facets in an attempt to find her inner voice.

In this piece, I bring a new element into the analysis by focusing on another chapter in Dana's story, namely "the tattoo as life story". I examine the role of the dragon

¹ Roman Pașca, Faculty of Education and Human Studies, Akita University, romanpasca@ed.akita-u.ac.jp.

tattoo that Dana inscribed into her body in order to identify the function it plays in constructing and representing her identity as a Japanese language teacher.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Constructing the self

My approach to life story research draws on Sakurai's (2002, 2012) notion of "dialogical constructivism" (*taiwateki kōchiku shugi* 対話的構築主義), which views the interview as a locus where the story is constructed through the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. In Sakurai's interpretation, both the storyteller and the listener are indispensable to the creation of the story, which is born out of the dialectic of the dialogue between the two. They are co-constructors of the story and, as such, they both become involved in a process whereby they also construct (or re-construct) their own selves and their own identities. As Sakurai puts it, "talking about ourselves is in fact a part of the practical process of formation of the self" (Sakurai, 2012: 39)². In this particular case, Dana's account of her life story and of her tattoo is a way for her to try to understand who she is, but at the same time my contribution to - and involvement in - the story creates an opportunity for me as well to reflect on my own story, on my own practice, on my own self and identity. Due to space constraints, I will focus here on Dana's story and leave mine to be told on another occasion; however, when (re)telling Dana's story in this article through quotes and other references, I will always include my utterances as well, as they are an integral part of the story.

A crucial element in the telling of the story is language. To quote Sakurai again, "the life story is told through a mutual linguistic act between the interviewer and the storyteller, and thus the self and reality are constructed through that story" (Sakurai, 2002: 61). This "linguistic act" represented by the constant back-and-forth of questions, answers, statements, accounts etc. and punctuated by silences, sighs, laughs, or gestures, is, however, neither uniform nor chronological. When telling her story, Dana always jumps across timelines, traveling back and forth from chapter to chapter, revisiting various memories, episodes, and scenes. In this way, she constructs a reality which is by no means linear, but meandering and convoluted, complicated and complex at the same time. In my rendering and analysis of her story, I try to respect this, and therefore my account of Dana's life is also convoluted and non-linear. Moreover, since at times I also appear as a character in Dana's story – as I showed in Paşca (2017), we have been friends and colleagues for a long time, so I was a direct witness or participant to many of the episodes or scenes she mentions in her account - my position is threefold, as I am simultaneously the interviewer who

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Japanese are mine.

listens to the story, the interviewer who co-constructs reality and identity together with Dana, and the friend who is also an active part of this story. In my interpretation of the data, I also try to convey this multiple layering or roles.

As for the meaning of the life story interview for Dana's life, identity, and education practice, I would like to bring into the discussion the concept of empowerment. When trying to find a "working definition of empowerment" at a time when the term was used "with a flexibility of meaning so broad that it seems to be in danger of losing any inherent meaning at all", Chamberlin (1997: 43) argues that empowerment is actually a cluster of qualities, which include, among others, "having decision-making power", "assertiveness", "a feeling that the individual can make a difference (being hopeful)", "learning to think critically", "not feeling alone; feeling a part of a group", "growth and change that is never-ending and self-initiated", etc., and notes that "part of the empowerment process is a *reclaiming process* for these life stories", and that "both the act of telling and that of *being listened to* are important events for group members" (Chamberlain, 1997: 45). While it is true that Chamberlin's focus is on empowerment in mental health programs and psychiatric evaluations, the "qualities" they discuss are not necessarily exclusive to this particular context, and it is clear that there is a strong connection between sharing one's life story and becoming empowered.

In a relatively similar context of health care, Bianco (2011) also suggests, along the same lines, that narratives empower us by allowing us to take back control of our life and, in some case, of our death as well:

Narrative allows us, through character, word, symbol, and plot, to rekindle times long passed, to preserve the stories of those no longer with us, and to reauthor death. Narratives may stop, but rarely do they end; after all, what is "happily ever after" if not another beginning? Narrative empowers us to author new and sublime realities that transcend objective events, allowing us to choose our own endings, as well as the endings of those who touch our lives. (Bianco, 2011: 301)

While I do agree with these assessments that telling one's life story is a means of empowerment, I would like to amend and adapt them for a non-medical context by suggesting that, at least in Dana's case, there can be empowerment *only if* there is vulnerability first. Both "I" and the "other" can only be empowered by sharing moments and episodes of failure, self-doubt and weakness; sharing them allows both "I" and the "other" to confront, acknowledge, internalize, and overcome these moments and episodes in a lengthy and often painful process; and through this process, both "I" and the "other" understand and embrace our own past, incorporate it into the present, and then project it into the future. As I will show in the following sections, Dana's story is indeed a story of empowerment, but this empowerment is

constantly underwritten by a story of confusion, uncertainty, and wounds.³ In other words, when constructing the life story, there are moments when the difference between storyteller and listener becomes blurred, when “I” become the “other” and the “other” becomes “I”, both vulnerable yet mutually empowering.

