

A Crisis of Japanese Studies: How Japan's Border Restrictions Have Affected Research in the Field

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Abstract: *How did Japan's border restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic affect Japanese studies? To answer this question, this essay discusses the results of a survey conducted in August 2022.*

Keywords: *Pandemic, Border Control, Travel Restrictions, Japanese Studies*

Starting in February 2020, the Japanese government began banning the entry of people from countries badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. By August the same year, the list of these countries had grown to 159. At the time of writing this essay in early October, 2022, visas can be issued to those newly entering Japan for a long-term stay (such as study abroad or employment in Japan), short-term business, or a short-term package tour. In these cases, anyone applying for a visa must have an institutional sponsor, or what the Japanese government calls a "receiving organization," in the country.

According to the announcement made by Prime Minister Kishida last month, Japan is scheduled to resume the admission of foreign visitors without visas starting on October 11. Accordingly, the maximum capacity of visitors

allowed to Japan per day, which is currently set at 50,000 a day, will be lifted, too. These actions will finally end the country's COVID-related border restrictions, and the free movement of people that had existed in the pre-pandemic era is expected to be revived. As the results of the survey that I conducted in this summer indicate, however, the strict border restrictions that have lasted for more than two years will likely have long-term effects on the field of Japanese studies and researchers in that field. Therefore, I find it important to share these results for further discussion.

Background of the Survey

As a Japanese citizen, I can enter Japan and conduct my research there. But over the past couple of years, I have seen my friends and colleagues who are neither Japanese citizens nor permanent residents struggling to find ways of entering Japan for research, only to be disappointed and defeated by the realization that complicated bureaucratic procedures made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to obtain visas. Moreover, many Japanese-studies researchers have strong personal ties with people in Japan (partners, friends, etc.). Their inability to visit Japan has meant not only that they were prevented from pursuing their professional activities but also that they were separated from the people they care about for a long time, the psychological effect of which has been immense.

Yet, while the restrictions lasted, the Japanese government and Japanese society remained quite indifferent to this issue. In Japan, the issue of the prolonged rejection of non-visa visitors was somehow reduced to a problem of the absence of international tourists or what Japanese people call “inbound,” and attention focused almost exclusively on the plight of Japan’s tourism industry. There was very little recognition that those admitted to Japan without visas in the pre-pandemic era included not only tourists but a great number of people whose lives and livelihoods depended heavily on regular trips to Japan, such as researchers.

It was within this context that in late summer of 2022 I conducted an online survey about Japan’s current border restrictions and their effect on the field of Japanese studies outside Japan.¹ Having heard both directly and indirectly about many people’s failed attempts to enter the country, their frustration, and the difficult decisions that they were forced to make about their careers and lives, I thought it important to clarify the extent to which Japan’s extreme border restrictions have affected Japanese studies researchers outside Japan, as well as the field of Japanese studies at large.

I launched this survey on August 16, posting it on the online platforms *H-Asia* and *H-Japan*. I also contacted researchers of Japanese studies individually as well as Japanese studies departments and programs in Asia, North America, Europe, and Australia. The invitation to take the survey was also circulated through the mailing lists of such professional groups as the Midwestern Japan Seminar, the University of Michigan’s Center for Japanese Studies, and the Association for Japanese Literary Studies. Initially, the questionnaire was available only in English, but on August 20, I added a Japanese translation, as well.

By September 12, I had received 378 responses. Of the respondents, 316 (83.60 per cent) identified themselves as affiliated with

four-year colleges/universities; 25 (6.61 per cent), as independent scholars; 5 (1.32 per cent), as affiliated with two-year colleges (such as community colleges in the United States); and 32 (8.47 per cent), with other types of institutions (Q1). Of all respondents, 207 (54.91 per cent) came from North America (the United States and Canada); 127 (33.69 per cent), from Europe; 18 (4.77 per cent), from East Asia (except Japan); 14 (3.71 per cent), from Australia and New Zealand; and 6 (1.59 per cent), from Southeast Asia (Q2). Given my own personal and professional connections in the United States, the majority of the responses came from North America.

Researchers’ Entry to Japan

Q3 asked when respondents last visited Japan. Of 374 respondents, 298 (79.68 per cent) responded “Before March 19, 2020.”² Sixty (16.04 per cent) responded “Between January 2022 and August 2022.” While this shows that the gradual relaxation of border restrictions in 2022 (i.e., the issuing of long-term and short-term visas) enabled some researchers’ entry to Japan, as of August 2022, the large majority of respondents had not been able to enjoy such an opportunity.

Q4 asked those who had visited Japan after March 19, 2020, what type of visa they got to enter the country. Of 104 respondents, 16 (15.38 per cent) ticked “No visa (on a Japanese passport)”; 9 (8.65 per cent), “Spousal visa”; 4 (3.85 per cent), “Visa to visit family/relatives in Japan”; and 26 (25.00 per cent), “Other,” which I believe includes re-entry permits for permanent residents of Japan (for which I should have created an independent category).

A researcher who did not have such legal status or familial ties but wished to enter Japan for purely professional purposes could only apply for a short-term or long-term visa. One could apply for the former, for example, to attend an

academic conference or a workshop, or to conduct archival or field research for a period of three months or less. The latter was for people who planned to stay in Japan for a period longer than three months, for instance, on a research fellowship or grant. In either case, one needed to secure a “receiving organization,” that is, a sponsor, in the country. According to the survey, the number of those researchers who entered Japan on these visas was very small—just 31 people (29.81 per cent) on long-term visas and 18 people (17.31 per cent) on short-term visas. While in theory Japan was already “open” to researchers wishing to visit the country for professional activities, in reality, the country remained tightly closed to most.

While it is understandable that one needs to have a sponsor for a long-term visa, the fact that even a short-term visa requires a sponsor is especially problematic. When a researcher wants to conduct archival research, say, at the National Diet Library for one week, it is not realistic at all to expect them to find a “receiving organization” located in Japan that is willing to host them. Before the pandemic, people from 68 countries and territories were allowed to enter Japan without visas nor sponsors for a short-term stay, including South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and most of Europe. It is expected that the scheduled removal of the border restrictions on October 11 will allow researchers from these countries and territories to travel to Japan much more freely just as they did in the past.

Many respondents who left comments in Q10 (open comment section) expressed their frustration at the Japanese government’s refusal to admit non-Japanese visitors. A few people called this practice *sakoku* or “seclusion,” though, again, the Japanese government would certainly insist that Japan is already “open.” Other people called the same practice “irrational,” “xenophobic,” “racist,”

and “backward.” One person correctly pointed out the diplomatic asymmetry between Japan’s policy of not admitting foreign travelers without visas while its own citizens kept enjoying admission without visas to many other countries. Similarly, another respondent urged the Japanese government to “treat foreign visitors in the same way as Japanese citizens and residents.”

Some of these comments also revealed the psychological and mental effects of the border restrictions. One person said: “It feels soul-crushing to be isolated for this long from the materials and colleagues who inspire us.” A UK-based PhD student claimed that they had “developed several stress-related illness” because they were expected to complete their PhD in a “strictly limited time” while being unable to go to Japan for research. They said they had been “put on anti-depressant” because of this situation. Another person could not study in Japan and ended up taking courses remotely for half a year. The time difference and “social isolation” affected their mental health, causing suffering that lasts to this day.

Effect of Border Restrictions on Researchers and the Field

Almost all the respondents agreed that Japan’s border restrictions have affected their research activities in some ways (Q5): 312 (82.76 per cent) checked “Strongly agree” and 53 (14.06 per cent), “Somewhat agree.” Those who disagreed constituted a very small minority: 3 (0.80 per cent) for “Strongly disagree” and 3 (0.80 per cent) for “Somewhat disagree.”

Q6, Q7, and Q8 looked into the effect of Japan’s border restrictions on respondents’ “research activities,” “the course of research,” and “career advancement” respectively. For all these questions, multiple responses were allowed. As expected, Japan’s border restrictions affected researchers tremendously

in all three fields. As for Q6, 267 (71.39 per cent) ticked “Couldn’t conduct archival research in Japan”; 220 (58.82 per cent) checked “Couldn’t conduct field research in Japan”; 141 (37.70 per cent), “Couldn’t attend a conference in Japan”; 107 (28.61 per cent), “Couldn’t attend a workshop in Japan”; and 260 (69.52 per cent), “Couldn’t do other research-related activities,” which, judging from the comments left in Q10, included interviews with subjects in Japan, collaboration with scholars there, and language study necessary for research.

As for Q7, 228 (60.96 per cent) checked “Had to delay completion of my research project”; 166 (44.39 per cent), “Had to modify my approach/method”; 154 (41.18 per cent), “Had to modify my research topic”; 96 (25.67 per cent), “Had to suspend or give up my research”; and 126 (33.69 per cent), “Had to make other changes.” The comments left in Q10 give us concrete examples of the various changes researchers were forced to implement by Japan’s border restrictions. One cultural anthropologist said that their new book project will have to focus on the United States rather than Japan because it was impossible for them to get to Japan. Similarly, several other researchers mentioned that they had decided to shift away from Japan-specific research topics and to focus on other parts of the world, such as South Korea, or on more “transnational” and “diasporic” aspects. Others expressed concern that their graduate students would have no choice but to give up their research topics due to their inability to travel to Japan.

As for Q8, 195 (52.14 per cent) checked “Prevented/postponed publication”; 145 (38.77 per cent), “Prevented/postponed academic presentations”; 126 (33.69 per cent), “Prevented/postponed acceptance/use of research fellowships/grants”; 15 (4.01 per cent), “Had to postpone my tenure review and/or promotion to associate professor”; 15 (4.01 per cent), “Had to postpone my review for

promotion to [full] professor”; and 164 (43.85 per cent), “Affected my career advancement in other ways.” Only 63 (16.84 per cent) agreed that the border restrictions did not affect their career advancement. Again, the open comments in Q10 help us further understand how researchers had to change their career plans, or even had to give up their careers, in the past two years. One respondent mentioned that their inability to travel to Japan led them to take an early retirement. Another commented that their funding was revoked because they could not go to Japan for research. It appears that researchers in their early careers, such as PhD students, suffered far more than their counterparts in their mid- and late careers. One PhD student feared that they might have to quit their PhD program because they had not been able to conduct dissertation research for more than two years. One researcher/teacher recounted that one PhD student in their “immediate circle has given up their dissertation altogether.”

