

**Itineraries of an Anthropologist**  
Studies in Honour of Massimo Raveri  
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# Massimo Raveri, the Oxford School of Social Anthropology and Researching and Teaching on Japanese Society

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**Abstract** This paper explores the context in which Massimo Raveri has produced his corpus of work on Japan and explains how and why he has so successfully been able to cover such a wide range of topics – stretching from the pre-modern to the contemporary. It situates his work in the context of debates between those in the worlds of Japanology and Japanese Studies and considers how he and his work have acted as a bridge between the two. It also examines the influence on his work of the debates taking place in the Oxford School of Anthropology at the time that he studied in Oxford in the late 1970s and how his distinctive approach has influenced the social anthropology of Japan.

**Keywords** Japanese studies. Japanology. Social anthropology. Oxford.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Japanology and Japanese Studies. – 3 The Influence of British Social Anthropology and the Oxford School on Japanese Studies. – 4 The Teaching of the Anthropology of Japan. – 5 Raveri’s Contribution to the Development of the International Community of Anthropologists of Japan.



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## 1 Introduction

Massimo Raveri has written on Buddhism, Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity; new religions and classical religions; classical philosophy and contemporary theology; death, play, food and drink. How is it possible for a scholar of Japan to be able to work across such a wide span of subjects and time? We argue that one of the reasons lies in his training in the Oxford School of social anthropology.

Today, there are many anthropologists of Japan teaching at universities across the world who were trained in the Oxford School.<sup>1</sup> The first generation of such scholars, however, included Massimo Raveri, which is why it is so important to honour his contributions at this time of his retirement. Raveri arrived in Oxford when social anthropology barely recognised Japan as a legitimate field of study. While he stayed only for a relatively short period of postgraduate student study, his legacy lives on in significant ways. We would like to consider here how we perceive the Oxford tradition of anthropological research influenced his work on Japan – as well as that of his students in Italy and others who received their training in Oxford – and, conversely, how his work contributed to the development of the anthropology of Japan in Oxford and elsewhere.

## 2 Japanology and Japanese Studies

The study of Japan through an anthropological lens needs to be placed in the larger context of a division between what can be generally outlined as ‘Area-ology’ versus ‘Area-Studies’ approaches or, in the case of Japan, ‘Japanology’ versus ‘Japanese Studies’. While the former long predates the latter, these two approaches have existed alongside each other in almost all communities of scholars studying Japan since the 1950s. In many parts of the world, however, they inhabit virtually parallel universes, publishing in different journals, attending different conferences and, sometimes, even being placed in different departments within the same institution.

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst those whose work we *might* mention as part of the Oxford School are (besides the authors and Raveri): Rodney Clark (SOAS, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London); Okpyo Moon (Academy of Korean Studies); Mary Picone (CNRS, Centre national de la recherche scientifique); Lola Martinez (SOAS); Peter Cave (University of Manchester); Bruce White and Greg Poole (Doshisha University); Sachiko Horiguchi (Temple University); Ayumi Sasagawa (Waseda University); Swee Lin Ho (NUS, National University of Singapore); Hyun Sun Lee (University of Tokyo); Yuki Imoto (Keio University); Huiyan Fu (University of Essex); Ryotaro Mihara (Waseda University); Sebastien Boret (Tohoku University) and Andrea de Antoni (Ritsumeikan University).

In general, the Japanological approach has predominated in continental Europe; the Japanese studies approach in Anglo-Saxon countries. This makes the fact that Raveri got his training in an Anglo-Saxon country but spent his career in a Continental European one particularly significant.

Table 1 sets out, very simply, some of the key differences between the Japanological and the Japanese studies approaches. The core intellectual difference between them is whether a society is best studied in its own terms (an emic approach) or through a comparative lens (an etic approach). The former sees history as the key discipline and philology as the key tool; the latter sees sociology (in the broadest sense and incorporating social anthropology) as the key discipline and the use of universally applicable theory as the key tool. The former focuses on, and looks, for continuities; the latter discontinuities. The former assumes a society can only be studied in its own right; the latter that it should be understood using universally-applicable theoretical ideas about social life. In general, the former has a view of society as essentially based on consensus; the latter takes into account that a society must always find ways of dealing with conflict. Even more broadly, the former is often associated with the humanities; the latter with the social sciences.

The significance of taking a Japanological or Japanese Studies approach to a project is rarely explicitly addressed even if its impact is potentially considerable. To give just one example: the assumption that it is the past ('history') which determines the present (the Japanological approach) or the assumption that it is the present which writes the past (the Japanese Studies approach) lead to very different views of how we should think about and study contemporary Japan. Despite the fact that his work is deeply philological in nature, we argue that Raveri significantly also takes a Japanese studies approach to the use of history as can be seen in his major work *Il corpo e il paradiso* (1992) which, as Maraini (1993) points out in his review of the book in *Monumenta Nipponica*, sets the many and varied explanations for why some Japanese Buddhist hermits voluntarily transformed themselves into desiccated object immune to decay in their own historical and sociological contexts.

