

# 100 Years of Japanese Studies at the University of Warsaw

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The beginnings of Japanese Studies in Warsaw and Poland date back to 1919, when, after Poland had regained its independence, Bogdan Richter (1891–1980), a graduate of Oriental Studies in Leipzig, started giving Japanese language classes as a part of a language course at the University of Warsaw. In 1922, he established the Department of Far Eastern Culture at the Faculty of Philosophy, where he taught classes on China and Japan.<sup>1</sup> He continued this work until 1932, when he left for the Middle East. In the 1933/34 academic year, his successor, sinologist Jan Jaworski (1903–1945), was appointed head of the Seminar on Chinese Studies – a seminar created thanks to a donation from Baron Mitsui Takaharu (1900–1983), who came to Warsaw with his wife. Later, the position was assumed by sinologist Witold Jabłoński (1901–1957). It was the creation of this seminar that opened an opportunity to conduct lectures on Japanese culture. Over the years, the classes expanded into Japanese Studies proper thanks to Professor Wiesław Kotański (1915–2005). He was the first Japanologist in Poland: a gifted linguist, religious studies scholar, and a translator of Japanese literature. Above all else, however, he was a tireless researcher of the sources of Japanese culture.<sup>2</sup> It is mainly thanks to him that Japanese studies in Poland

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<sup>1</sup> More in: E. Pałasz-Rutkowska and A.T. Romer, *Historia stosunków polsko-japońskich [History of Polish–Japanese Relations]*, vol. 1, 1904–1945, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 2019, pp. 174–180; Japanese version in: E. Pałasz-Rutkowska and A.T. Romer, *Nihon Pōrando kankeishi 1904–1945*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. R. Shiba, Sairyūsha, Tokyo 2019, pp. 181–186.

<sup>2</sup> See also W. Kotański, “80 shūnen ni omou. Refleksje na 80-lecie” [“Some Reflections on the Eightieth Anniversary”], [in:] *Shōpan Pōrando – Nihonten. Nihon Pōrando kokkō juritsu 80 shūnen oyobi kokusai Shōpan nen kinen jigyō.*

were established. Since he is the person whose actions resulted in the formation of many generations of Japanese studies scholars in Warsaw (including the author of this article) and in other Polish cities, I shall talk about him in more detail.

## Wiesław Kotański



Figure 2. Professor Wiesław Kotański. Source: Chair of Japanese Studies archives.

In 1934, Wiesław Kotański (Fig. 2) was admitted as a student of Polish Studies to the University of Warsaw but, as he told me during our conversation in December 1997, he never ended up studying there, because what he was mainly interested in was the Japanese language and an opportunity to translate it into Polish. As he explained, the knowledge of a foreign language is linked to the ability to understand the reality of a distant culture, hence performing a translation often requires not only an extensive knowledge of the culture of a given society in a wider con-

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*Chopin – Polska – Japonia. Wystawa z okazji 80 rocznicy nawiązania stosunków oficjalnych między Polską a Japonią oraz Roku Chopinowskiego* [Exhibition for the Chopin Year and the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Establishment of Official Relations between Poland and Japan], Tokyo 1999, pp. 18–26; E. Pałasz-Rutkowska, "Professor Wiesław Kotański (1915–2005). Outstanding Scholar in Japanese Studies," [in:] *Beyond Borders. Japanese Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In Memoriam Wiesław Kotański*, ed. A. Kozyra, I. Kordzińska-Nawrocka, Department of Japanese and Korean Studies, Nozomi, Warszawa 2007, pp. 21–24; A. Żufawska-Umeda, "Niepokorny myśliciel. Wspomnienie o Profesorze Wiesławie Kotańskim (1915–2005)" ["A Rebellious Thinker. The Memory of Professor Wiesław Kotański"], *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 2006, no. 1–2, pp. 117–122.

text, but also an ability to represent values of this unfamiliar culture in the language of the nation one has belonged to from birth.

