



Ghent: Academic Capital of Japan in August

By Geert Benoit, Managing Director, Yamagata Europe, and BJA Editorial Committee Member

A rainy spring day in Ghent. We are in the Blandijn building where the Japanology team of UGent lives and works. It is also the venue where the largest conference of academic Japanology research in the world will land this summer. I was warmly welcomed by Profs. Anna Andreeva and Andreas Niehaus.

Geert: Congratulations for getting this EAJS conference to Ghent.

Prof. Niehaus: Indeed, it is the first time the event comes to Belgium, and it will probably also be the last time during my active career. It is a once in a lifetime experience.

Geert: How big is it?

Prof. Niehaus: It is the biggest conference focusing on academic Japanese studies in the world. For the last edition (which was held online), we had 1175 participants. During the conference (in Lisbon) before that one, about 1000 academics joined live. In any case, it is quite unprecedented to bring that scale of academic expertise in Japanese studies together. To give you an idea: during the conference we are organizing 17 to 18 parallel sessions. It really is a flood of shared expertise and research. The name of the organization may suggest that the attendants will only cover the EU & Japan based universities, but other Asian universities and US universities are also represented.

Geert: Is there a central theme or focus area?

Prof. Andreeva: No, the conference really covers all aspects of Japan studies. In each specialization field, new research topics will be presented. Besides the specific traditional tracks, however, for the first time we will organize interdisciplinary tracks with a broad focus on either environmental studies, gender

studies or digital humanities. It shows the growing attention among scholars who are increasingly working at the crossroads of different disciplines.

Prof. Niehaus: Also interesting to mention is that during the days before the conference, KU Leuven is organizing a training for PhD students in Japanology. Young PhD students can attend in order to both train and win a scholarship. This is a nice cooperation between UGent and KU Leuven.

Prof. Andreeva: Besides the academic track, we will also organize art events for the general public. We will organize a kimono exhibition that shows the tradition of textile material and fashion design in Japan. This exhibition is supported by the city of Ghent. Ghent has a sister-city partnership with Kanazawa, both cities share a textile tradition.

During the event, we are also organizing a film festival for documentaries about Japan which will be held in Studio Skoop, the theater that also hosts the Japan Square film festival each year.

Geert: Does this event also fuel the popularity of Japan studies in Ghent and Belgium?

Prof. Niehaus: There is no real influence on popularity, but Japanology in Ghent is healthy and vibrant as ever. We have around 80 to 100 new students every year, and these figures are similar for other universities in Belgium and its neighboring countries.

Geert: Is there anything else you want to say to the BJA readers?

Prof. Niehaus: Non-academic researchers who are interested to join are also welcome. Obviously there is a registration fee, and the content will be quite specific, but we are open to the general public and lovers of Japan.

Besides that, we are still looking for extra sponsorship for our different events and also to bring in young researchers that are not entirely covered by their university. As we all know, costs and inflation are out of control, so it is quite a hassle to organize an event in 2023 with a budget that was approved before Covid.

In any case, though Ghent is sometimes called “the capital of West Flanders”, in sunny August it will be the proud, temporary capital of Japan, where all of the disciplines of Japan studies come together.

More info: <https://eajs.eu/eajs-2023-conference/>



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