**Table 1** Some heuristic dichotomies for thinking about research on Japan:  
The Anglo-Saxon (Etic) vs the Continental European (Emic) Approaches  
(drawn from Goodman 2020)

|                               | <b>(Japan)-ology</b> | <b>(Japanese)-Studies</b> |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Approach</b>               | Emic                 | Etic                      |
| <b>Reference Point</b>        | Internal comparison  | External comparison       |
| <b>Key Disciplines</b>        | History              | Sociology                 |
| <b>Key Tools</b>              | Philology            | Theoretical terms         |
| <b>Assumptions</b>            | Continuities         | Discontinuities           |
| <b>Moral Universe</b>         | Relativistic         | Universalistic            |
| <b>University departments</b> | Humanities           | Social sciences           |

Raveri's work is distinctive, we argue, because it bestrides the Japanological and the Japanese studies traditions of work on Japan. In some ways this reflected the fact that as a graduate student in Oxford he had two supervisors: one, a social anthropologist, R.H. Barnes who had no specialist knowledge of Japan, the other, the scholar of pre-modern Japanese ethical traditions, James McMullen, who, at the time, had little background in social anthropology although he went on to supervise a number of anthropologists of Japan and increasingly drew on anthropological ideas in his own research (see McMullen 2020). Raveri's third official tutor in Oxford – in those days called a 'moral tutor' – was the pre-eminent historian of Japan, Richard Storry, who also had a major influence on his thinking. Given this background, we can more easily see why it is that Raveri's work draws so naturally on the work of both pre-modern and contemporary historians, philosophers, philologists and scholars of Japanese religion and ethics. It was this background, for example, which led to him challenging the widely-held prejudice in Oriental Studies at the time that the study of Buddhism meant the study of *Indian* Buddhism – and that the earlier the tradition of Buddhism that was being studied the better – and treating the study of Japanese Buddhism as equally legitimate in its own right (see Raveri 2002; 2017; 2015a; 2015b; 2020)

We also believe that there is something distinctively influential that he gained from his exposure to the debates which were taking place in Oxford's anthropological community in the late 1970s.

### 3 The Influence of British Social Anthropology and the Oxford School on Japanese Studies

The Oxford School of anthropology shares with other schools of British social anthropology a strong focus on personhood; how the relationship between the two elements of the person – self ('ego') and role ('persona') – is construed (see Hendry 1999 for an overview of the British approach to anthropology). It looks at how 'society' is constructed through the mobilisation of symbols and rituals. It examines who has control over those rituals and symbols by placing them in a political and economic context. It considers the importance of kinship for understanding nonkin as well as kin relationships.<sup>2</sup> The Oxford School is particularly interested, following the work of Evans-Pritchard, in the role of history; it eschews analyses which suggest that there is anything essentialist and unchanging about a society.

The Oxford School has always also been focussed on the role of fieldwork through the medium of the language of the societies being studied. Often fieldwork has been seen in terms of a year at a minimum, so that the anthropologist can see the full ritual cycle, but this has increasingly become modified as the world has been globalised and it has been possible to do fieldwork long-distance. At the core of the fieldwork project is learning to see the worlds of those being studied through their own eyes and gaining empathy, though not necessarily sympathy, with their world views. In the case of a highly literate and self-reflexive society like Japan, it also requires reading native accounts and analyses of their own society produced for indigenous readers; it is necessary to be able to read as well as speak and understand Japanese. Raveri spent three years at Kyoto University before he came to Oxford, so he was well qualified to draw on that experience within the Oxford system. The first two years of his university study had been in Florence, where Fosco Maraini, a multi-talented man who spent many years in Japan and claimed anthropology and ethnography amongst his skills, had clearly been an important influence.<sup>3</sup>

The empirical tradition of British anthropology, however, was under some attack in the 1970s and Raveri found himself in the middle

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<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that the best-known exponent of the thesis that the kinship system provides the idiom for other social institutions in Japan is Nakane Chie whose postdoctoral work in social anthropology was at the anthropology department at the LSE (London School of Economics) and who subsequently was a visiting professor at the SOAS before becoming the first female full professor at the University of Tokyo in 1970 and subsequently the first and only female member of the Japan Academy in 1995. Nakane (1973) argues that the kinship ideology of the household *ie* system provides the idiom even today that structures many other aspects of social life and social institutions – education, welfare, arts, religion, politics, economics.

<sup>3</sup> It was also Maraini who persuaded Raveri to return to Ca' Foscari to take up an Assistant Professorship before he had completed his doctoral studies in Oxford.

of these debates. The attack came primarily from French structuralist theory. At the risk of caricaturing, the French saw the British fixation on empiricism as limiting and unimaginative; the British saw the French structuralist approach as purely theoretical and ungrounded. In Oxford, these two traditions came to a famous head between Rodney Needham, who was, along with Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas, one of the major interpreters for a British audience of the ideas of Claude Levi-Strauss (though Levi-Strauss was later to repudiate Needham) and the disciples, such as Edwin Ardener, of the arch pragmatist and empiricist, E.E. Evans-Pritchard. The lines which were drawn between the two camps were very stark at the time in Oxford, not just intellectually but also physically, as reflected in the fact that Needham did not enter the Institute of which he was the professor for the last seventeen years of his tenure. Raveri though had a foot in both camps and was able to draw on both traditions in his work which added a distinctive and important flavour to it. Unlike previous scholars, for example, he was sceptical of some of the more essentialist claims in the work of the revered Japanese ethnologist, Yanagida Kunio, whose account of premodern and early modern Japanese social values was used by many scholars uncritically to explain so much of what was happening in modern, post-war Japan. Raveri was one of the first scholars to analyse the work of Yanagida and his school as a constructed tradition or even, *pace* Levi-Strauss, as myth (see Raveri 1984).