Q9 asked about the effect of the border restrictions on Japanese studies as a field. As many as 274 (73.66 per cent) predicted “Fewer students studying Japan”; 237 (63.71 per cent), “Fewer publications on Japan”; 228 (61.29 per cent), “Less scholarly interest in Japan as an object of study”; 198 (53.23 per cent), “Fewer scholars specializing in Japan”; 166 (44.62 per cent), “Fewer academic programs in Japanese studies”; 51 (13.71 per cent), “Other.” Many researchers hold serious concerns about the future of Japanese studies. One respondent’s comment neatly summarizes this shared fear: “The restrictions are impoverishing the study of Japan. The effects will be like dominos. Less travel will result in less interest and an eventual downturn in class enrollment.” According to another, a scholar from an East Asian Studies department: “It threatens the existence of my academic department. If fewer students are interested in Japan (because they see it as unlikely they will be able to visit Japan), it becomes easier for administrations to

decide to curtail or even get rid of my department.”

Conclusion

This survey has confirmed the following points. First, until the current restrictions are lifted on October 11, the Japanese borders remain closed to non-Japanese visitors. In theory, Japan is open to researchers who plan to pursue professional activities there, but, in reality, very few researchers are able to visit Japan. Difficulty in finding sponsors and complicated procedures for acquiring visas have continued to discourage researchers from visiting Japan. Research is often solitary work conducted at the individual level that cannot always count on organizational support; high-quality research results are often achieved in this way (especially in the humanities). Therefore, it is not realistic at all to expect all researchers to find organizations in Japan willing to sponsor them for visas.

Second, Japan’s border restrictions affected researchers’ professional activities and their careers in a variety of ways over the past couple of years. Researchers were forced to not only modify their research topics and approaches but also suspend or give up their research, postpone publication, postpone or give up the use of research grants and fellowships, and in some cases, even leave the field for other careers. The way that the Japanese government has addressed the issues of the nation’s border restrictions as well as the way the Japanese mainstream media has reported on this may give the impression that only tourists without visas are currently prevented from entry to Japan. However, I want to emphasize that researchers need to go to Japan not for leisure but for their own lives and livelihoods and that Japan’s border restrictions have brought immense, irreversible changes to what they do for a living.

Third, even though Japan’s border restrictions are to be lifted very soon, they are expected to have a long-term effect on Japanese studies, causing an overall decline in the field and a shrinking of general interest in Japan. This will likely manifest in many ways: a decrease in the number of students studying Japan, students majoring or minoring in Japanese studies, scholars specializing in Japan, publications on Japan, academic departments/programs that offer courses on Japan, and so on. Also, as the comments in Q10 indicate, many researchers of Japanese studies, who care deeply about Japan and have contributed enormously to the growth of the field, have come to develop a deep sense of disappointment and distrust toward the country (or, more precisely, its government). In the past decade or so, Japan has vigorously promoted the country’s soft power and openness to foreign visitors using such expressions as “Cool Japan” and “hospitality” (*omotenashi*), but the border restrictions revealed how superficial these policies are and how easily Japanese society can turn xenophobic and introverted. In this environment, it seems only natural that many researchers of Japan—especially those in their early careers—are losing interest in and concern for Japan and switching fields. This is a true crisis.

To conclude, I want to quote from one of the open comments in response to Q10, as it sums up the nature of the problem generated by Japan’s border restrictions:

The damages are immeasurable. Academically, career wise, and on a personal level. These years won’t come back. Besides all our enduring sacrifices the image and reputation of Japan are damaged for decades. The Japanese studies in Europe are still considered as an exotic career path at best, an unnecessary and redundant field of studies at worst.

Decades of scholars' struggle to establish the field [are] being destroyed in a matter of months. The heartache caused in these past months (turning into years) will see young people turning their backs on Japan and its culture and technology.

maximum capacity of visitors allowed per day (50,000) will be removed. But the country's border restrictions have brought immense changes to researchers of Japanese studies and the field as a whole. We must not forget the legacies of these policies and need to continue examining them critically. I hope that this report on the survey will help deepen the conversation.

I am truly glad that Japan's borders will soon reopen to non-visa visitors and that the current

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Notes

¹ I would like to thank all the people who participated in this survey and who helped to distribute it to potential respondents. This survey has been featured in several media outlets. *The Japan Times* demonstrated interest in this survey at a fairly early stage and quickly published an [article](#) that featured it on August 30. *The Washington Post* also published an [article](#) on Japan's border restrictions, in which this survey was mentioned, on September 16. I have also been interviewed by NHK in late September, and an article is expected to come out soon.

² Initially, I misidentified March 19 as the date that all the countries were added to the list of the countries from which entry to Japan was banned. This was my mistake, but in the spirit of full transparency I maintained this original date in the discussion of the survey results.