

EDITORIAL

TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND THE NEGOTIATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN JAPANESE CONTEXTS

This issue brings together selected papers from the 11th iteration of the international conference *Japan: Pre-modern, Modern and Contemporary*, held between September 2 and September 4, 2024, at the Center for Japanese Studies at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, highlighting the dynamic range of current scholarship in Japanese studies. The contributions explore Japan's intellectual, cultural, and socio-economic trajectories across multiple centuries and disciplines. Ranging from studies of educational reform and linguistic change, to explorations of war imagery, archetypes in popular culture, and the economic dynamics of both nation and ritual, the articles demonstrate the continuing richness of Japanese studies as a multidisciplinary field. In assembling this special issue, our aim is not only to showcase the innovative research presented at the conference but also to foster ongoing dialogue across regions, methodologies, and generations of scholars.

In order to synthesize the contributions, this editorial will organize them into four broad thematic clusters: (1) education and language; (2) intellectual history, philosophy, and Confucianism; (3) secondary forms of expression; and (4) business, economy, and the sacred. Within each, we find both convergences and productive contrasts.

1. Education and language

The issue opens with three contributions that highlight the foundations of cultural reproduction in Japan: its educational systems, linguistic categories, and publishing practices.

Sheikh Ajahar's essay on Japan's educational reformations and barriers to higher education provides a *longue durée* perspective on the development of schooling from the Edo period through the late twentieth century. Ajahar emphasizes how Japan's rapid modernization, often inspired by Western models, was continuously mediated by domestic challenges, particularly demographic decline, class stratification, and the competitive pressures of university entrance examinations. The essay highlights

the paradox of Japan as a country celebrated for its technological innovation but also burdened by systemic inequities that impede access to higher education. In this, the work contributes to ongoing debates on educational globalization, sustainability and equity.

In a very different but complementary vein, Daiki Yoshitake's philological study of the verb *kikoyu* demonstrates how linguistic categories shape cognition and cultural expression. By tracing the historical semantic expansion of *kikoyu* from involuntary auditory perception to various forms of comprehension, Yoshitake illustrates the deep entanglement between perception and understanding in Japanese intellectual history. The diachronic analysis reveals how shifts in meaning reflect broader transformations in cognitive frameworks, suggesting that language itself acts as a site of cultural reform.

These two essays underscore how Japan's knowledge systems mediate, through schooling and language, between domestic traditions and global pressures, demonstrating both resilience and transformation.

2. Intellectual history, philosophy, Confucianism

Another set of articles tackles Japan's intellectual traditions and their intersections with Western thought, particularly in the figures of Fukuzawa Yukichi and in the reinterpretation of Confucianism.

Ferenc Takó's contribution compares Fukuzawa Yukichi and Karl Marx on the question of Asian "stagnation". Using the innovative methodology of comparative reception history, Takó illuminates how both thinkers grappled with the problem of China's position in world history, yet arrived at divergent conclusions rooted in their cultural core. The study is valuable not only for its comparative insights but also for its methodological reflection on the challenges of intercultural philosophy.

Ryohei Kageura's essay deepens the engagement with Fukuzawa by examining his role as Japan's first advocate of financial capitalism. Against the grain of his contemporaries, Fukuzawa defended the pursuit of profit through financial instruments as a path toward personal independence and national modernization. The essay highlights the tension between Confucian suspicion of commerce and Fukuzawa's Enlightenment-inspired vision of a commercial society. In this way, it situates Fukuzawa at the nexus of Japan's intellectual and economic modernization.

Alexandra Mustătea's study, by contrast, reassesses Confucianism's role in shaping women's lives in early modern Japan. Challenging Anglophone feminist readings that treat Confucianism as uniformly oppressive, Mustătea foregrounds the presence of female Confucian scholars and the complex interplay between Confucian thought and women's agency. By complicating the narrative of Confucian patriarchy, the

paper calls for a more nuanced historiography of gender and intellectual life in Edo Japan.

The essays remind us that intellectual history is never a simple matter of “East versus West,” but a constant process of negotiation and reinterpretation.

3. *Secondary forms of expression*

Irina Holca’s and Mizuki Matsumoto’s contributions turn our gaze toward what is usually overlooked. Their work converges on a shared pursuit, namely to recover the significance of marginal forms and transient materials that have shaped Japanese modernity’s visual and textual culture.

Irina Holca’s essay on animals of war in Russo-Japanese War graphic magazines uncovers a neglected archive of visual and textual materials. By analyzing how animals appeared both as symbols of nations and as companions or adversaries on the battlefield, Holca provides a multi-layered account of the human–nonhuman entanglements of modern warfare. Her work not only enriches war studies and visual culture but also speaks to the broader “animal turn” in the humanities.

Matsumoto’s study of the *obi* – the paper band wrapped around Japanese books – exposes the dynamic life of an object often dismissed as disposable. Through its dual nature of transience and sustainability, the *obi* becomes a microcosm of Japan’s publishing ethos, perpetually changing yet deeply rooted in design tradition. By tracing its history from the Meiji era to the present, Matsumoto reveals how a fragile strip of paper mediates between art and commerce, permanence and ephemerality, embodying a uniquely Japanese negotiation between aesthetics and industry.

Both articles highlight the idea that what lies on the edges can redefine the center of cultural meaning. The *obi* transforms the act of reading into an encounter with marketing and design; the animals of war transform the spectacle of battle into a reflection on coexistence and survival. In both cases, what is “supplementary” or “secondary” proves essential to understanding the sensibilities and contradictions of Japan’s modern visual culture.

4. *Business, economy and the sacred*

The final cluster turns to the intersections of economy, business, and sacred practice. Costin Andrei Istrate examines Romanian–Japanese economic relations in the context of globalization and recent trade agreements. By situating Japan’s distinctive managerial philosophies – *kaizen*, *just-in-time*, *ringi* – within the framework of EU–Japan and Romania–Japan partnerships, Istrate highlights opportunities for economic collaboration amid global competition with China. The essay offers a timely contribution to international business studies and comparative capitalism.

Complementing this macroeconomic perspective, Carmen Săpunaru Tămaș and Masanao Kawakami analyze the Ise Dai Kagura troupe through a business model lens. This itinerant group, both performers and ritual specialists, represents a fascinating case of the entanglement of sacred and economic spheres. By asking how such groups have sustained themselves across centuries, the authors illuminate the mechanisms of “religious capitalism” in Japan and the ways sacred performance adapts to modern conditions of sustainability and tourism.

Both essays remind us that economics in Japan has always been more than markets and trade. It is a domain where philosophy, ritual, and culture intersect.

Across these four thematic clusters, a unifying theme emerges: the negotiation of tradition and modernity. Whether in education, language, Confucian thought, war representation, or economic practice, each contribution highlights how Japan has continuously reinterpreted its past in the face of new global realities.

The articles demonstrate the vitality of Japanese studies as an interdisciplinary enterprise. They remind us that Japan’s experience mirrors broader global questions about sustainability, identity, and the human search for meaning.

As editors and readers, we are invited not merely to appreciate these case studies in their specificity, but to see them as part of a larger conversation about how societies everywhere negotiate between inherited traditions and the demands of modernity.

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