

CANADIAN STUDIES IN JAPAN

“Quebec’s declaration of war on Canada,” observed a Japanese colleague wryly, “is about the only thing that would really boost my enrolments.” In a decade dominated by Monica, Milosevic, and the American economic miracle, Canadian Studies programs in Japan struggle to attract students and encourage interest in an ambiguous place known mainly for Whistler and Céline Dion. Asked their impressions of Canada, students in a graduate seminar looked at each other blankly until one ventured bravely that “it must be a good place, because I don’t know any thing about it – it’s never on the news.” Understandable, given that the top Canadian stories in the Japanese daily papers this past year were the establishment of Nunavut, accompanied by the requisite (if not entirely relevant) photo of a caribou standing in an empty field of snow, the recall of the disgraced Japanese Consul at Vancouver, and the land mines treaty. For the average student, Canada is largely invisible. With most trade taking place at the wholesale level in food, lumber, and raw materials, there are few visible reminders of a Canadian connection in advertisements and shop windows, save for Quebec maple syrup producers who seem to have staked their claim to a small section of supermarket shelf. Yet despite these difficulties, the efforts of a dedicated group of Japanese scholars, supported by Embassy and Consular officials as well as the International Council for Canadian Studies, ensure that Canadian Studies continues to develop on major campuses across the country. In many ways, in fact, the program is stronger now than it has ever been.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, and stimulated by Trudeau’s search for a ‘Third Option’ in foreign affairs as well as the publication of the Symons Report, Canadian Studies in Japan grew rapidly – encouraged in part by the joint commitment of the two governments to provide \$1,000,000 each to support the study of Japan in Canada and Canada in Japan. With this stimulus, the late 1970s and the decade of the 1980s saw the establishment of Canadian Studies courses at a number of leading Japanese universities, the translation of ‘classic’ (if somewhat dated) textbooks in a variety of fields together with a book donation program to build library collections, the creation of scholarships, funding for graduate and post-graduate research, and the establishment of a professional association – the Japan Association for Canadian Studies, now with a membership list of some 370 scholars who participate in both regional seminars and annual conferences. Meanwhile, a succession of Canadians took up positions as visiting professors or scholars-in-residence at both public and private universities; many of their students eventually traveled to Canada to complete their graduate work at Montreal, Toronto, McGill, Laval, Queens, UBC and other schools before returning to Japan to take up academic appointments in a wide range of disciplines. In short, the expansion of Canadian Studies in Japan paralleled the expansion of Canadian Studies in Canada during the same period, and for much the same reasons: the

attractiveness of the multidisciplinary approach, the enthusiasm for new courses and fresh areas of study, and the ready availability of funding.

Recent years have been less happy, again for much the same reasons. The declining scholarly popularity of ‘area studies’ (where Canadian studies typically finds its home), reduced government funding and tight university budgets, and a greater demand by students for courses that promise a leg up in a tough job market. With the collapse of the economic bubble, the Ministry of Education scrutinizes with considerable scepticism proposals by the public universities it controls to expand course and program offerings. Private universities, facing a drastic falloff in student numbers, must manoeuvre carefully to make themselves as attractive as possible to the shrinking pool of potential applicants if they are to survive. Few can afford to pass up Computer Science or Policy Studies in favour of CanLit. And just as in Canada, most Canadianists owe their first allegiance to their disciplinary department or school at a time when staff and resources are short. Meanwhile the number of visiting Canadian professors has also shrunk. Partly, this resulted from difficulties in attracting suitable appointees (many mid-career Canadian academics must have wondered at the wisdom of taking an extended absence when Canadian universities were in the midst of restructuring, cutting departments and dropping programs). More significantly, the drop in the number of visiting appointments reflects the maturing of the program – the Japanese graduate students of the 1980s have now become the professors of Canadian Studies in the same way that translated Canadian texts have steadily been replaced by high-quality books and articles written in Japanese by Japanese scholars.

Visiting lecturers and researchers enhance the program, rather than provide it. Visitors now have an opportunity to participate in a genuine academic endeavour (rather than simply “being there,” in a sort of splendid isolation). And with over 180 courses on Canada currently being offered at Japan’s universities, students will likely have had some exposure to things Canadian. While there are still students whose interest comes from a home-stay, a holiday, or a year or two with parents on overseas assignment, there are more who hope to find in the Canadian experience insights into changes taking place in Japan – the growing presence of women in the workplace, the government’s efforts to encourage bilingualism (English/Japanese, in this case), the erosion of national culture and values by Hollywood and the Net, the problems of schools and housing created by the arrival of significant numbers of non-Japanese workers and residents, and the dilemmas of an aging population. Not surprisingly, multiculturalism, gender relations, second-language acquisition, Canada-U.S. relations, minority rights and environmentalism top the list of popular paper topics. For the visiting instructor, the

teaching experience can be a bit unsettling. On the one hand, students often lack the most basic knowledge of Canada; at the same time, free of commonplace Canadian assumptions, they frequently pose unexpected questions. How can democratic institutions and processes operate over such distances of time and space? Why do Canadians think they lack an identity? How have Canadian urban centres managed to remain “garden cities,” with so much green space in their downtown core? Much the same is true of colleagues, who are often researching unconventional topics (the influence of Quebec’s institutions on French colonies overseas, e.g.) or approaching conventional topics from a different scholarly angle. To see Canada from a fresh perspective, as others see it, has to be one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching outside the country.

While Canada has been overshadowed in the past decade by the U.S., it continues to be the subject of serious study – in no small part because Canada’s concern with the community as well as the individual, its commitment to finding peaceful solutions to international frictions, and its pragmatic approach to social problems make its experience both understandable and relevant to Japan’s situation. More than the Blue Jays or Banff vacations, it is these commonalities which ensure that Canadian Studies will maintain its presence at Japanese universities – and that visiting Canadianists (of whom there are about 25 in an average year) will be an important element in that presence.

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