2.2 *The tattoo as life story*

In their discussion of the role of body tattooing in identity construction, Velliquette, Murray and Creyer (1998) and Velliquette, Murray and Evers (2006) identify two major themes for discussion: the “simulated self” and the “personal myth”. The notion of “simulated self” refers to the fact that “the public persona uses a system of signs which reflects the inner self” (Velliquette et al., 1998: 465), thus suggesting that the outer self is not identical to the inner one. Thus, “the inner self is the real self and the public persona is a simulated self which extends from within” (Velliquette et al., 1998: 465), and the tattoo serves as one of the “signs” whose function is to project a certain image of the self. In other words, it constitutes an interface through which the individual negotiates between the inner self and its outer projection.

On the other hand, the “personal myth” is “a story that brings together a wide range of experiences into a purposeful and convincing whole” (Velliquette et al., 2006: 35) by which people try to make meaning of their lives. The authors point out that this meaning-making centrally involves storytelling and that, as such, tattoos become an integral part of the story. In fact, through tattoos, people construct a certain narrative of their lives, which can range across a wide spectrum, from narratives of redemption (moving from bad to good) to narratives of contamination (moving from good to bad), all of which can be subscribed to the notion of identity negotiation. They also add that, since tattoos are customized yet permanent, they serve to destabilize a series of oppositions such as body / object, inner self / outer (projected) self, true self / simulated self, etc.

Along the same lines, Shelton and Peters (2008) draw on DeMello’s (2000) remark that the most commonly reported reason to get a tattoo is to enhance one’s sense of

³ When discussing the life story interview as a locus for creating a “shared experience”, Sakurai states that “[...] the teller and the listener of a life story are both dynamic subjects who create history together. It is true that the story is created through mutual action in the “here and now”, but the story contains messages of all the experiences accumulated from the past until the present” (Sakurai, 2012: 23). In this sense, the story that Dana and I co-create becomes part of our personal histories, and at the same time it becomes part of the history of the Japanese language education community. Therefore, to a certain extent, her story is also mine and, amplified through the interview, our experiences become relevant for the community at large, as they have the potential to be *anybody’s* (or *everybody’s*) experiences.

individuality and suggest that the tattoo can be interpreted “as a personal narrative to commemorate an event or significant period in their life [...] such as celebrating an accomplishment of the bearer. [...]”, or as the choice of a person to “individuate herself as an act of rebellion” (Shelton and Peters 2008: 1).

Lader, on the other hand, focuses on the role of the skin as the boundary between “me” and “other” and interprets the body as canvas:

The body represents the individual to the outside world. It is how people are recognized from one another. The skin serves as the boundary between “me” and “other” (the rest of the world). It therefore makes sense that the body can represent a personal bulletin board to express to others things about oneself. (Lader, 2006: 15)

What all these interpretations have in common is the central idea that once a person decides to get a tattoo, she decides to represent herself in a certain way and to construct her identity in a certain way, through a process of negotiation that is at the same time permanent and dynamic. Also, tattoos are used to plot – or landmark – life stories and, in this sense, the tattooed body represents a map that enables narration. Dramatic life changes are embodied in tattoos that help subjects to ease their problems. However, as Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005) show, since problems are engraved into skin and flesh, they are not only visible to, but also *seen by* other people. Therefore, subjectivities and vulnerabilities become visible and thus, the human body is, at the same time, both a subject actively seeking meaning and a mere object to be judged.

Another aspect of the tattooed body that should be considered is the therapeutic potential of the tattoo. Spry (2001), for example, mentions this aspect for patients who were diagnosed with cancer or other life-threatening diseases, for whom tattoos represent a way of inscribing the trauma into their bodies and their lives in order to deal with it and eventually overcome it.

As for teachers and students choosing to tattoo their bodies, this is a field that still needs to be explored. Most of the literature I mentioned above deals with tattooed bodies that are not necessarily involved in the education process. One of the few studies that discusses tattooing in an educational context is Leader’s (2015), who led a multidisciplinary research project at a South Florida public university. Leader, however, focuses more on the cultural aspect of tattoos, stating that the “tattoo emerges as a repository of memories and a site of affirmations, but also a significant form of creative self-expression beyond temporary fashion” (Leader, 2015: 17). The study beautifully characterizes tattoos as “a moment of ink” and suggests they are to be understood as a locus where arts (the aesthetic aspect of the tattoo) and humanities (the narrative it constructs) merge with the double purpose of promoting self-knowledge and tolerance.

In Japan, there is a powerful stigma associated with tattoos, which are considered to represent belongingness to the criminal world, particularly to the underworld of the yakuza, and especially for men. As Sekiya (2022) shows, having a tattooed body can often trigger a response of rejection or even discrimination, particularly when using public facilities. Recently, there have been several attempts to integrate tattoos within life story research, such as McLaren's (2015) study on the life story of a traditional tattoo artist (*horishi*); Okabayashi, Kudō and Kumagai (2018), for instance, do discuss tattoos as part of the process of body modification (along with makeup, clothing etc.), but only focus on female university students. However, none of these studies explore the meaning of the tattooed body of a teacher in the Japanese context.

3. Dana's story

I have interviewed Dana five times over a period of six years. All interviews were conducted in different locations (Dana's home, cafés etc.) in the Kantō area in Japan and lasted between 1½ and 2½ hours. I recorded all the interviews, transcribed them, and then showed the transcripts to Dana for confirmation. Apart from these transcripts, the data also include my field notes, my correspondence with Dana, as well as some of the discussions we have had over the years as friends. Throughout the research process, from the initial stages of preparing for the interview to writing this piece, all ethical requirements have been carefully respected. Thus, after explaining the *enjeu* of the research project and clarifying the expectations, boundaries and requirements embedded in our respective roles (researcher / collaborator), I made sure to obtain from Dana a written letter of consent, so her consent to participate in this project is informed, unambiguous and voluntary. At all stages, I handled the data with the utmost care and in complete confidentiality, storing and sharing it responsibly. When processing the data for analysis and then for publication, Dana was consulted numerous times on all aspects pertaining to my interpretation of the data. In fact, she read all versions of this paper, from the initial draft stage to the final one, and often made comments and suggestions. Therefore, I prefer to refer to her as a "collaborator" (as Sakurai 2002 suggests) and not an "informant" or an "interviewee".

My initial coding of the data consisted in identifying and labeling significant chapters in Dana's story, such as "Japanese Language Summer School", "Matsuri at the university", or, of course, "the dragon tattoo". I use the term "chapter" here as it appears in Kirkegaard Thomsen (2009: 446), where it is defined as "memory for different activities and episodes stretching over an extended period of time and relating to the same higher order activity. Because specific memories are often operationalised as lasting less than 24 hours, logically chapters may extend from 24 hours to several years". To accurately convey Dana's "voice", I will quote extensively from the transcript of the interviews; when preparing the data, I tried not

to change any of the idiosyncrasies of Dana's discourse (such as the fact that she prefers to use Japanese words for certain notions), and to stifle my own "voice" when it seemed to become too loud.

Dana's body is tattooed: a few years ago, she decided to get her own "moment of ink". She was already in Japan at the time, so she went regularly to a tattoo studio in central Tokyo for about six months, inscribing into her skin a large black and white image representing a mythical animal, a dragon. The "ink" covers most of her back, with the head of the dragon on one of her shoulders, and its tail swirling at the bottom and then extending on to the stomach, in the front. In the following sections, I will explore what meaning Dana assigns to this mythical creature embedded within her skin and flesh, and how this meaning-making process relates to the negotiation of her identity as a (non-native) Japanese language teacher. My analysis of Dana's life story takes into account both the life story constructed through the interview, and the role the tattoo plays in the way in which she tells this life story.

3.1 Vulnerability

As I showed in my previous article (Paşca, 2017), Dana's story is rather complicated and non-linear. She started studying Japanese by chance immediately after a tragedy had occurred in her family, as she felt at the time she needed a challenge – learning a new language she had never been in contact with – in order to get "back on track", as she puts it. Until then, she had studied Italian and English from middle school through high school, so Japanese was in fact her third foreign language. After graduating from university, she became a teaching assistant at a private university in Bucharest, Romania, where she taught for about seven years before coming to Japan on a scholarship to pursue a second PhD degree (in Japanese language education) at a Japanese university. However, the PhD program in Japan turned out to be a rather traumatic experience: according to Dana's retrospective account, it was a period of three years when she almost constantly felt insecure and vulnerable, an outsider to the community not recognized and acknowledged as a peer, and not challenged intellectually. She never finished the program and, at the end of the three years, when her scholarship ran out, contemplated going back to Romania but decided instead to stay in Japan and continue her career and life here.

Dana's assessment of the three years she spent in the PhD program in Japan is indeed very harsh: in the interviews, whenever she mentions that period in her life, she talks about a constant feeling of not fitting in, mainly because her supervisor and peers expected her to do things in a certain way when it came to research. According to her account, it was an environment almost hermetically closed, where everybody was expected to follow the same protocol when doing research or presenting their findings, with very little room for novel approaches, broader perspectives or interdisciplinarity. For Dana, this situation eventually proved to be unbearable: constantly struggling to find her own place within the community and to renegotiate

her new identity, she started to feel uncertain about herself. She lost her confidence in herself as a professional (as teacher and researcher) and started to have doubts about the path she had chosen in life.

In retrospect, however, she does not regret her decision to enter the PhD program. She does interpret the whole three years as a period of struggle and powerlessness which was sprinkled throughout with panic attacks and long episodes of depression, but in the interviews, she rather talks about what happened in her life in the aftermath of the period and about her own incapacity, at the time, to correctly evaluate and deal with those experiences:

D: So after those years, maybe one or two in the beginning, after I went through that period of really weird anxiety, this last semester has been OK. I have been feeling better, and it has been better with...

R: You mean in your head?

D: Yes, in my head. I stopped having so many problems in front of the students.

R: But what do you think caused that anxiety?

