

INTRODUCTION: THE LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHIES OF JAPAN FROM THE EAST-WEST AND WORLD LITERATURE PERSPECTIVES

Akiyoshi Suzuki*

The guest editor of this special issue takes immense pleasure in introducing a special issue on Japan Studies. This issue encompasses studies of Japanese literature and philosophies from the perspective of the East and West and the standpoint of world literature.

In these circumstances, Kōchi Doi (1886–1979), a distinguished Japanese scholar of British literature and world literature, emerged early as a central Japanese supporter of world literature. He promoted research on world literature as a direction for future literary studies and as a method of education. He conducted influence studies from the perspective of cosmopolitanism and accomplished parallel investigations of literary works written across the world, indicating unexpected similarities beyond their socio-cultural and linguistic differences. For example, Doi's English translation of the *Diary of Izumi Shikibu* [*Izumi Shikibu Nikki*] (c. 1007) discovered the technique of stream-of-consciousness applied in ancient Japanese literature in the form of diary writing before reading the works of Western modernist writers. He noticed that the narrative of the *Diary of Izumi Shikibu* is generally in the present progressive tense; however, “the past, the great past, and the future existed overlapping in the present” and that in her writings, “there are no personal pronouns, and everything written is in the mind of Shikibu” and that “what happens in the world of others is as vividly depicted as what happens in her own world” (Doi, 1964, 27–28). Doi asserts these facts to claim that the past and the future exist in the present, pronouns are not differentiated, and subjectivity and objectivity and Shikibu's own world and others' world are not clearly separated but exist in a state of unity. Doi translated the *Diary* around 1915.

A few years later, after reading the works of Western modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, he concluded that “the writings of Izumi Shikibu could also be said to express the stream of human consciousness as it is” (Doi, 1964, 28). Subsequently, he expanded the scope of his comparisons, confirming the use of stream-of-consciousness in *Kagerō Diary* (*The Gossamer Years*) [*Kagerō Nikki*] (c. 975) and *The Sarashina Diary: A Woman's Life in Eleventh-Century Japan* [*Sarashina Nikki*] (c. 1060). He then concluded that “the stream-of-consciousness is not a technique unique to Western modernism, but a universal literary technique, which was already used in Japanese classics as well” (Doi, 1973, 160).

* Dr. AKIYOSHI SUZUKI, Professor of American Literature and Comparative Literature, Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki, Japan. Email: suzu-a@nagasaki-u.ac.jp.

In a parallel study of the tale of Odysseus's sojourn on Calypso's Island and the narrative of Urashima's sojourn in the dragon palace at the bottom of the sea that houses the princess *Otohime*, Doi stated,

The central motif of these tales is that the kingdom of the gods is too boring for a human to stay for long, that they want to go back to the world of human love and suffering, and that the goddess wants to give eternal life to a human but a human is doomed not to receive it (Doi, 1964, 110).

This comparative study was later extended to Scottish and Irish tales, and Doi also established similarities between them (Doi, 1973, 168).

Doi was committed to validating human affinities by comparing the characteristics of the literature of discrete regions and subsequently further confirming the correspondences by expanding the areas of comparison. In this manner, he revealed the universality of the human imagination and spirit and simultaneously uncovered the universal elements of literature.

Shigehiko Sotoyama (1923–2020), a famous Japanese literature scholar, also conducted an excellent study of world literature. In an interview with Doi in 1970, Sotoyama explained world literature as follows:

I think that current global world literature lacks a unified standard like a grand style and is becoming more diverse and internationally understandable. This means that world literature is literature that can transcend national borders, and as a result, I think that many works that have the characteristics of allegorical fairy tales and works that are suitable for going abroad, in other words, literature that is translatable, will come to form world literature. The result will be that many works with a fairy tale character will form world literature (Doi, 1973, 188).

In short, Sotoyama defined world literature as early as 1970 as “internationally understandable,” “literature that can transcend national border,” and “literature that is translatable” and studied the mode of reading such literature through research affinities and differences in texts originating worldwide.

Thus, scholarly investigations of world literature as we know it today were conducted in Japan in the 1970s, but such studies were abandoned. A probable reason could be Japan's deference to the continuing predominance of the positivism postulated by the French school, which led Japanese scholars to neglect parallel studies because they have always viewed the relationship between the West and Japan in the context of a teacher-student association. However, the overwhelmingly strongest cause is vested in the denial of the value and significance of reading literature. The focus of comparative literature studies shifted to literary theories based on the contemporary French conception of relativism. In other words, it became theoretically impossible to read and compare literary works.

However, the primacy of reading literature has recently been reinstated, as we all know. Zhang Longxi (2015) insists that it is the humanist's mission and a global imperative to read works of world literature, share the affinities and divergences in the literature originating from other domestic and foreign regions, and approach literature as a means of better understanding the human condition and of promoting peace. A sum of seven articles and two book reviews written by

researchers who follow in Doi's and Sotoyama's footsteps comprise this special issue. I hope they can contribute to the abovementioned mission and propagate the understanding of Japanese literature and philosophies.

References

- Doi, Kōchi. 1964. *Bungaku no dentō to kōryū*. [*Tradition and Interaction of Literature*.] Iwanami Shoten.
- . 1973. *Tōzai bunka no nagare—Doi Kōchi taiwashū*. [*The Flow of East and West Culture: A Collection of Dialogues with Kōchi Doi*.] Kenkyūsha.
- Suzuki, Akiyoshi. 2019. “Nippon no sekai bungaku shōshi to kongo no tenbō to shite no gengo taihi kenkyū—Doi Kōchi to Qian Zhongshu wo rei ni.” [“A Short History of World Literature in Japan and Linguistic and Cultural Encounter for a Future Prospect: Doi Kōchi and Qian Zhongshu.”] *The Katahira*, 54, 117–141.
- Zhang, Longxi. 2015. *From Comparison to World Literature*. New York: SUNY.