

Readers' Column

Japan in Spain through Mutual Literature: Novels, Essays & Travel Books

By Fernando Cid LUCAS



Japan's culture and other affairs, as well as Japan itself, are becoming more and more interesting in Spain, especially over the last 10 years. In addition, recent efforts by several Spanish universities such as Universidad de Salamanca, Universidad de Valladolid or Universidad Autónoma de Madrid bring us this distant culture in their respective degrees. Nevertheless, in this column, I do not want to deal with a circle that exclusively belongs to the university sphere, but with the publishing boom in Spain concerning Japanese literature and culture that has aroused a deep interest in our society. A clear example of this is its classical literature. Several publishing houses are still printing the most important titles of Japanese literature. In this sense, Spanish readers can find two editions of *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), one edition of *Heike Monogatari* (*The Tale of Heike*) and *Ise Monogatari* (*The Tales of Ise*) and countless books about *haiku* and *tanka* poems that have been unexpected purchase targets, competing on the Spanish bestseller lists with vernacular literature. But, this goal has been achieved not only for the suggestive medieval Japanese literature and its rich imagery, where *samurai* and *geisha* are the main characters, but also for books by current, well-known Japanese authors. Thus, acclaimed writers such as Haruki Murakami, Yoko Ogawa or Banana Yoshimoto have achieved great success among Spanish readers; success that goes beyond the borders of literature. After reading Yukio Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata – who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968 – or the above-mentioned Murakami, many people in our country decide to learn the Japanese language in order to enjoy the original pronunciation and language, and the small things that make the Japanese literature so special.

Apart from that, I would also like to focus on the Spanish writers who have published some interesting works in different fields such as language, literature, economics or modern culture. In this sense, I would recommend some appealing books such as the recently published “*Japón: de la katana al manga*” (2008), which is a very interesting essay on different aspects of Japan by Professor Javier Martínez Herrero. Written in a more relaxed style, we can find “*Un geek en Japón*” (2008), an amusing report by Héctor Gracia. This best-seller shows us unique little things in Japan; for instance, *otaku*'s world or the tricky careers of *manga*

cartoonists. In the academic field, Professors Elena Barlés and David Almazán are publishing and editing in the frame of Universidad de Zaragoza some rigorous essays about different aspects concerning the “*Empire of the Rising Sun.*”

Undoubtedly, due to this incredible literary production, many people begin to study Japanese, calligraphy or *ikebana* or simply make and eat *sushi* and *sashimi*. We can feel a deep interest in everything related to Japan.

In this sense, going back to the books published in Spain, readers can nowadays gain access to Japanese culture with absolute certainty of the precision of these works, acclaimed by the brilliant career of their authors.

For the rest, what remains to be done is to enjoy yourself as you read the works, using literature to know more about other cultures. This could be an excellent exercise of interculturality in a world in which any attempt at a true understanding and assimilation is welcome. Let's then seek tolerance and empathy through literature. This is, at least, a beautiful message.



Fernando Cid Lucas is a Japanologist and a member of the Spanish Association of Orientalists, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain.