

Introduction

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Introduction

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The articles collected in the special section of this issue have their origins in a workshop titled “New Directions in Modern Japanese Culture: Comparativism, Translation, and Nation-Building in the Age of Empire,” which was held in September 2023 at the Waseda University Brussels office in collaboration with the ERC project “Modernizing Empires: Enlightenment, Nationalist Vanguards and Non-Western Literary Modernities,” led by Özen N. Dolcerocca. The workshop explored new possibilities in the study of modern Japanese culture within current scholarly debates on comparative modernity beyond the Japan/West dichotomy. It also aimed to bridge the disciplinary gap between the Edo 江戸 (1603–1868) and Meiji 明治 (1868–1912) periods, attempting to integrate early modern cultural formations into an organic view of the development of discourses on Japanese modernity. The workshop questioned how emergent notions of aesthetics were articulated and codified around the formation of cultural fields such as literature and art in modern Japan.

The five articles that constitute the special section of this issue explore the cultural forms, discourses, and strategies that Japanese artists, authors, and intellectuals developed to rise to the challenge of a modernity that thrust artistic and literary representation into a moment of crisis. While traditional aesthetic values, institutions,

and practices that inspired social totality and stability became antiquated at an unprecedented pace, new values were introduced just as quickly as a result of the rapid modernization and commodification of the artistic field. Although this transformation is common to the historical experience of modernity elsewhere, in Japan it was also considered to be a crisis of cultural authenticity. The essays illustrate the entangled histories of representational crises and inventions of cultural authenticity across specific contexts in art history, cultural and literary criticism, popular literature, print culture, and new visual media in the long nineteenth century in Japan. Through these case studies, we demonstrate that dual fields of cultural translation emerged in nineteenth-century Japan. On the one hand, radical social and political transformation prompted a reevaluation of the traditional significance of literature in contemporary Japanese culture within the national context. The past was reconsidered cultural forms of the remote past were recalled to conjure up a purportedly authentic national experience, while, perhaps counterintuitively, literary Sinitic tradition and literary vernacular Chinese were reappropriated in modern Japanese literary forms. On the other hand, at the international level, new Western concepts and sets of ideas in art, literature, and aesthetics were being negotiated, appropriated, and domesticated. What

emerged was a complex artistic field in which Japanese intellectuals envisioned a redefined, modern Japan as both authentic and fundamentally distinct from the West, while simultaneously imagining it as one and the same with the West along an evolutionary pathway based on a universal model.

The essays in this special section focus on critical junctures—the moments when the past is put under the service of the present; it is mined, repurposed, and appropriated to create a distinct sense of national aesthetics, but simultaneously the enduring existence of a past lingers in residual forms, as an intruder or a closed aesthetic object of nostalgic sensibilities. The long nineteenth century was a significant moment in cultural history worldwide, since it was then that many of our current ideas about “tradition” and “the classics” were codified. We demonstrate that this was also when the modern was invented. In this chaotic discursive field, fundamental values and concepts such as literature, art, and the vernacular were debated and redefined repeatedly. We trace this transformative moment through a diverse array of lenses: the pivotal role played by the aesthetic imagination in the context of nation-building (Dolcerocca); an Edo-period artist and her reception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mueller); the late nineteenth-century reappropriation of premodern notions of elegance and refinement in the term *fūryū* 風流 (Oshikiri); the late Meiji-period reevaluation of the Chinese canon via translations of Chinese vernacular fiction (Milasi); and the transformation of authorship and literary value in the early twentieth century (Pitarch Fernández).

This special section constitutes a timely intervention in the intersecting fields of literary studies, art history, the sociology of literature, intellectual history, comparative literature, and media studies. It also complicates the often rigid periodical boundaries that imagine the late Edo, Meiji, and Taishō 大正 (1912–1926) eras as separate cultural spheres. This collection aims instead to identify and connect histories with the objective of creating a more nuanced understanding of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Japanese culture.