D: I have no idea, maybe I have to start studying psychology for that. [10 seconds of silence] I've been reading a lot and I've found all sorts of methods to try and calm down... I had... I guess it all started... It's clear to me that I reacted like that to something here in Japan, and I guess I'm still reacting to what happened then during the PhD program. It's still not very clear, but it's possible. You know, during that time when I was enrolled in the PhD, I didn't publish anything, because I always waited for approval from [the supervisor]. So, I don't know, I really don't know what happened there. Something happened in my head, something just got stuck at some point, and I had no confidence whatsoever that I could still offer something to my students. And I was second-guessing everything... Constantly, there was a voice behind me asking me "Are you sure you didn't make a mistake? Are you sure that was the correct particle? Are you sure you should have said that?"⁴

At the time of the interview, Dana had already withdrawn from the PhD program and started her current job teaching at a private university in the Kantō area. However, as can be seen in this quote, the negative, traumatic consequences of the PhD program episode extend in time well after its administrative ending and, for Dana, one of its most damaging reverberations is the fact that it made her feel estranged from the academic community, both as a researcher and as a Japanese language

⁴ All the interviews with Dana were conducted in Romanian, which is the native tongue for both of us. I translated the transcript into English for the purpose of this piece, and Dana herself reviewed the translation to check its accuracy. Throughout the interviews, there are numerous instances where Dana uses the Japanese version of certain terms, i.e. *bogowasha* for "native speaker", *nihongo kyōiku* for "Japanese language education" etc. I left these terms as such in the transcript, as they represent one of the idiosyncrasies in Dana's discourse whose presence is telling in terms of her relationship with foreign languages and the way they contribute to shaping her identity.

teacher. Extremely harsh in her assessment of the whole experience, Dana links her “dry spell” in publications as a researcher with the feeling of uselessness as a teacher, as these two facets of her identity are interconnected, much like the two sides of the same coin. She talks about her “weird anxiety” and her lack of self-confidence, and she hints at the imposter syndrome that still affects her practice to a certain extent, while at the same time indicating that she is actively trying to understand their causes and to overcome this impasse of non-belongingness and uselessness. Moreover, she also suggests that this impasse extends beyond her professional career, into her private life, affecting her social connections and relationships as well:

There was also that period when I felt that, anyway, as a non-bogowasha, as a person who still has so much to learn, I have no right to be behind the teacher’s desk... And on top of that there was the personal stuff, when I felt that apart from you and [my partner] I couldn’t talk to almost anybody else. [...] I was that kind of person who turned any social situation into something really, really awkward, because I really didn’t know what to say. [...] I was constantly afraid I would do something really embarrassing in front of the students... I don’t know, really embarrassing, something physiological maybe. [...] I was in self-destructive mode.

From this account, it seems like the complex puzzle of facets that make up Dana’s identity is shattered beyond recognition and there is no possibility in sight to put the pieces back together; the teacher, the researcher, the woman, the human being etc. – they are all “self-destructive”, “awkward”, “afraid”, and powerless. At this point in her story, Dana appears to be slowly disintegrating, vanishing into thin air under the weight of her burden as her confidence is shaken and her vulnerability increases.

One thing worth noting here is that, at this moment, I’m already *in* Dana’s story. As she herself confesses, I am one of the two people she felt comfortable confiding in, so the interview is actually not the first time for me to hear her story (or at least this part of it). This, of course, is a testament to the length and strength of our friendship and to the depth of the rapport established between us; but on the other hand, at a meta level, it also represents a key moment in the development of her story as it indicates how it becomes *our* story, something that we co-construct. Did the fact that I was there all along, that I had heard the story before, make it easier for Dana to share it during the interview? Has the interview contributed to Dana’s dealing with her vulnerability, through some sort of therapeutic effect? To be honest, I don’t know. Naturally, I am tempted to say yes, but the problem is that Dana herself never makes this assessment, and I am afraid I would be straying away too much from the data and, thus, inducing a faulty and perhaps misleading interpretation. What I do know for sure is that my presence there (both as a character in the story, and as an interlocutor for the interview) constitutes a trigger for my own process of self-reflection: listening to Dana’s story makes me think about my own; her lack of self-confidence reminds me of my own imposter syndrome; her passing remark about being a “non-bogowasha” reminds me that I am one as well and that my practice is

in many ways similar to hers; her “self-destructive” mode somehow harks back to my own bouts of depression; her overall sense of powerlessness and uselessness becomes, to a certain extent, my own. I will not go so far as to say that *I am Dana*, but her story is definitely mine as well.

3.2 The tattoo and its meaning

So, how does the dragon tattoo fit into Dana’s life story? First, let us have a look at how she herself talks about the decision to get her “moment of ink”:

The tattoo, I got it at a time when [5 seconds of silence] I decided not to let others and society decide who I am and who I need to be. [...] Because up until that moment I didn't know how to be in the world in any other way than being dependent on somebody else. I truly didn't.

Temporally, the period Dana is referring to here overlaps with the period she was enrolled in the PhD program mentioned above, a time of struggle and pain during which she felt like she was losing sight of her identity. In Dana’s own words, the decision to get inked was triggered by her need to be true to herself, to “be somebody I can live with”. She frames the decision in these terms in several episodes scattered throughout the interviews, often accompanied by remarks about attempts to reevaluate and find herself, as in the excerpt below:

D: I've never wanted to be in education until I got the job offer. [...] And once I was in education - well, I think I've already told you this during the previous interviews - I started liking it and...

R: And has the tattoo helped?

D: [8 seconds of silence] It helped me then. Yes, it helped. I think it was the only moment when... the first moment when I started to have a bit of color as an individual. And not because I had a tattoo, the tattoo was rather a symptom of the fact that I realized that I need to be somebody I can live with, somebody I want to be. At that time, it was a sort of reaction to the way in which... well, I can't really say that... I still think about it every now and then... Sometimes I don't even perceive it anymore.

R: You mean you don't realize it's there anymore?

D: It doesn't have the same capacity to renew me and to renew my motivation.

R: You mean you don't need it anymore, or it has accomplished its mission?

D: Neither. It means that the depression I'm in right now has erased... [5 seconds of silence] ...it has erased a lot of the things I wanted to do in all those years when I had found myself and had reevaluated myself and had re...

R: Those years were quite hectic, weren't they?

D: Yes, they were quite hectic. [10 seconds of silence] But I was thriving. I loved that. I miss that.

R: In what sense?

D: I feel that was the period when I evolved the most as an individual. It seems to me that, without that period, I wouldn't be where I am now, I wouldn't have become so determined and so motivated to do certain things, including in my research. I guess I needed that period, which I probably should have lived in my adolescence. But I didn't get to.

The emergence of the dragon onto Dana's skin may have been triggered by her need to find herself, but, as the fragment above seems to indicate, that does not necessarily mean that the mythical beast was some sort of panacea that immediately removed the source of all pain and suffering. For Dana, getting the tattoo is definitely not the end of the road, but rather the beginning. And the ride is by no means a smooth one: she talks of depression, of lack of motivation, and she suggests that the tattoo does not have the same capacity that it used to have originally. In other words, the vulnerability is still there, and Dana is still trying to make sense of who and what she is. As a side note, let me add here that on several occasions throughout the interviews, Dana repeatedly stated that she never regretted getting the tattoo – the dragon may have lost some of its powers, but that does not make it redundant or irrelevant.

The “hectic” years Dana and I mention here refer to a period of about four years immediately after she withdrew from the PhD program, during which she did a lot of “crazy stuff”, as she puts it: she took a break from academia, putting on hold all her research projects, not publishing anything and refusing to look for teaching jobs; she started her own business as a freelance photographer; she then joined a multinational IT company where she worked for a while doing office work that had nothing in common with her academic background; she became very active socially, joining several communities and groups and making many friends; and last but not least, she began exploring the possibility of acquiring a motorcycle. In retrospect, her overall evaluation of the period is rather positive, as she considers those years to be, in a sense, formative years that ultimately played an important part in her becoming. She talks about herself as “thriving” during that period, yet at the same time she also expresses a feeling of loss and regret for putting her academic career on hold:

D: [...] About four years. About the same duration as the PhD program, because it was after I got in the program that I went... How do I put this?... I missed a lot of opportunities, professionally. I think I would be much further today if I had been just a little bit more focused back then, but that was the period when I lost... It was the first moment when I had so much freedom that I became immune to any social expectation, but I don't think I was aware of the price that I would have to pay. You know, the fact that right now I don't have a network of people I can rely on when looking for a job, or that I can hang out with and talk about stuff, or people I can have intellectual conversations with... I lost many important years. I could have grown, professionally. But on the other hand without that period I don't think I would be where I am now. I think this is the first time in my life when I feel the

motivation I have to continue on this path is authentic and really comes from within me.

R: From the dragon? [laughing]

D: [10 seconds of silence] It's still just a koi fish... It comes from all those years, but also from the fact that I've been depressed and trying to overcome it.

Dana's evaluation of the dragon tattoo as "still just a *koi* fish" indicates that this is, actually, just the beginning of the road for her in this journey of self-reflection and identity search, and from vulnerability to empowerment. As I noted above, the tattoo is by no means a panacea, but by inscribing the dragon onto her skin Dana takes the first step of mapping out her story, of creating a landmark for it. Yet who is this story for? As I showed in the literature review, tattoos have the double and somewhat paradoxical function of acting both as border between self and other, and as canvas for the other; it delineates the limits of the self while also blurring them by beckoning the other to share in the story. And, for the most part, this stands true for Dana as well. But I would argue here that, for her, the story is not so much for the other, but rather for herself; the dragon does indeed make the story *visible* to, and *seen* by, the other, but I think that its main role is in fact to make the story visible to, and seen by, Dana herself. The dragon, even in its incipient stage of *koi* fish, serves as a reminder of the pain and vulnerability even as it sets the ground for acceptance and empowerment. It also serves as a token connecting Dana's past, present and future, a sort of anchor she hangs on to in order to find a point of stability:

It's a bit silly of me to say this, but in a way I feel like an artist, that I have to put in the work before I can see the results, and if I can overcome this period it would be wonderful. [...] I feel like I'm just starting out, I'm just beginning to find out what I want to do for the rest of my life, wherever I go.

But what is the role of the tattoo in Dana's practice as a teacher and researcher, i.e. where is the dragon placed within the spectrum of facets that make up Dana's identity? She actually talks about this aspect several times, not only during the interviews but also during our informal meetings. After quitting her corporate job and going back to teaching, she was initially afraid that the tattoo might affect the way she is perceived both by students and by colleagues, and that she might be ostracized or even lose her job because of it, so she tried to hide it by wearing clothes that showed as little skin as possible. In time, as nothing negative happened because of the tattoo, she realized that it actually doesn't matter:

D: Now, I'm more relaxed about the tattoo. The students don't care, they're amused and sometimes make comments about the dragon. Plus, almost all of them also have tattoos. And the coordinator hasn't said anything so far.

R: Has she seen it?

D: I don't know. But she hasn't said anything. So I guess she's OK with it. And if I'm ever in a situation where I could lose my job because of the tattoo... You know,

this is what I was actually afraid of. I was clinging on to that job and I didn't want to lose it because... I literally put... When I left [the corporate job], you know, they had just offered me a full-time position. That was the moment when I knew I didn't want to give up education, I felt the need to stay in touch. I mean, from my point of view working in a corporation was somehow... and I didn't realize that until the moment I was put in a situation where I had to make a decision. I would have buried myself. I had started to become stupid. I had started to feel that my mind... How do I put this? I had become so frustrated and so stressed that my creativity and all those other things that I appreciate and had started to cultivate in myself...

This short fragment above is essential for understanding Dana's story, for two reasons. The first reason is acceptance: when she sees that the students don't care about the tattoo and that her colleague also seems to be "OK with it" – in other words, when she realizes that the dragon is *accepted* by the others - Dana finally accepts it herself, as part of her body and of her identity. This is the moment when the story told by the dragon, which, as I suggested earlier, is told mainly for Dana and not for the others, finally becomes *her* story. She accepts it and she embraces it.

The second reason has to do with what I would call Dana's "core values", the things she believes in not only as a teacher and researcher, but more broadly speaking as a human being: creativity, critical thinking, intellectual growth etc. Financially, she would have been quite comfortable had she kept the job with the IT company, yet when confronted with the decision of staying in the corporate world, or going back to something else, whatever that may be - at the time, she did not have an alternative option or a job offer - she chooses the latter and, eventually, returns to being a teacher and researcher. And she makes the choice despite the perceived risk that the tattoo might affect her prospects or her status; at this point, the dragon becomes the token of empowerment, whereby Dana makes a strong statement about who she chooses to be. And later on, when reflecting on her current teaching practice and on her research projects, Dana explicitly declares that she has no regrets about the decision; quite the contrary, as her return to the academia is now fueled by a new-found motivation and a renewed sense of confidence in the validity and relevance of her endeavors:

I still find it difficult though, but maybe it's because now I am motivated, and because I'm doing what I am doing now because this is what I want to do, because I care a lot about the research project [on Japanese philosophy]. I really want to translate those thinkers, publish them and make them known, because I think they are relevant. [...] And precisely because I believe in this project, it's difficult because I feel the weight that each and every word I say about them should have, which I never used to do.

As I noted earlier, Dana's story is not linear, but quite complex and convoluted, and so is her account of it. It is also full of inconsistencies, constructed memories, and

contradictions - just like any other life story. The way and the order in which I chose to include the quotes from the interviews might make it seem like everything is beautifully arranged in chronological order within the story, like all the episodes conveniently come together and arrange themselves in a coherent, completed puzzle. It might also leave the impression that Dana's story is overwhelmingly positive, an uplifting narrative of immediate empowerment. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. I only arranged the quotes in this order to better focus on the episode of the dragon, and to better grasp its meaning. Dana's account is not an objective "truth", but rather a subjective perception of the events as experienced by her; her narration is a maze, full of branching stories and episodes and anecdotes, with many sudden turns and dead ends, a maze in which she (and I, for that matter) gets lost numerous times only to find yet another path that seems to be leading somewhere, and, most importantly, a maze that does not necessarily have a goal, or an exit. Dana does not tell her story *because* she wants to overcome it, or *because* she wants to attain a better understanding of her life; these things happen *because* she tells her story, or, to put it better, *while* she is telling it. And during this process, the tattoo is always with her, both as a *koi* fish and as a full-fledged dragon at the same time, because vulnerability and empowerment are not mutually exclusive. There is empowerment because there is vulnerability, but the journey is never over, and vulnerability is never completely gone. It remains there, as a substratum and incentive for empowerment. At least for Dana.

4. Data interpretation

So, what is the meaning of Dana's life story? And what is the meaning of her telling it? To explore these issues, I will start by referring to Atkinson's discussion (Atkinson, 1998: 25-26) of the potential benefits of sharing a life story. Atkinson proposes nine main points, which include things such as "a clearer perspective on personal experiences and feelings" (point 1), "greater self-knowledge", "stronger self-image and self-esteem" (2), or "inspiration to help them change something in their lives" (7). While most of these points are quite straightforward and sensible, some need further clarification and / or contextualization – point 4, for example, stipulates that "Joy, satisfaction, and inner peace are gained in sharing one's story with others", yet its scope remains rather vague and ambiguous. Atkinson does imply that *not* all nine benefits are gained for *every* story, and I think this is indeed true in Dana's case – there seems to be very little joy or satisfaction in her narrative, which retains a rather dark undertone until the very end, even as it hints at empowerment. However, I feel that the following three points can be applied to Dana's story, providing a framework for discussion that can help us make better sense of it, and I will focus on them in this section:

5. Sharing one's story is a way of purging, or releasing, certain burdens and validating personal experience; it is in fact central to the recovery process.

