

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 51 (1997)

Heft: 1: Diversity, change, fluidity : Japanese perspectives

Artikel: Open questions concerning method in the method in the study of Japanese culture

Autor: Ackermann, Peter

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147316>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 13.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

OPEN QUESTIONS CONCERNING METHOD IN THE STUDY OF JAPANESE CULTURE

Peter Ackermann, Erlangen

I.

It appears problematic to me at times that studies by non-Japanese on Japan have a tendency to more or less just accept standard scholarly techniques devised within the various disciplines (anthropology, sociology, philology, history etc.), without making any mention of the quite specific difficulties encountered when Japan is the object of discussion. Of course Japan is not a "special country", nor is it a "special case", and yet the study of aspects of Japanese culture does present us with very special problems that I think should never go unmentioned.

The central problem for most of us non-Japanese is, of course, the Japanese language. By "language" I do not primarily mean the vocabulary, the grammar, or the writing system. (Though I do wish to point out that even excellent knowledge of the language in this sense does not mean that we can understand utterances in non-standard Japanese. What, let me ask here, does this imply with regard to our knowledge of subcultures, or of vast parts of Japanese society outside Tōkyō and/or the educated elites in larger cities?)

By "language" I mean mainly two things: a) What a person is actually trying to communicate when he or she says something that, on the surface, we appear to be able to understand; and b) what has gone into a concrete utterance in the form of background knowledge acquired by the speaker or writer in the process of his or her life experiences.

Of course I am aware that generations of scholars and thinkers have dealt with the question of "meaning" from many different angles. Here, however, I wish to choose the most pragmatic – and admittedly "primitive" – position possible and assume that, to a certain degree, "meaning" may be grasped if we lead carefully structured, intensive discussions with given persons, not once or twice, but many times, and over lengthy periods of time.

How far does the Japanese context allow us to do just that? I am not thinking here of the well-known problem that people generally do not, and cannot explain what is to them just the natural way of everyday life. What I

am thinking of is the fact that what we call "discussion", even if it may be possible once, twice or also three times, is presumably not a generally acceptable type of communication in the Japanese context (and, for that matter, in the context of many other cultures too). Anybody who has experienced the process of socialization in Japan will know of the emphasis placed on silent observation, patience, the supreme importance of marking relative status, even if this means not getting wanted information, or on never digging too deeply into topics that create a strain on the other person. "Serious talk", which obviously is as necessary in Japan as anywhere else, is thus almost always spread out in time and managed in tiny portions that invariably demand a great deal of "cooperative thinking, speaking and acting" from all who participate (or who are permitted to participate).

Do *we*, who are interested in Japan, in the first place have the time to pursue our questions over the necessary long timespan? Even if we do, are our questions and interests altogether considered "serious talk" for our Japanese partners, in the sense that they will give "serious" (and not just "polite") answers? Our questions, after all, are often almost totally unrelated to anything that will bring direct profit to our conversation partners.

Turning to a more technical level, are we capable of gathering information through silent observation, patience and "never digging too deep"? Are we in a position to fulfil the Japanese expectation of "cooperative thinking, speaking and acting" in serious talk? Asking detailed questions, and perhaps at the same time harbouring the wish to get through a whole body of problems in one session, is definitely not what Japanese would call "cooperative". Unless, of course, we are the big boss and in a legitimate position to demand explicit information and crisp answers!

Furthermore, do the Japanese rules structuring the pattern of who may converse with whom altogether allow us to talk to the person we need to talk to? From whom exactly does information we are rendering come from? How valid is this information if some persons, who may very well be the best informed, intentionally leave less well informed persons to do the talking?

For example, if I as a man am in company of a younger friend, his wife and two children as well as his mother and father, then it is conceivable that the friend himself, and maybe his parents or at least his

father, will take an interest in what I wish to know, but that it will be impossible to get any information – or at least any coherent thought – from his wife or children. In some cases – and usually depending on the topic of discussion – the wife might not even speak to or look at me, using her husband as intermediary. However, this must not lead us to believe that her views are the same as those of her husband's, in fact, as a rule, they probably are not! So if we speak of "Japanese opinion on something", whose views are we actually rendering? And what do we do if it is important for us to know the wife's views?

Similar problems can arise if we need information from a student of a teacher who is not one's own teacher, or a member of an organization that is not one's own organization.

