GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTORY NOTE: MODERN JAPAN: FROM THE MEIJI RESTORATION TO THE TAKARAZUKA REVUE

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The study of modern Japan, in all its aspects, is in constant evolution. From the "re-discovery" of Japan by the United States and the Western European powers during the time known as the Bakumatsu period in the middle of the 19th century to the present day, the field of Japanese studies amassed over 150 years of research on the language, culture, history, and society of the archipelago. A body of scholarship far from limited to what we now define as "modern Japan" has come to be embraced and enriched not only by scholars from the "West", but also by Japanese researchers, alongside others from all over the world.

Certainly, defining "Japan" and "modern" poses challenges. For this special issue I opted for a wide view of the "Japan" concept as we came to define it in postwar scholarship: the geopolitical space of the country named Japan today in its borders as set after its defeat in World War II (including some, but not all of the territories and colonies occupied by the Empire of Japan after 1868, the point in time that we identify as its launching into modernity), and populated by ethnic Japanese together with Ainu populations, as well as with Korean, Chinese, and other non-Japanese ethnic groups.

"Modern" and "modernity" in turn have also be generously defined here as the period started in the Bakumatsu period (1853-1867, the end of the

Tokugawa shogunate), when United States Navy Commodore Matthew Perry (1794-1858) reached the shores of Japan and forced the moribund shogunal government to open the country for trade with foreign powers after over two centuries of relative isolation from the rest of the world. And while the beginning of "modernity" per se could be argued to stretch back in time to the 17th century, or even earlier, the end of Japan's "modern" period is perhaps a more vexing issue to address. Historians of Japan tend to close Japan's modern period with the defeat in World War II. Chronologically that may make things easy, as it aligns the historical interpretation with other parts of the world. If we consider, however, that 1945 found Japan barely two decades into what turned out to be the longest reign of its modern monarchy (that of the Shōwa Emperor—better known outside Japan as Emperor Hirohito—which covered almost 65 years, spanning from 1926 until 1989), then shouldn't Japan's "modern" period also end in 1989? Or should it continue into the Heisei Period (1989-2019), and the "lost decades" that dominated it, as a natural consequence of the "bursting" of the "bubble economy" of the 1980s?

Or should the modern period end with the start of World War II? But, Japan's World War II does not cover the same period as it does for Europe, 1939-1945, nor does it align with that of the United States' and the Pacific War, 1941-1945. In fact, Japanese historiography talks about the "15-Year War" (1931-1945). Should then, Japan's modernity end in 1931, with the Mukden Incident of that September? As is the case with "Japan", for the purpose of this special issue of the *Annals of the West University of Timisoara (Humanities Series)*, I generously considered "modern" Japan to extend all the way into our immediate contemporaneity, with the end of the Heisei Period and the beginning of the Reiwa Period (2019-).

The research papers in this issue cover that entire span. In his contribution, "A *Restoration* that Never Became a *Revolution*: The Meiji Restoration as a Rebuilder of Japanese Conservative Nationalism", Kyu-hyun Jo reopens the debate around the nature of the 1868 Meiji Restoration to power of the imperial house of Japan, one that had been more or less dormant and lacked real authority over state matters for centuries (depending on how far back one goes, it could either be since the 12th century and the establishment of the first shogunate, the Kamakura, or even further back, as even during the Heian Period the court was mostly dominated by all-powerful clans such as the Fujiwara or the Tachibana). Jo challenges the accepted view of the Meiji

Restoration and demonstrates in his study that the restoration had nothing to do with the throne itself, as it was a compromise between liberal and conservative forces aimed at supporting Japanese nationalism and creating the mythology around the modern emperor, who was to become once more no more than a figurehead in this new iteration of monarchy. Moreover, rather than being born out of idealistic endeavors, the restoration was, in Jo's view, a pragmatical way to mimic change without truly implementing any and to replace a group of elites with another.

The next study in the volume, "A Political Consideration on the Japan-Italy Treaty Revision Relations During the Inoue Kaoru Foreign Affairs Era (1879-1887): Centering on Japanese and Italian Primary Sources" is written by Carlo Edoardo Pozzi. Based on careful research from Japanese and Italian archives, Pozzi sheds light on a lesser-known side of Japan's early modern diplomatic history, namely that of the relations with Italy. Focused on the infamous "unequal treaties", Japan's first international treaties in more than two centuries, signed during the last years of the Tokugawa shogunate, the research discusses the way the Kingdom of Italy, a relatively new modern nation itself, and Japan re-negotiated the Bakumatsu Period treaties and found ways to offer satisfactory solutions to both parties. While Italy was not at the time necessarily the main Western power with vested interests in Japan's opening for trade, the two countries used diplomacy to their own advantage and pursued their interests through foreign policy strategies that shed additional light on the convoluted history of the period.

The following research paper skips historically to the last years of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. "Political Conversion Opposites: Two Writers and Their 1920s Soviet Union Experience", which I authored, reposits Japan's prewar salient issue of *tenkō* from a different perspective. *Tenkō*, the coerced political conversion of the Japanese leftist intelligentsia and membership of the Japan Communist Party, has an early iteration in the person of female writer Miyamoto Yuriko who will turn from political neutrality to convinced and militant communism. The study focuses on Miyamoto's experiences in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s and compares them to those of French Romanian writer Panait Istrati and of French writer André Gide, who turn from leftists into critics of the young Soviet regime following their own trips.

Two other papers bring the research focus in our closest contemporaneity, thus skipping Japan's long postwar period, and projecting us straight

into the "lost decades" (1990-2020). In her study, "Contemporary Urban Hideaways: Shops in Two Japanese Novels", Beatrice-Maria Alexandrescu offers a close reading of two novels by female writers Kawakami Hiromi and Murata Sayaka. Alexandrescu's analysis reveals multiple layers of meaning interlaced within the narrative structure of the novels, *The Nakano Thrift Shop* and *Convenience Store Woman*, both works that achieved international recognition since their original publication in Japan.

The last paper in the volume is centered on the wildly popular Japanese revue theatre company Takarazuka and the gradual transformation of its take on war since 2014. In her study, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Representation of War in Takarazuka Revue's Performance Strategy," researcher Maria Grajdian offers an overview of the theme of war in four separate performances by the famed Osaka theater company. In a reflection of our times, the company has been opting to gradually incorporate war into their plays as a contemporary reality and carry that message to their mostly female fans in Japan.

This is the first special issue of the *Annals of the West University of Timisoara (Humanities Series)* dedicated to Asian studies, and I am excited not only that it is focused on Japan, but honored that I was asked to curate it. It's been a longer than anticipated journey to see this work to completion, but I am proud of the result. The contributions gathered here reflect the importance and worldwide spread of current scholarship on modern Japan. Italian, Korean, American Romanian, and Romanian researchers who teach and do research at universities in Japan, Romania, South Korea and the United States bring an unique and complex universe of themes and methodologies to their contribution to the field.