6. *Sharing one's story helps create community and may show that we have more in common with others than we thought.*

[...]

9. *A better sense of how we want our story to end, or how we could give it the "good" ending we want, might be gained. By understanding our past and present, we also gain a clearer perspective on our goals for the future.*

I believe that these points indicate a connection between the narrative of the tattoo embedded within Dana's body and within her life story, and the negotiation of her identity as a Japanese language teacher and researcher.

To start with point 5: as I have shown above, by sharing her life story Dana does indeed purge some of her "demons" – through the narrative of the dragon, she is able to come to terms with what she perceives to be a period of failure in her life and career, when she felt uncertain about her identity. For her, the dragon carved into her skin is a marker of the beginning of a recovery process which starts with acknowledging her own wounds and vulnerabilities, then goes through a stage of self-awareness triggered by the interview, and eventually leads to empowerment.

This is where point 9 comes into play: by sharing her story, Dana embraces her past, understands it, internalizes it, brings it to her in the present and learns how to project it into the future. And, as I noted earlier, the dragon serves as the token connecting these temporal dimensions, therefore playing a crucial role in articulating Dana's identity.

As for point 6, I would like to begin by making a few considerations about the meaning that the tattoo as life story can have for a Japanese language teacher in particular, and for Japanese language education in general. As I have already shown, Dana is a woman, a woman living in Japan, a Romanian living in Japan, a non-native Japanese language teacher teaching Japanese in Japan, a language learner, a Romanian fluent in three foreign languages, a researcher in Japanese philosophy, and so much more – a multi-faceted, complex person with a multi-faceted, complex life story. And by telling this story – both through the tattoo and at the meta-level, through the interview - Dana attributes new layers of significance to her identity as a Japanese language teacher (which is the facet I chose to concentrate on in this piece): the process of reflection on the story told by and through the tattoo also means a process of re-evaluating her past experiences and incorporating them into the construction of her self, and identity negotiation. At the same time, the tattoo as life story builds a bridge that connects these past experiences with the present, i.e. with Dana's current teaching practice, thus signifying her reintegration within the community of Japanese language education.

But what does Dana's story mean for Japanese language education in general? To answer this, I would argue that Dana's sharing of her life story can also be understood in terms of personal growth, triggered in this case by her interaction, in the locus of the life story interview, with the small part of the community of Japanese language

education represented by me, a fellow Japanese language teacher, as the interviewer. Thus, the story we co-create is not only Dana's, and not only mine; it is not the story of one and it is not the story of two, for it is, indeed, the story of *many*. And it is the story of *many* not only because it helps us understand the past, present and future of the teacher who tells the story, but also because it influences the development of the educational practice of tomorrow. Of the storyteller, of the listener, of all the other practitioners.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I bring a new element into the analysis of Dana's story by focusing on another chapter, namely "the tattoo as life story". I examine the role of the dragon tattoo that Dana inscribed into her body in an attempt to identify the role it plays in constructing and representing her identity as a Japanese language teacher. As with all qualitative research, the purpose of this piece is neither to offer broader insight into a particular topic such as, for example, the identity of foreign women in Japan, nor to make generalizations of any kind. I did not set out to test any hypotheses and generalize, my aim is simply to come to a deeper understanding of Dana's story, and of its meaning for the community of Japanese language education at large. As Sakurai (2012) suggests, the significance of a life story resides primarily in it being told; its value is intrinsic, and it does not have to represent a pretext for generalizations in order for it to be meaningful.

My conclusion is twofold. First of all, drawing on previous research on the meaning of tattoos, I show that, for Dana, the tattoo has a double, somewhat paradoxical, meaning. Thus, the tattoo, by being written into the skin, represents a thin border between the self and the other, between self and community, between the inner and the outer world and, as such, can be conceived of in terms of a mechanism of protection and isolation. On the other hand, however, precisely because it is visible to the other, the tattoo represents a canvas onto which Dana writes and projects herself as she wants to be seen, a locus where she displays her strengths but also her weaknesses and wounds in order to deal with them and overcome them. In other words, the tattoo is at the same time a locus of vulnerability, and a locus of empowerment, that creates a distancing from the other while at the same time beckoning the other to come closer. In this sense, the tattoo functions as a mechanism of identity negotiation whereby Dana navigates between her *selves* on the one hand (inner negotiation), and between her selves and the other, on the other hand (outward negotiation).

