

The Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at Tallinn University

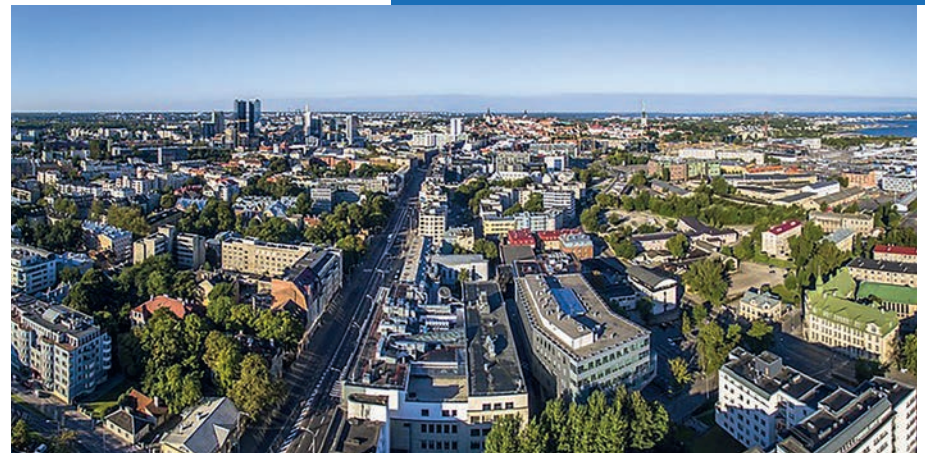
The Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at Tallinn University is part of the School of Humanities and comprises four research units: Japanese Studies, Chinese Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and Border Studies. We currently offer three B.A. programmes in Japanese Studies, Chinese Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies; and two M.A. programmes in Japanese Studies and Asian Societies and Politics.

Always attuned to the interests of new generations of students, the educational needs of society, and the evolution of the job market, the university has now approved a quinquennial development plan that will allow us to further grow and expand our curricula through three brand new programmes: a B.A. in Korean Studies, an M.A. in Chinese Studies, and an M.A. in Middle Eastern Studies.

In what follows, we are pleased to present our first contribution to The Region. Each of the essays introduces one of our four research units, and we look forward to deepening our

engagement with IAS and *The Newsletter* in future issues. We have a rich calendar of both online and onsite national and international events planned for the years to come. We hope to have the chance to welcome colleagues and friends in Tallinn soon and we would like to extend our warm invitation to join us at the upcoming conference of the Baltic Alliance for Asian Studies (BAAS) that we are hosting on 23-25 September 2022.

For more information, go to <https://balticasianstudies.wordpress.com/2021/09/29/5th-baas-in-tallinn-2022>



Tallinn panorama.



TALLINN UNIVERSITY

Tallinn University

Tallinn University is a young and vibrant higher education institution that builds on the longstanding, solid academic tradition of the Estonian Institute of Humanities, which in 2005 was merged together with Tallinn Pedagogical University and other research institutes to establish this new modern comprehensive academic reality. With its 7000 students, 11% of whom are coming from outside the country every year to study in green "digital Estonia," the university has a multicultural student population and is a growing centre of knowledge in constant evolution.

Japanese Studies at Tallinn University

Rein Raud, Maret Nukke, and Alari Allik

Although there have been many notable scholars working on various aspects of Asian Studies in Estonia since the 19th century, the discipline was first established as an academic programme only relatively late, when the hold of the Soviet regime on intellectual activity began to relax and the Estonian Institute of Humanities, the first officially recognized independent (non-state and non-church) university, was established in 1988. One of the Institute's founders, Professor Rein Raud, had a degree in Japanese Studies from St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) University and began to develop the discipline in Estonia as well. Thus, Japanese Studies became the core to which specializations in other regions of Asia and the Middle East were added in due course.

