

Hasekura League:

A New International Japanese Studies Network

We are exceedingly delighted that we can propose the formation of a new international Japanese studies network, the Hasekura League, here in Florence, the flower of humanities. It is very well known that the Platonic Academy of Marsilio Ficino was founded during the High Renaissance in the fifteenth century in this city. Florence is the birthplace of humanism, which encouraged humanity to see itself as the measure of all things, and helped to inspire the later Copernican Revolution from the world of God to the world of men. We feel also quite honoured that the University of Florence and Tohoku University have joined hands to hold an international symposium on Japanese Studies as an opening event. We think it is truly suitable for our league at its inception to have an exciting academic meeting in this home of Renaissance humanism in order to generate a new kind of interdisciplinary humanism, thus making the conversation between tradition and the future happen.

In the late-twentieth century, when the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union ended, we felt as if a bright light had broken through the clouds—and yet, the confusion of the world actually deepened thereafter. In order to overcome this crisis of civilisation, we must keep our sincere respect for the diverse cultures of the world as well as our empathy towards other people. The urgent issue of ‘reclaiming our humanity’ is not only the task of politics, economics, or scientific technology. It is above all a mission for Japanese Studies. In the belief that we can, however little, contribute to this task through collaboration and cooperation, we—Tohoku University in cooperation with a number of first-class European universities—will hereby propose to form the ‘Hasekura League’, a new Japanese Studies network. We really appreciate the understanding of and support for our shared goals from everyone here.

The name, ‘Hasekura League’, is taken from a historical figure in early 17th-century Japan, Hasekura Tsunenaga. He was a samurai retainer of the first Lord Date Masamune, who governed Sendai 400 years ago and whose castle site is now utilised as a campus of Tohoku University. Under the orders of his lord, Hasekura set sail in 1613 for Europe as an overseas envoy to the West.

Lord Date, in spite of the Tokugawa shogunate's seclusion policy, dispatched the special mission, hoping to initiate cultural exchange with the wider world. After many difficulties, the party finally had an audience with Pope Paul V in Rome in 1615. Hasekura also had himself portrayed in oils there, which is regarded as the first oil painting that depicts a Japanese. Following the feat of this great pioneer, we sincerely wish to rebuild Japanese Studies as a new interdisciplinary field of the Humanities rather than a branch of area studies, with the purpose of learning from each other, having lively discussions, and working together to cultivate the minds of young people who might help to respond to pressing global issues. At the same time, while we believe in the new Japanese studies shown above, we would not have an overarching slogan; for we value the freedom and diversity of academic scholarship above all things.

In 2014, the Japanese government appointed thirteen universities as 'Super Global Universities', one of which is Tohoku University. The ambitious 'Super Global University' programme aims at promoting the internationalisation of Japanese higher education and creating a global-mind system of knowledge, with which we can deal with the world today and contribute to the well-being of humanity. As one of the SGUs, Tohoku University, starting with the field of spintronics (spin transport electronics), have already launched seven different international graduate programmes in total. Now it is our turn to make a move—the graduate school of arts and letters at Tohoku University is now energetically preparing the eighth, that is, an international graduate program of Japanese Studies, which will start in 2018. We sincerely hope that our colleagues in the Hasekura League all over Europe will be interested in our new graduate school and utilise it as your forum to discuss diverse issues from the viewpoint of comparative cultures.

Once again, with this symposium in Florence as a foothold, we ardently wish for a formation of fruitful international academic exchange under the banner of the Hasekura League, which we believe will profit each one of us mutually. Thank you.

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Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Letters

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