
English [course]

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East Asian Studies

When you hear “East Asian Studies” the first thing that comes to your mind is probably images of students diligently practicing calligraphy, or brushing up on their conversational Mandarin skills. East Asian Studies is typically viewed as a discipline that only concerns learning languages. Consequently, it is not considered a field where any real academic writing gets done. However, if you put past these preconceived notions behind, you will find this discipline to have a surprising amount of writing and many different writing conventions.

East Asian Studies focuses on three major regions of Asia - Japan, China, and Korea, as well as a few other nearby countries such as Taiwan. For this essay I will be focusing on Japanese studies, but the writing conventions and argumentation I will explore apply regardless of the region of East Asia one chooses to study. In addition to geographic regions of study, East Asian Studies also encompass three major areas of study – the history, culture, and languages of East Asia. These three areas of study make up two sub-disciplines; East Asian history and culture make up the first subdiscipline. Topics in this subdiscipline revolve around cultural phenomenon in East Asia and their impact on history. Professionals that focus on this subdiscipline may be radically different that those who specializes in the second one – the languages of East Asia. Professionals here tends to be foreign language teachers, and are mostly concerned with teaching languages rather than East Asian culture or history. They may also be concerned with the mechanics of their language, or how it has changed over time.

When considering the writing conventions of East Asian Studies, one of the most important

questions to answer is who is the intended audience? My Japanese [...] Professor, Professor *** was able to provide the answer, as well as give a great insight into the writing practices in East Asian Studies. According to Professor ***, professionals in language subdiscipline of East Asian Studies specialize in writing academic journals, which can be about a number of topics from pedagogy, to language mechanics, or regional dialects of the language they study. She stressed that writings in East Asian Studies, regardless of the subdiscipline, typically are directed towards other professionals, not students. This is especially true in the language subdiscipline where academic journals dominate. These are not student-friendly because the aim of most of them is to show someone how to teach, or see how a language works, rather than show students how to learn a language (Yasuda). Professor *** emphasized how students indirectly benefit from these journals. It is the professor's job to read the writing, and then use what they learn from that piece to better teach their students (Yasuda). Therefore, even though her students have probably never read an academic journal about teaching Japanese, they will benefit through Professor *** herself, who uses the piece to better her method of teaching. However, this is not to say all writing in East Asian Studies is off-limits for students. Generally the more student-friendly articles are the ones in the historical-cultural subdiscipline, because writing in this area is written to inform the reader about a specific topic to make the reader more cultured in East Asian culture or history.

The historical – cultural subdiscipline sometimes seems to overlap with another discipline – History. However, there is a major difference between writing in History and writing in this subdiscipline of East Asian Studies. History considers all aspects of history -- the economic, demographic, social, governmental, etc..., while East Asian Studies focuses on the cultural aspects of East Asian history, and how culture has changed throughout history. Culture is fluid by nature, so keeping up with the changes in one's writing can be the difference between

sounding like an expert, or coming off as an unenlightened novice. If the writer has an understanding of that country's cultural history, it allows them to see where a certain cultural phenomenon fits in with the greater history of East Asia.

One example of good historical – cultural writing is from a collection of essays about Japanese pop culture in *Japanese Visual Culture*. The essay I choose is Shiro Yoshioka's Heart of Japaneseness, History and Nostalgia in Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away. Shiro Yoshioka writes about Hayao Miyazaki, a famous Japanese animated filmmaker, and his most famous film *Spirited Away*, to see where their niche lays is in the greater scope of Japanese visual culture. To do this Yoshioka needs to play the historian by looking at the larger historical movement of Japan that the movie draws its background from. In this case it is the Taisho Period, which is a period in Japanese history from 1912-1926, and is often considered an important source of inspiration for modern, Japanese animated filmmakers (Yoshioka). To start, Yoshioka must show he knows a significant amount about the Taisho Period. First he gives a general background of the Taisho Period and the cultural atmosphere at the time, before talking about how Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki drew inspiration for *Spirited Away* from it. He must pay particular attention to the cultural trends of the period, and be able to compare and contrast them with those of previous periods in Japanese history. Also, he must know what it is about this particular period that stands out and makes it so important to Japanese culture. Then, Yoshioka must dissect the cultural phenomenon in question – in this case, Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki and his film *Spirited Away*. Here is a prime example of Yoshioka playing the historian.

“The Taisho period (1912– 1926) in Spirited Away is an important focal point. The period is a favorite setting among many manga, anime, and computer game artists. This is also the case in Spirited Away. Miyazaki chose this setting because it allowed him to

highlight the diversity inherent in Japaneseness. The Taisho period has a strange power to evoke nostalgia. It contains images of modernity and cosmopolitanism. Often, manga and anime envisage the Taisho era nostalgically. Such works never try to capture the history accurately, but reenvision it “through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the images” (Jameson 1992, 19). The Taisho period here is a fantasy world, more ideal than real (Yoshioka 267).”

Yoshioka’s first tactic was to give a small description of the period’s timeline. He then went into describing how that period is important to modern Japanese Visual Culture, and how *Spirited Away* falls into that niche of Taisho-inspired films. Next, he described the key cultural features of the period and connected them back to Miyazaki’s modern filmmaking era. Because Yoshioka is discussing a person in his paper, he also has to know some basic biographic information about Hayao Miyazaki and his filmmaking career. This sort of mini-biography is added to better understand how the person in question contributed to the culture of their country, rather than to get to know the person as a biography does. Yoshioka is looking for Miyazaki’s purpose, not his life story.

When writing in East Asian Studies one is likely to use a little bit of their language of study, or the language of their country of study, in their writing. For example, this could be using the original title of a Japanese book, or incorporating a well-known Chinese proverb. The most common incidence is when a word simply has no apt English translation, and must be written in its native language in the article. One mark of a good writer in East Asian Studies is the ability to incorporate native words in their article in a way that English speakers can understand them. It is similar to using jargon in a sport's article or scientific terminology in a biology textbook. Like jargon, wisely using native words in an article gives the reader an interesting insight into a new

field of study, without confusing the reader or making them feel as if they've entered a totally foreign field. If done correctly, the reader should walk away from the article not just knowing what the native words mean, but with a small, positive insight into the language.

Yoshioka's article was originally written in Japanese. However, because of the masterful work of editor and translator Mark W. Mac Williams, the article has made a flawless transition into English, but still carries an atmosphere that the reader can walk away feeling a little cultured in Japanese visual culture. When translating an article, part of the original atmosphere can be lost in transition to English. The translator's job is to ensure this does not happen. Williams preserved the atmosphere of Yoshioka's essay by carefully using picking and choosing what native words to keep and use to enhance the article. When faced with a native word, Williams first put the English translation and then the native word in parenthesis. For example, "In 2001, *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*) established Hayao Miyazaki as the undisputed leader in a national obsession with anime," (Yoshioka 256). Having the native word in italics and parenthesis keeps the native word and translation separate, but at the same time the special formatting impresses on the reader that these native words are something to be noticed. In this example Mark Williams smartly includes the original, Japanese title of the movie. This was a very good move on his part, because later in the article Yoshioka explains the symbolism in the title and how it alludes to the theme of *Spirited Away*. For example, *kamikakushi* (hidden by the gods) is a central element to the movie as well as a well-known Japanese expression, but the word is lost in the English translation of the title. Adding the Japanese title allows Yoshioka's argument of its significance to make sense to the reader.

As opposed to Yoshioka's article - an example of a historical-cultural writing - which uses native words to enhance the atmosphere of the and simply introduce the language. In the language

subdiscipline, using native words is a way to explore the mechanics and impact of a language. By mechanics this could be grammar rules, or the language's origins. Impact might be how a language changes over time, or its effects on a certain society. Linguistic specialists rely more on native words than their historical - cultural counterparts, because they specialize in East Asian languages. Gouverneur Mosher's article in the periodical *Japan Quarterly*, Why Katakana? looks at the negative impact of the use of katakana - a Japanese alphabet designed for foreign words - in Japanese society. "Katakana, once a convenience for those who could not read the foreign alphabet, has become a pest weakening the language in the hands of those who use it to eliminate indigenous words and kanji characters," (Mosher 218). Katakana and kanji (Japanese characters) are the two native words in this passage. Mosher uses the first native word, *katakana* as the subject, and *kanji* to contrast katakana's place in the Japanese language. Katakana is seen by Mosher as corrupting the original Japanese language, represented by kanji characters, with foreign influence and by promoting a heavy use of borrowed words. Mosher is looking at the impact of katakana on the Japanese language, and the way katakana is used. Hence, here is an article looking at both the mechanics of the language - the two opposing alphabets - and the impact it has.

Next time you hear "East Asian Studies" remember all the complex writing practices that go into each and every piece of writing. Although the key to the understanding the mechanics of East Asian Studies is comprehension of the two subdisciplines, it is also important remember that these subdisciplines are not entirely separate. They are still a part of the same, greater discipline. While a professor typically focuses on just one the subdisciplines, a student will likely experience a little bit of both. In fact, only by exploring both subdisciplines can you really study East Asian Studies to the fullest.

Work Cited

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