If we observe the many interviews done by Japanese in Japan we will probably come to realize that only relatively few persons of extremely high prestige (such as senior NHK reporters or well-known TV-stars) are really able to touch upon interesting and important points. In most cases the interviewer is forced to adopt a very low status as someone who "in a subordinate position is stealing time from a person in a superior position". Hence, the interviewer will politely pose two or three questions, but no more. These questions will certainly be to the point and show the fact that the interviewer has – politely – acquainted him- or herself with the background of the person spoken to. Above all, however, the interviewer will not insist on specific aspects and not bother the interviewee by stressing that this or that has not been understood.

What, then, are we non-Japanese to do if we want to gain information in Japan? What should we, adopting the proper "low profile", do when we have not understood something? What do we do if we have come from far, have only limited time to spare, but can only pose two or three questions and are not allowed to "impolitely" keep coming back to the same problem? How do we – and can we all together – acquaint ourselves with the background of the person we humbly wish to disturb? What can we do to close the gap between the theoretical knowledge we may have acquired (to show too much theoretical knowledge can easily appear presumptuous!) and the real-life perspective of the person spoken to?

A problem that creates a particularly high degree of stress when I am working in the Japanese context is the gap between my own background knowledge and that which the Japanese person I am communicating with

has gained in the past through socialization and experience, and is still gaining in the present through access to both verbal and written information to an extent that cannot be compared to what I could ever achieve. As for access to information, we should also not forget to observe the speed with which a native Japanese tends to read through Japanese texts!

What do the points touched upon so far mean for our academic work? They probably mean, in the first place, that our perspective of things is inadequate. Questions that to the Japanese are of little importance (because they are seen within a wide context) can easily take on far too much weight in our eyes. Conversely, we may be considering other questions for years as weighty and important, while a Japanese person, constantly aware of the flow and change of times and the multitude of opinions, will quite possibly in 1996 long ago have put aside what worried him in 1993. Are we as scholars actually aware of the limitations of our perspective, caused by the particular difficulty we have of keeping in touch with the flow of information – and the enormous output of publications! – in Japan?

Turning to the specific aspect of dealing with written materials, is it not common practice in academic studies to have read or at least looked at a large percentage of recent publications on the topic we are working on? I have already posed the question whether in the case of Japanese language materials this is altogether physically possible for the majority of non-Japanese scholars. Here I would like to go one step further and ask: Can we, and should we, when we do seriously study as many Japanese publications as possible, use them like we do publications in English, German or French?

I am referring here not to problems of style that have already been pointed out by various scholars (for instance, statistical data presented without any discussion and therefore being often quite misleading, or reference to friends, personally experienced episodes, impressions etc. brought into scholarly texts probably for reasons of style and often extremely irritating to persons not used to finding, or interested in reading, this kind of information in the context it is given). A far greater problem, to my mind, is the fact that very often a Japanese text is clearly rooted in some ongoing discussion among persons often unknown to us.

Now if we are not aware of such ongoing discussions, or cannot possibly imagine the many concrete people and points of view the author has in mind, how are we to deal with the text? Probably we will have to

make do with what we hope to have understood, and forget about the rest. Are we honest enough in our scholarly writings to say that we have done just this? And is this really the most adequate way of dealing with written Japanese information?

To put it in general terms, should we not reflect more seriously also on the meaning and position of the written word in Japan, instead of treating the written word as something that universally “makes lasting statements which, just because they are lasting, can be trusted to have a very high degree of correctness and reliability”? I think it important to remember that, just because writing exists apart from a concrete, speaking person, this does not mean that it universally and invariably is used to present information meant to be fully intelligible by merely reading it.

Should we, to sum up, not be more explicit about the specific limitations we face when working on Japanese topics? Should we not be more self-assertive about how little we really can grasp of a culture in which at least an important percentage of the population supports ideals different from ours in matters of spoken and written communication, and adheres to social norms that do not easily permit putting into practice what we have theoretically learnt to be essential for conducting serious studies?

II.

As concrete examples for some of the points touched upon above I would in the following like to present one written text (in translation), and report on one interview. (Both examples in themselves also give remarkable insights into aspects of “fluidity” and change in Japan, especially concerning identity and self image).

The first example is a written text, taken from a newspaper (*Asahi Shinbun*, February 5, 1994, page 15). Though I admit that newspaper articles usually have characteristics that cannot be generalized as typical for all written texts in a language, nevertheless I think that the example chosen does show features found in present-day Japanese books and articles far beyond the realm of newspapers.