My second conclusion is that by incorporating the tattoo into life story research we can identify and unpack a deeper meaning to the story and to the way in which it is told. Thus, Dana's story has at least two levels. The first level is the tattoo itself, which, as I stated above, is in itself a locus for identity negotiation and, as such, already tells the story of a person in search of their voice. The second level of the

story is the chapter in the interview where Dana actually talks about the tattoo, from the experience of getting it inscribed into her skin to the meaning it has acquired for her in her becoming as a teacher, as a student, as a researcher, as a woman, as a human being etc. This second level is in fact a meta-level, of a higher, abstract order, which allows the storyteller to reflect on the first level of the story (i.e., the tattoo) and to assign new meanings to the process of identity negotiation.

If we read Dana's story carefully, it becomes evident that her "moment of ink" is a sign of a time of struggle in her attempt to find her identity and her voice as a teacher. In her own words, the mythical creature inscribed into her body is only a *koi* fish at the moment, but that means that it has the potential to grow into a mature, full-fledged, powerful dragon. In other words, Dana's story is also 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. This choice has its downsides, such as the fear of being singled out as a misfit and thus ostracized from the community, but it also has advantages. And one of the most obvious advantages is the fact that, by choosing to negotiate her identity through the narrative of the dragon, Dana gains new insights into her role as a teacher, and into her teaching practice. As a co-creator of her story through the interview, I also share into those insights, as they turn, for me as well, into an opportunity for reflection and meaning-making.

References and bibliography

- Armour, W.** 2000. "Identity Slippage: A Consequence of Learning Japanese as an Additional Language", in *Japanese Studies*, 20(3): 255-268.
- Armour, W.** 2004. "Becoming a Japanese Language Learner, User, and Teacher: Revelations from Life History Research", in *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 3 (2): 101-125.
- Atkinson, R.** 1998. *The Life Story Interview*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Bianco, J.A.** 2011. "Narrative Empowerment and the Talking Cure", in *Health Communication*, 26(3): 297-301.
- Chamberlin, J.** 1997. "A Working Definition of Empowerment", in *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, Spring 1997, 20 (4): 43-46.
- DeMello, M.** 2000. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kirkegaard Thomsen, D.** 2009. "There is more to life stories than memories", in *Memory*, 17(4): 445-457.
- Lader, W.** 2006. "A Look at the Increase in Body Focused Behaviors", in *Paradigm*, 11: 14-18.
- Leader, K. J.** 2015. "Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at a South Florida University", in *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 14(4): 426-446.
- McLaren, H.** 2015. *Needling Between Social Skin and Lived Experience: An Ethnographic Study of Tattooing in Downtown Tokyo*, Tokyo: Hitotsubashi

- University Repository Graduate School of Social Sciences (unpublished doctoral dissertation).
- Nagatomo, D.** 2016. *Identity, Gender and Teaching English in Japan*, Bristol/Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.
- Okabayashi S., Kudō M. and N. Kumagai.** 2018. “Joshi daigakusei ni okeru tasha noshintai sōshoku he no ishiki – tattoo to piasu wo chūshin toshite” [Female university students’ perception of body modifications – focusing on tattoos and piercings], in *Sen’i seihin shōhi kagaku*, 59 (7): 542-550.
- Oksanen, A. and J. Turtiainen.** 2005. “A Life Told in Ink: Tattoo Narratives and the Problem of the Self in Late Modern Society”, in *Auto/Biography* 2005; 13: 111-130.
- Paşca, R.** 2017. “Dealing with Identity Slippage: A Few Considerations based on Life Story Interviews with a Non-native Japanese Language Teacher”, in *Journal of Kanda University of International Studies*, 29: 279-295.
- Sakurai, A.** 2002. *Intabyū no shakaigaku - raifu sutōrī no kikikata [Sociology through interviews – how to ask about life stories]*, Tōkyō: Serika shobō.
- Sakurai, A.** 2012. *Raifu sutōrī ron [Life story theory]*, Tōkyō: Kōbundō.
- Sekiya, D.** 2022. “Irezumi, tattoo ga aru kyaku no riyō kahi wo meguru genjō to kadai – kōkyō nyūyoku shisetsutō he no intabyū chōsa ni motozuku teiseiteki kentō” [Current State and Issues Regarding the Availability of Public Baths for Customers with Tattoos – A qualitative investigation based on interviews with public bathing facilities], in *Kankō Kenkyū*, 34 (1): 5-16.
- Shelton J. A. and C. Peters.** 2008. “An exploratory investigation on identity negotiation and tattoo removal”, in *Academy of Marketing Science Review*, 12 (6): 1-14.
- Spry, T.** 2001. “Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis”, in *Qualitative Inquiry* 7(6): 706-732.
- Velliquette, A. M., Murray, J. B. and E. H. Creyer.** 1998. “The Tattoo Renaissance: An Ethnographic Account of Symbolic Consumer Behavior”, in Joseph W. Alba & J. Wesley Hutchinson (eds.). *Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 25, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research: 461-467.
- Velliquette, A. M., Murray, J. B. and D. J. Evers.** 2006. “Inscribing the Personal Myth: The Role of Tattoos in Identification”, in *Research in Consumer Behavior*, vol. 10, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Leeds: 35-70.

The author

Roman Paşca is an associate professor at Akita University. His main research interests include the relation between Japanese philosophy and environmental ethics, and life story research.