

What do you like about Japanese literature?

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Since pseudonymous Amaravadee's Thai translation of the English version (1954) of Roka Tokutomi's *Hototogizu* 『不如帰』, which marked the first ever translation of a Japanese literary work, Japanese literature has gradually captivated and inspired many Thai readers. During that time, traveling to Japan was not as convenient as today, so Japanese literary works served as an invaluable source of insight into the country's culture, society and people. This essay provides an account of how my first forays into Japanese literature have affected the trajectory of my literary journey as well as how Japanese literature has been received by Thai readers.

My current interest in Japanese literature has been shaped by two formative reading experiences. As a middle school student, I was first introduced to a translated version of Kawabata Yasunari's *Yukiguni* 『雪国』 by my father who, despite being an engineer, was an avid reader of classical Japanese literature. The novel allowed me a first glimpse of Japanese culture through an interesting depiction of the relationship between a geisha and a man in the snow country. As a child, I found the profession of the former a novelty and a curiosity and marveled at the aesthetic refinement that a geisha embodies. I could also sense the main characters' internal struggles and was attracted by what I later knew as "the Japanese aesthetic geido." The second reading experience that has left a lasting impression on me was my later encounter with E. Dale Saunders' English translation of Abe Kobo's surrealist novel *Suna no Onna* 『砂の女』. I was moved by the sense of alienation that the male protagonist experiences as someone simultaneously inside and outside both his old community and later a desert village where he is accidentally "held captive" as the helper of a woman who toils as a virtual slave. Little did I know that the casual, pleasure-filled reading experiences would have such a great impact on me as a novice reader.

Spurred by my love for and eagerness to explore Japanese literature, I decided to turn my childhood interest into a lifelong passion by becoming a student of Japanese literature at Chulalongkorn University. Trained in literary analysis, I later found that, beyond allowing me to immerse myself in the culture, Japanese literature has helped me gain better insight into life and see my own community through a more critical lens. Despite Japanese language complexity and conceptual challenges, I experienced something similar to self-exploration as I delved into different literary works which brought refreshing perspectives when approaching real life problems. The notion of protagonists who have overcome hardship as they move or are forced out of their comfort zones to gain a sense of identity resonated in me as a university student trying to carve a niche for myself.

With more exposure and training in Japanese literature, I have developed great interest in contemporary work, particularly that which puts forward the protagonist as a representation of marginalized groups—the underprivileged in remote lands, the disabled and the underdog—to the fore. To me, these works vividly and poignantly deliver an author's sense of alienation, loneliness and loss conveyed in a novelistic world in constant flux that mirrors such experiences in our own lives. Two major contemporary Japanese authors, Abe Kobo and Oe Kenzaburo effectively address the issues of subtle stigma, discrimination and injustice experienced by individuals with war-related deformities and those at a lower rung of the social hierarchy often exploited by the government. These subjects continue to be my research interest. Moreover, my class discussions and current research often revolve around the works of Japanese feminist modern and contemporary authors which include Higuchi Ichiyo, Okamoto Kanoko, Tawada Yoko, and Matsuda Aoko. Each problematizes the Japanese patriarchal social fabric and celebrates female empowerment and independence.

Apart from a brief account of evolving interest in Japanese literature, Thai readers' reception of Japanese literature is worth exploring as its popularity has grown significantly over the last 30 years. Namthip Methaset's paper "The reception of Japanese literature in Thailand" (2018) shows that it was not until 2000 that modern and contemporary literature had become widely translated and subsequently recognized by Thais as capable translators were widely available prior to that time. Research data reveals that over the past 15 years translated Japanese literature has gained ground among Thai readers. Suzuki Koji's *The Ring* 『リング』 with its vivid description of haunting spirits was popular in early 2000s and has since spurred an interest in subsequent contemporary Japanese literature. Various genres such as detective, fantasy, historical and even Yaoi have become the favorites of young readers who find the Yaoi storyline entertaining due to the Japanese characters' exaggerated, and hilarious behavior. Works of famous authors such as Murakami Haruki, Higashino Keigo, Minato Kanae, Kawaguchi Toshikazu are not only enjoyed but selected as research topics because of scenarios which speak to contemporary issues. As the number of expert translators increased, the interest in Japanese literature has gained momentum among both an academic and a general interest Thai readership.

Research data reveals a developing picture. The number of thesis and dissertation on classical Japanese literature in Thailand is about the same as that of modern and contemporary Japanese literature. In addition, the study of Japanese literature which was once limited to those majoring in Japanese language has recently expanded to students with course concentrations in other fields such as comparative literature, film studies or other liberal arts subjects. This phenomenon testifies to the establishment of Japanese literary texts as a world literature well recognized by aficionados and scholars alike. The research of those studying Japanese language varies from Heian to contemporary periods and explores different aspects of work by authors such as Sei Shōnagon, Shiga Naoya, Oe Kenzaburo, Abe Kobo, Yoshimoto Banana. Also receiving attention are major literary works such as *Genji Monogatari* or *Heike Monogatari* or genres that include Noh plays and young adult novels. Meanwhile, comparative literature students' research titles are mostly on Murakami Haruki's post modernism and crime fiction.

As an enthusiast and scholar, I am both delighted by my own evolving interest and that of general readers and Thai scholars of Japanese literature. This reception, to me, suggests that Japanese literature will continue to have a strong hold on Thai readers and academics, delighting and deepening their understanding of Japanese culture and aesthetics. Thus, it will come as no surprise if a brief venture into Japanese literature leaves a first-time Thai reader with a lasting impression.

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