Not *boku*, not *watashi*, but *jibun*.

Nowadays many students doing *arubaito* (i.e. jobbing) refer to themselves, when they are communicating in the context of their job, not as *boku* [“I” used by male persons, giving the feeling that they have laid aside a certain reserve

and “opened up” to the other persons], not as *watashi* [the most formal and at the same time most commonly used expression for “I”], but as *jibun* [“self”].

This *jibun* used to be a common pronoun for the first person singular among students who were members of athletic associations, and if we go back still further in time, we find it used in the military. Why, however, has this *jibun* now become so popular? We tried to get an answer to this question in and around the campus [of the Hōsei University in Tōkyō].

It appears that *jibun* is used in contexts like students’ part-time jobs, rather than when they are among each other. Take, for instance, an office. Section chief Nakayama says, “Who has written these papers? I wonder if it was Satō.” Tanaka (a male student), standing nearby, says, “No, *jibun* was asked by Satō to write them.” Satō (also a male student), who was doing some other work, says, “Oh, I’m sorry. *jibun* was busy last night studying for an examination, so [*jibun*] asked Tanaka.” Why is this *jibun* being used in this conversation?

“Mmm. Difficult to answer, suddenly being asked such a question,” says Imai Hiroki (22), 4th year student at Hōsei University, Department for Social Studies, combing his long hair with his fingers. “The expression <*jibun*> is characterless. If I were spoken to by classmates or colleagues [*nakama*] using such an expression, I would feel lonely (*sabishii*). But perhaps it has become fashionable nowadays to use *jibun* as the pronoun for the first person singular.” Takahashi Shinya (22), also a 4th year student in the same department, who in his high school days jobbed at a landing pier unloading ships, says, “The world of classmates and colleagues (*nakama*) is a world where usually no [grammatical] reference is made to the subject. But when one goes jobbing and suddenly confronts other people, one feels confused and ... isn’t it so that then the word *jibun* comes out?”

Some 10 or more years ago, the National Research Institute for the Japanese Language (Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyūjo) published a volume with the title “Language in the Life of the large Cities [Daitoshi no Gengo Seikatsu] – Analyses”. There we can read that among adults in Tōkyō *watashi* was used by 62% of the people as the pronoun for the first person singular. *Jibun*, however, was the least frequently used of all possible pronouns.

Incidentally, in the Kansai region, we find many instances where, since former times already, *jibun* designates the person spoken to.

Students use *ore* [fairly rough sounding “I” used by male persons among people they are close with, and sometimes also in front of subordinates], or *boku*, also *atashi* [a somewhat nonchalant variant of *watashi*, often used by female persons], and at times some dialectal expression. Once one has become a member of society, however, *watashi* begins to appear within the context of [vertical] relationships between superiors and inferiors. So it is understandable that *watashi* is not a word students will use. Yamashita Shin (41), chief announcer at the Japan Broadcasting Corporation NHK, is of the opinion that, “[*jibun*] is possibly employed by young people as a kind of ‘assistance’ to help them get used to the standard language [of society].”

Moreover, within the various contexts of education, great emphasis has in the recent years been laid on training debate (*giron*), and we cannot overlook the fact that here the “subject” is frequently mentioned.

Mr. Yamashita's colleague, Ishiodori Shōichi (35), points out an aspect of popular culture and says, “It is so that in recent years rock music singers are often heard to use the word *jibun*. It is therefore possible [that the use of *jibun*] is influenced by [the wish to adopt] an image of ‘being hard and tough’ (*kōha*).”

We are on a campus where the final examinations of the year are just over. Nakano Osamu (60), Professor of Communication at Hōsei University, Department of Social Studies, says, “In present-day Japanese, honorific language (*keigo*) is not even used between parents and children any more. It has even become a trend to call [the parents] by their given name. We have therefore to take into account a background of loosening of standards, both in a general sense, as well as specifically with regard to language.”

“In other words,” Nakano Osamu continues, “relationships between people have become horizontal to an extreme degree. As a result, the nuances by which *watashi*, *boku*, *ore*, *atashi* and so on are individually characterized have become unimportant. So it is possible that *jibun*, that retains a slight indication of an existing vertical relationship, is perceived as a fresh way [of speaking of oneself]. In contrast to *ore*, which puts emphasis on the self that is asserting something, *jibun* is used both when one wants to conceal an individual standpoint or responsibility, as well as when one wants to emphasize that one is a self differing from all others. It is also an expression of the loss young people feel at in an age when the rules governing the use of language have become indistinct.”

This newspaper article shows, I maintain, in a paradigmatic way some of the concrete problems we face when dealing with written Japanese texts, namely,

1) Much of what is written and published in Japanese has the characteristics of a snapshot, that is, both writers as well as readers take an immense interest in observing and registering moments within the continuous process of human movement, change and development. The outcome of this interest is that written texts, contrary to what we presumably expect, often do not have a definite character, and do not give conclusive answers or insights.

2) The absence of conclusive answers, insights, or results is hardly a problem for readers who can picture the context and add their own interpretation. It does, however, become a problem for readers – particularly “Western” readers – who have been trained to think of written language as something more fixed, more lasting. and therefore also more definite in style and substantial in content.

3) How should we interpret the information given? What method do we employ to relate relatively random information to a more substantial picture of Japanese reality? How far should we in our own work let it be felt that a Japanese reader will almost certainly sense a degree of comfort – and also sympathy – when made aware, through a set of relatively random facts (as in the newspaper article above), that problems *are* being discussed and reflected upon? Are we altogether able to identify with a more process-oriented, rather than goal-oriented, way of thinking?

* * *

The second example I would like to present is a short report on an interview about an interview.

Person interviewed: Miss Y., an office-lady, 20 years old, a close relative of my wife's and therefore well-known to me. Date: August 1996. Topic: *Otoko-rashisa* – *Onna-rashisa* [“Typically Boy” – “Typically Girl”].

It was known to me that Miss Y. had conducted interviews on *Otoko-rashisa* – *Onna-rashisa* in the context of her university studies, where she had been obliged to gain educational experience through practical training. The university was a short-time (two year) university, the practical training forming part of the subject *Katei-ka* [Domestic Studies]. The interviews were conducted in 1995 during one week that Miss Y. spent at the high school in Kakogawa (Hyōgo Prefecture), from which she had graduated.

The results of Miss Y.'s interview were, briefly, as follows:

The woman teacher in the class interviewed was a “manly person” and stressed that she thought *Otoko-rashisa* – *Onna-rashisa* were outdated categories. Miss Y. was told that up until two or three years ago Domestic Studies had been split into classes for boys and classes for girls, but Miss Y. should be aware that now boys and girls attend the same classes.

To Miss Y.'s great surprise, the boys were all very interested in cooking and had no problems with sewing and stitching. The boys reacted upon Miss Y.'s surprise by saying, “We do it at home too!” Miss Y. interpreted this as a possible characteristic of the Kansai region, where,

unlike in her own home region in Tōkyō, married couples tended to leave the children more to themselves, while both partners went to work.

Miss Y. asked the high school pupils about what they were told by their parents with regard to *Otoko-rashisa* – *Onna-rashisa*. Nobody recalled having been told to be “a boy” or “a girl”. The parents did not lay stress on these facts.

Miss Y. was rather puzzled by these results, since she herself had – not that long ago! – been very sternly admonished by both parents and grandparents that she always had to think of being “a girl”. Miss Y. tried to give the pupils interviewed some examples to see their reaction. She said that “typically boy” meant, for instance, *genki de asobu* [to play vigorously], *shikkari suru* [to be strong, firm, hardy, decided, hard-working], and also *mesomeso nakanai yō ni* [not to whimper and let tears flow]. “Typically girl”, on the other hand, meant *ie no tetsudai o suru* [to help at home], *otonashiku suru* [to be gentle and docile], *hin ga ii* [to be elegant, graceful], *ranbō na kotoba o tsukawanai yō ni* [not to use rough language], *ashi o soroeru* [to keep the legs together].

When Miss Y. asked whether the high school pupils were told things like this there were two reactions, a) the answer, “We are not told such things”, and b) no answer, just silence.

Y.’s general comment was that many of the girls were more manly than the boys, and on the other hand many of the boys seemed particularly weak.

The results of Y.’s interview are not very spectacular, but they do show this much: What a twenty year old girl from Toyko expected to find among pupils only a few years younger was not there, and her questions brought almost no reaction and much puzzlement. Miss Y. attributes this not only to rapid changes in recent years, but also to differences between the Tōkyō and the Kansai region, as well as to the changed context of Domestic Studies, where boys and girls are now together.