Japan had a particular allure among the Estonian reading public. Several translators, notably Agu Sisask and Ülle Udam, had translated works by Kawabata Yasunari, Abe Kōbō, and even Mishima Yukio into Estonian,

to great popular acclaim. There was also a boom of haiku poetry, and although no reliable translations of Japanese authors had been published to date, many Estonian poets began to experiment with the genre on their own. Another sphere of interest was classical aesthetics, and several people had studied the art of flower arrangement on their own. However, as there were virtually no opportunities to travel to Japan at the time, most of this interest was not backed up with serious study.

In 1989, a Japanese Studies programme was thus set up for the first time in Estonia at the newly established Estonian Institute of Humanities, and a small group of students began to study the language, history, literature, and religions of Japan. The Japanese language curriculum was developed in 1996, and courses in Japanese theatre, arts, society, folklore, and politics started to be taught in 1998. The beginnings were difficult, as there were virtually no study materials or dictionaries, and nearly all teaching had to

rely on Rein Raud alone. However, through his Finnish contacts, in the period between 1989-1996, he managed to invite several qualified native speakers from the University of Helsinki to teach courses. He also secured donations of second-hand dictionaries and study materials. The discipline began to grow and eventually reached the level to qualify for Japan Foundation support. Many among the students from the first cohorts have by now become the pillars of the discipline, which has been prospering especially after the Estonian Institute of Humanities merged with several other universities and research institutions into Tallinn University in 2005. When that occurred, the programme in Japanese Studies became part of the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Finally, in 2009, the M.A. programme in Japanese Studies was established with 12 enrolled students.

During its early years, the Institute of Humanities was known for its theoretical outlook and its effort to import into the country new forms of cultural theory and methods of research that had been banned under the Soviet regime. This meant that all teaching and research in regional studies had a strong theoretical orientation. Raud's own work is an example: in the early 1990s, he started using deconstructionist and Foucauldian methods on classical Japanese poetry, which was something not normally done anywhere else in the world at the time. His students followed suit – the problematizing of self-writing in Dr. Alari Allik's work on Heian (794-1185) reclus literature deserves special mention. Allik works on Japanese Medieval writings, and his research focuses especially on how translators have constructed the image of authors through commentaries and rhetorical stylistic devices. He has also produced several Estonian translations of Japanese texts, spanning from the Heian period to contemporary times. This includes his two latest publications, a translation of Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* and of Yōko Ogawa's *Memory police*, both released in December 2021. He has also been especially active in the field of translation studies and is currently a team member working on the prestigious interdisciplinary research project "Translation in History – Estonia 1850–2010: Texts, Agents, Institutions and Practices,"¹ sponsored by the Estonian Research Council.

Another fundamental figure of the department – and a former student of Raud who has been a part of the team since its beginning – is Dr. Maret Nukke, Associate Professor of Japanese Studies. Nukke gives lectures on Japanese culture, society, and politics. She was the coordinator of the Japanese language program in the years 1996-2017, and she has been teaching Japanese language at the university since 1994. Her research interests involve new developments in Japanese classical *nō* theatre, especially contemporary plays (*shinsaku*) as adaptations that expand the traditional canon of the art. Since 2000, the Department avails itself also of the linguistic competence and expertise of Akiko Masaki-Kadarik, who is Lecturer in Japanese Language.

The input of the department into the development of the image of Japan in Estonia, as well as for the development of the discipline in the country and the region, has been considerable. Many of the department's graduates now work in various areas, from foreign relations to private business. Quite a few have made a name for themselves as translators of Japanese literature: thanks to their efforts, Japanese literature remains one of the best-covered non-Western literatures in the Estonian cultural scene. Several of the department's graduates have even advanced to academic positions in Japan. In 2011, the European Association of Japanese Studies held its triennial meeting in Tallinn University, and Rein Raud was elected the president of the association for the following three-year period. He has also been awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star, for his research and work in promoting Japanese culture in Europe.

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Notes

1 <https://translationinhistory.tlu.ee>



Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion) temple in Kyoto, lake and garden. Photo downloaded from [freepik.com](https://www.freepik.com).