

Researching Contemporary Japanese Religions:

The University of Manchester Japanese Studies Workshop

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ORGANISERS:

Paulina Kolata, The University of Manchester

Aura Di Febo, The University of Manchester

SUMMARY OF THE EVENT:

The project was a two-day workshop bringing together PhDs, ECRs and senior scholars researching Japanese religions in a contemporary context in order to facilitate a discussion on issues relating to religious responses to demographic and socio-economic transformations of the most recent years. It was an initiative bringing together researchers from The University of Manchester (UK) and from across other UK and European universities. It was aimed at investigating how Japanese religions, including both established religious traditions and new religious movements, address challenges of continuity and change in contemporary Japan from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The invited papers explored a variety of topics from different disciplinary perspectives, including, but not limited to, issues such as continuity of religious practices in secularized society, relationship of religion and the state, and grass-root and institutional level debates on social engagement and relevance of religion. The workshop was aimed at bringing together researchers working on contemporary Japanese Religions from a number of perspectives, including sociology, anthropology, heritage and media studies, and religious studies. The workshop also served as a stepping stone to develop a network between scholars and graduate students working in similar academic fields that the participants wish to formalise into a research group format in the future.

EVENT OBJECTIVES:

The initiative had four main objectives. It aimed to

- 1) bring together PhDs, ECRs and senior scholars researching Japanese religions in a contemporary context from several universities across Europe;
- 2) enable discussion on issues relating to religious responses to demographic and socio-economic transformations of the most recent years;
- 3) provide a forum for a debate, exchange of ideas and provision of feedback, especially for postgraduate researchers and early career researchers;
- 4) present and explore work in progress to develop ideas and potential future collaborations in a friendly and informal setting of a workshop.

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The presenters included thirteen researchers from a few European countries including the UK, Germany, Norway and Italy. Further to that, there was a balanced diversity among the presenters in relation to the level of their experience in research ranging from PGR students (5 presenters), ECR (3 presenters) and senior scholars (5 presenters). This allowed for a stimulating exchange of ideas and provision of invaluable feedback by and for both junior and senior scholars. The format of the workshop allowed for a more intensive feedback for each participating researcher where researchers were able to unpack concerns and present work in progress rather than ready answers and polished papers. Each presenter was offered 60 minutes to present their work, allowing generous time to present, discuss and digest every piece of research.

Each presenter was allocated 30-40 minutes to present their work, followed by a 20-30 minutes discussion. The presenters/participants were invited to present their written work in progress intended either for submission for publication or as part of their PhD thesis submission (i.e. a chapter). Therefore, the ultimate objective of the workshop was to provide an opportunity for presenting new ideas, for interdisciplinary debate and feedback and as a vehicle for developing one's research for public dissemination. As a result, thirteen junior and senior scholars presented their work over a two-day period of intensive debates. The organisers and the presenters are grateful for the funding provided by the Japan Foundation and other funding partners including AHRC, ESRC and Arts Methods at the University of Manchester.

The event was a much-needed initiative connecting both senior, PGR and early career scholars working on contemporary Japanese religions. The Japanese Studies cohort at the University of Manchester, as well as the number of researchers in the field of contemporary 'Japanese Religions' is small across the UK and Europe. The avenues for collaboration are also limited; hence, this workshop was intended as a starting point for developing a Europe-based (at first) research-network for academics working in the contemporary religious context of Japan. It succeeded in allowing people to develop links and cross-themes for the future collaborations. As such, it enabled to explore the diversity of the field and the quality of research in the study of Japanese religions, especially in the contemporary context.

PRESENTERS:

This was a closed workshop by invitation only; therefore, the participants included 13 invited presenters and a guest observer from the Japan Foundation (one of the funders of the event).

The presenters / participants include: five postgraduate researchers, three early-career researchers, and five senior scholars.

- Erica Baffelli, The University of Manchester (Senior Researcher)
- Ian Reader, The University of Manchester (Senior Researcher)
- Aura Di Febo, The University of Manchester (PGR)
- Paulina Kolata, The University of Manchester (PGR)

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- Monika Schrimpf, University of Tuebingen (Senior Researcher)
- Birgit Staemmler, University of Tuebingen (Senior Researcher)
- David Weiss, University of Tuebingen (Early Career Researcher)
- Klaus Antoni, University of Tuebingen (Senior Researcher)
- Masato Kato, University of London SOAS (PGR)
- Rin Ushiyama, University of Cambridge (Early Career Researcher)
- Marilena Frisone, University of Cambridge (PGR)
- Silvia Rivadossi, Ca Foscari University, Venice (Early Career Researcher)
- Morgaine Wood, University of Oslo (PGR)

A short report about the workshop is to be published on the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership blog: <http://www.nwcdtp.ac.uk/blog/>

PARTICIPANTS FEEDBACK:

At the end of the workshop, all participants shared their insights and opinions about the event, and the comments of individual presenters included:

- It was an excellent format that combined writing workshop and a conference, allowing one hour for each presenter to unpack ideas. (ECR)
- The format of the workshop allowed for more relevant questions to be asked and for spotting weaknesses of the argument. Each presenter having between 20-30 minutes for a discussion helped with that. (PGR)
- A huge positive was the flexibility of form and delivery of papers, where people could present concerns and try out ideas, rather than present ready answers. (PGR)
- One of the strengths of the workshop was its interdisciplinarity that manifested itself in the methodological diversity as well. However, despite diverse methodologies, it was clear that some shared themes emerged highlighting relevance of similar ideas in different disciplinary and thematic contexts. (PGR)
- Open atmosphere of the workshop removed the stress and pressure to impress other scholars. It was a perfect opportunity to try out ideas that still need development and can benefit from as much feedback as possible. (ECR)
- It was a great opportunity to share ideas, also for the senior scholars who rarely get opportunities to try out new projects. This presented an invaluable access to ideas that are yet to be crystallised and published, and to learn from the work of others. (Senior Scholar)
- The workshop gave us a great chance to discover the diversity of the field and learn a lot from the new generation of emerging scholars in the field of Japanese Religions, a field that twenty years ago would have not gathered 13 people in one room. (Senior Scholar)
- Having generous amount of time to present, discuss and process the ideas was invaluable. The intimate atmosphere of the workshop also allowed for more honest and in-depth debate of ideas. Also, having access to funding to develop such initiatives is incredible. (Senior Scholar)
- The workshop allowed to discover the diversity of framework and identify developing links and cross-themes for the future collaborations. (Senior Scholar)

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- The event allowed a provision of more intense feedback where the presenter and the audience had more time to unpack and digest presented ideas. Knowing that the audience consists of a group of scholars well informed in the field allowed for a more in-depth presentation of ideas. (PGR)
- The workshop really brought the field of contemporary Japanese Religions together. Not having a prescriptive theme to the workshop allowed to unpack what 'Contemporary Japanese Religions' are and appreciate the diversity of frameworks and methodologies employed. (ECR)
- The workshop allowed for a stimulating debate in a positive and supportive atmosphere that avoided politics of the field and a disciplinary compartmentalisation of research. (PGR)