Miss Y.’s interviews with the pupils may possibly have suffered from basically the same type of problems as my own interview with Miss Y. The problems on my part were as follows:

Obviously it was not possible for me to withdraw into a separate room or even into a quiet corner for my interview, since I am a man and Miss Y. was a young lady. Moreover, the other family members in the room clearly thought that an intensive “private” discussion, no matter on what

subject, was improper due to the factor of age difference. In particular, criticism was directed at the blurring of correct – polite – behaviour that tended naturally to occur on account of getting emotionally involved in the topic discussed. For this reason, no effort was made on any side to create a context for my interview.

Although I have known Miss Y. from earliest childhood and spent many hours laughing and enjoying smalltalk with her, she was extremely reluctant to give me “serious” information, the reason being that she held her experiences to be irrelevant with regard to what I, a grown-up man from a European university, would wish to know. That this reluctance had the function of expressing humility and politeness may be noted, but the fact remains that the actual situation could not be turned into an exchange of coherent and “substantial” utterances.

The elder persons present did not, as already indicated, think Miss Y.’s answers polite towards me and therefore constantly interrupted her. Not only did they interrupt, they kept giving answers of their own. These usually consisted of stressing how important it was to differentiate between “typically boy” and “typically girl” – just the very thing that Miss Y. was trying to tell me played no part for the pupils she had interviewed.

The discussion between Miss Y. and myself finally came to an abrupt end when the grandmother stepped in saying, “You have been talking now for a long time, *ugoite kudasai* [please move, don’t stay sitting!]”.

When I apologized to Miss Y. for having been somewhat persistent (after all, I was extremely interested in changes within Japanese youth culture), she reacted with the following statement: “In the firm I am employed at now I would never be allowed to ask the same or a similar question twice. The *senpai* [i.e. a person in one’s institution who is older than oneself (in this case 2 years older) and therefore responsible for one] admonished me very strictly never to bother those elder than myself, and to grasp things immediately and without asking questions.”

This little interview with Miss Y. shows, I maintain, in a paradigmatic way some of the concrete problems we face in a Japanese context when we wish to gain a deeper insight of verbal communication, namely,

1) The problem of context. Space and time is not simply there, it is granted or not granted, in the case described above it was certainly not granted. Often the criterion for granting or not granting space and time is sex, but it can also be age, or affiliation and belonging (i.e. the question,

“Does this person belong into my or someone else’s sphere of control and responsibility?”), etc. Thus, even though my interest in a given area, and someone else’s knowledge and experience in just this area, could theoretically form a good basis for discussion, the possibilities for, as well as the contents of, actual communication are largely defined by factors that have nothing to do with whether something is “interesting” or not.

2) We cannot ignore differences of age, sex, and in many cases also social status. It is not possible to cross barriers of this kind in order to pursue some abstract interest or problem.

3) We must take note of the specific way individual persons define themselves. For instance, Y.’s self-definition was that of a person not being experienced enough to really talk to me or give me any coherent information. Moreover, the grandmother’s self-definition was that of the person in charge of all aspects of social behaviour in the room, and both she, as well as Y.’s mother, would naturally and immediately interrupt Y.’s own comments if they thought this to be necessary. Thus they considerably muddled up the information I was being given. Finally, this task of observation and control became too much for the women present, and the grandmother therefore demanded that the discussion finish immediately.

4) Both we who are doing academic research, as well as the Japanese who are being asked questions, are speaking and acting in quite specific, culturally defined ways. To exaggerate slightly, for Y. “speaking” has been defined as disturbance. Accordingly, she has been admonished to listen attentively, observe carefully, but not to bother others by speaking. Incidentally, also for the elder persons present, “speaking” was defined as disturbance, in the concrete situation, however, as legitimate disturbance.

What do these points and observations imply for us in a Japanese context, where we need a certain degree of acceptance to do our research? What do they imply if we wish to relate abstract and/or statistical information to Japanese reality? What do they imply if – to return to the question posed at the beginning of this article – we want to gain a deeper insight into the “meaning” of things, that, to at least a certain degree, could theoretically be grasped,

— if we could lead carefully structured, intensive discussions with given persons, not once or twice, but many times, and over lengthy periods of time; and

— if we could relate the written documents giving snapshot-like glimpses of situations and on-going processes to broader backgrounds.

The question is: can we?