

Romit Dasgupta

Introduction

Romit Dasgupta is an assistant professor in the [Discipline of Asian Studies](#) at [The University of Western Australia](#). He was awarded his Ph.D at [Curtin University](#) in 2005. His Ph.D thesis on Japan's corporate masculinity, received Chancellor's Commendation and Best Thesis Award from the [Asian Studies Association of Australia](#) in 2006.

His key research areas cover the gendered construct of Japanese white-collared [salaryman](#), representations of non-conventional family relationships in popular culture of Japan and Asia, and also the articulations of queer identity through popular culture (especially visual culture) in Asia.

His latest book "[Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities](#)", which was published in 2012, re-examines the discourse of salaryman masculinity in the post-1990s context. His future research includes a collaborative project with [The University of Queensland](#) on conventional and non-conventional family structures in contemporary Japan, and representations of the Japanese salarymen in twentieth-century films.

He currently teaches courses in Japanese society and culture, Japanese language and popular culture in Asia. He has also previous teaching experiences in Japanese popular culture modules at the [National University of Singapore](#).

Interview

1) There has been an increased use of films to analyze popular culture as reflected through your recent publications. The examples include Kurosawa Kiyoshi's "Tokyo Sonata" and a cross-cities collaboration film "About Love". What is your opinion of using films as a pedagogical tool/text in teaching popular culture? What kind of pedagogical tools have you adopted for conducting lesson and why?

I find film to be a very effective means of making the abstract or theoretical issues discussed to be more immediate and approachable to students. For instance, we can discuss issues such as the impact of economic re-structuring on families in Japan, or the shifts in attitudes towards parenting in a general or abstract manner. However, I believe that students can truly appreciate these issues only after watching them expressed through the day-to-day realities of individual characters in the films. Other than feature film, I find non-fiction documentaries to be very effective. They include short youtube clips or long documentaries like the "[Pacific Century](#)" series on history. I also use other forms of visual media too, including still images & photos.

2) You have taught popular culture in many different locations such as Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore. What are the differences between teaching in one place and the other? Do the students share similar responses towards Japanese popular culture in class?

The biggest difference in my experience is with regards to familiarity with Japanese popular culture. Hong Kong students are probably most aware of and immersed in Japanese popular culture, followed by Singapore students. Among Australian students, there are differences between those of Asian background and those of Anglo/European background. Asian-Australian students tend to be a lot more aware of trends in Japanese (and Korean) popular culture. Among male Anglo-Australian students, some are interested in martial arts (judo, kendo) while others tend to be [otaku](#)-type computer geeks. Hence, in terms of teaching, I would need to spend more time providing contextualize background information to students in Australia. If I play a clip of [AKB 48](#) in HK or Singapore, I wouldn't need to explain much about their background as much as I do in Australia.

3) In the abstract of your paper for this upcoming Teaching Japanese Popular Culture Conference, you have noted a shift in focus in the teaching of Japanese Studies from an emphasis on 'macro' institutions to "micro" everyday institutions and practices, including popular culture over the last decade or so. How did you arrive at this observation? What are the future trends you foresee in the teaching of Japanese Studies, especially with regards to popular culture, in the next 10 years?

I was referring to the trend whereby the focus since the 1980s has shifted from an emphasis in courses about Japan on macro trends and institutions (political structure, role of [Liberal Democratic Party](#), etc.) to one where a bottom-up view has become more pronounced. Twenty years ago, university courses dealing with such issues as fan cultures or sexual diversity would be unheard of. Today, it would be unusual to have programs that don't address these issues. However, this trend is not unique to Japanese studies. Since the 1980s, there has been a reflexive turn in social sciences and humanities, whereby the focus shifts from grand, sweeping overviews to the micro and the previously disregarded 'voices' within a society.

It is difficult to foresee future trends, but I can imagine that [the March 11 Tohoku Earthquake](#) will prove to be something of a watershed in Japanese Studies. The nuclear crisis and anti-nuclear movements may bring wider attention to environmental issues and the ways they are played out through popular culture. However, this is just a personal hunch & speculation, so do not be surprised if I am proven wrong :)

4) With regards to the popular culture, your field of interest has been primarily focused on the constructions of genders and sexualities, as well as the negotiations of "in-between" identities. How did you become interested in researching about the various forms of gendered identities of Japan, especially the "salarymen"?

My interest in "salarymen" was at first accidental. When I started my Ph.d, I was interested in looking at the shifts in attitudes towards work among the younger generation. That period was when issues such as "[freeter](#)" had first received media attention. However, I soon realized that while there had been considerable research focus on women in the workforce, this was not true for men. Also, it was around this time that [masculinity studies](#) as a field of research was starting to receive academic attention. In the context of Japan, if I were to research about men in the workplace, I could not overlook the "salaryman" as it is such a dominant symbol of Japanese masculinity.