#### 4 The Teaching of the Anthropology of Japan

How does training in social anthropology relate to the teaching of Japan? As we have seen, it gave Raveri a set of skills which allowed him - through detailed and close ethnographic study - to explore *any* aspect of Japanese society. As he discovered, it does not matter what aspects of Japan the anthropologist decides to study because they all lead to a deeper understanding of the society, an understanding that can be then taken to looking at other aspects.

Courses on the anthropology of Japan can be very broad indeed. Not all the readings for each of the topic needs to be anthropological, but they need to be 'anthropologised' by students who read them so that they can place them both in a broader understanding not only of how Japanese society works but also how society in general is a process in which persons construct the world around them and that world then comes to constrain them. It is this background which explains the depth and breadth not only of Raveri's own writings but also those of his students and others who have trained in this tradition and have worked on Japan.

## 5 Raveri's Contribution to the Development of the International Community of Anthropologists of Japan

Given the splits between Japanological and Japanese studies and within the anthropological community itself between British empiricists and Continental structural theorists, it is perhaps not surprising that, round the time that Raveri was in Oxford, British anthropologists who had worked in Japan were feeling a little isolated in both Japanese Studies and social anthropology. They were in short supply in both places, and while anthropological gatherings were dominated by people who had worked in Africa and other Commonwealth countries, the Japanese Studies associations were largely populated by historians. A conference of the EAJS (European Association for Japanese Studies), held in Raveri's alma mater in Firenze in 1979, began to open up new possibilities. It included for the first time a whole session devoted to the anthropology of Japan. By the time of the next gathering of the EAJS, three years later in the Hague, it was clear that Europe was home to several otherwise rather lonely anthropologists of Japan and a group began to make concrete plans to form an association.

An inaugural event was held at St. Antony's College in Oxford in 1984, supported by funds made available through the new professor of Japanese Studies, Arthur Stockwin, as part of a benefaction from the Nissan Motor Company. Although a gathering of around a dozen scholars had been expected, nearly 30 individuals from across Europe attended and it was decided to establish an organisation which became known as the Japan Anthropology Workshop (JAWS). Raveri gave a splendid paper on a subject relatively little known at the time, entitled "*Miira*: Techniques of Self-Mummification and the Problem of Immortality in Japan", which would form the basis of his book *Il corpo e il paradiso* (Raveri 1992) on the same subject, sadly never translated into English.

Japan Anthropology Workshops continued to be held after that initial gathering, first in a series of different European universities, then later in other parts of the world, and the European connection was reinforced when JAWS formally became the first subject-specific branch of the European Association for Japanese Studies in 1985 at its conference in Paris. In Berlin, in 1991 – an historic meeting that celebrated the new status of German unification – Raveri put together a panel on what was at the time a new subject, "Play". A collection of papers from that session was later published in a book (Hendry, Raveri 1992) which continues to be widely used as an introduction to the field.

In the meantime, Raveri had established himself in the Università Ca' Foscari in Venice from where he contributed through the Erasmus programme to a second very powerful set of links with anthropolo-

gists of Japan who worked in European universities. Founded by Jan van Bremen in Leiden as only the second Erasmus programme disciplinary group, the Japanese Studies group pulled together members from a wide range of disciplines. Indeed, the project that Raveri undertook that became a two-volume series, *Rethinking Japan*, which he co-edited with two Italian colleagues (Boscaro, Raveri 1991a; 1991b), based on a major symposium held in Venice in 1987, was dedicated to breaking down disciplinary boundaries; volume 2 was devoted to *Social Sciences, Ideology and Thought*.

The aims of the Erasmus programme when it was founded in 1987 were set out in its acronym (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) and in the early years this movement was established through biannual meetings of staff members of the universities involved, who then organised academic visits for their students to each other's departments. Small conferences were also held, in turn, in each of the participating departments, and Venice was active from the start. A longer-term aim was that these students would become European citizens training and taking up positions in departments throughout the European Union, rather than being limited to their own nations, and graduates of Ca' Foscari now work throughout the member states.

To this day, meetings of the Japan Anthropology Workshop inevitably include Italian students who have very often chosen unusual subjects demonstrating their eclectic but sound knowledge of Japanese language and its broader cultural heritage. They have also completed the long-term in-depth research that characterised the Oxford school and provides them with the confidence in their chosen fields that Raveri also displayed when he was a student. When questioned about their own background, they almost always mention the influence of Massimo Raveri.



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