This is why Kotański started his studies at the School of Eastern Studies (Szkola Wschodoznawcza), which opened on November 6, 1931, at the Eastern Institute (Instytut Wschodni) in Warsaw.<sup>3</sup> From 1926, the Institute had operated as a socio-scientific institution for maintaining scientific and cultural relations between Poland and the East, but it also had certain political goals related to the Promethean movement, the main aim of which was to weaken the Soviet Union and to support independence efforts among the major non-Russian peoples that lived within the borders of the USSR. It was subsidized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education, as well as by the Second Department of Polish General Staff, which showed a particular interest in the East in a broader sense. The School was to organizationally resemble the *École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes* in Paris. The studies took three years and were divided into three didactic units (general studies, the Middle East, and the Far East). Kotański chose the Far East – the Third Department. Back then it was headed by Witold Jabłoński, who was succeeded in 1934 by Jan Jaworski. They were both sinologists who went on to become professors, and despite giving lectures focused mostly on China, they also taught about Japan. Among their lectures were classes on Japanese grammar and geography. Umeda Ryōchū (1900–1961), at that time the only native Japanese teacher in Poland, was in charge of teaching Japanese language and writing.<sup>4</sup> Earlier, between the years 1926 and 1928, he had taught Japanese at the University of Warsaw and had also been working as a lecturer for the courses of the Poland–Japan Society.<sup>5</sup> He was a philosopher and

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<sup>3</sup> I. Maj, *Działalność Instytutu Wschodniego w Warszawie 1926–1939* [*Activities of the Eastern Institute in Warsaw 1926–1939*], Oficyna Wydawnicza RYTM, Warszawa 2007.

<sup>4</sup> T. Umehara, *Pōrando ni junjita zensō Umeda Ryōchū* [*Umeda Ryōchū – A Zen Monk Who Dedicated His Life to Poland*], Heibonsha, Tokyo 2014; A. Nasiotowska, *Wolny agent Umeda i druga Japonia* [*Free Agent Umeda and the Second Japan*], Wydawnictwo Premium Robert Skrobisz, Warszawa 2013, pp. 11–175; A. Żuławska-Umeda, "Profesor Stanisław Ryōchū Umeda (1900–1961)" ["Professor Stanisław Ryōchū Umeda (1900–1961)"], *Japonica* 2000, no. 12, pp. 107–113.

<sup>5</sup> The Society was established in 1922. Its aim was to strengthen cultural, scientific, and economic relations with Japan and to promote Japanese culture in Poland.

a Zen monk. By pure chance, he found himself in Poland in 1922 and ended up staying there until the outbreak of World War II. During these years, Umeda became better acquainted with Poland, its culture, and its people, which later influenced the direction of his academic research (including his work on translating Polish literary works, on which I shall elaborate later). According to Professor Kotański, it was already during his early studies that Umeda suggested a joint work on creating a Japanese–Polish dictionary – a task that Kotański would try to accomplish many years later. At that time, the language classes were being conducted by Czesław Miszkiewicz, who worked at the Japanese Legation in Warsaw (which in October 1937 became the Japanese Embassy). Both he and his brother Mieczysław knew the language very well, although they had never visited Japan. Czesław also continued working at the Embassy after the war.

Lectures at the Third Department were very popular, but only the most tenacious students managed to finish their studies – only a handful from the initial fifty or so. The lectures were taking place from 5 pm to 9 pm, as most of the students were working. For Kotański, the leading language was Japanese, but he also studied Russian, English, and Malay. He took his final exam in 1939. Professor Kotański remembered this day very well, even after many years. The board of examiners consisted of all the lecturers from the department. The written portion of the exam called for a translation of a Japanese text, and the text he was assigned concerned fishing nets of some sort as well as the Japanese invasion of China. He did quite well but he transcribed Chinese names in Japanese, and this did not go unnoticed by the sinologists. Umeda interceded on his behalf, which only made a bad situation worse. After the exam, Jabłoński explained that Kotański would have received a “very good” mark if it had not been for Umeda’s intervention, which resulted in lowering the mark to “good.”

After receiving his diploma from the School of Eastern Studies, Kotański decided to further pursue his interest in Japan at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw. As regular Japanese Studies did not yet exist at the time, he started a tailored, individual study at the Seminar on Chinese Studies in the Institute of Oriental Studies, and followed a program created for him by Jaworski and Jabłoński. The plan was for him to lead the Japanese studies specialization in the future

and, most importantly, to eventually become Jaworski's collaborator. Jaworski, who was an expert in the field of Buddhology, was hoping that Kotański would help him with work on Japanese commentaries to the *Tipitaka*, a collection of Buddhist teachings whose 100 volumes in Chinese (the original version being in Pali) had been brought to the University of Warsaw some time earlier. Unfortunately, the war broke out soon afterwards. Most of the time, Kotański studied alone, and during the period between 1940 and 1944, he only occasionally took part in clandestine classes held in private homes.<sup>6</sup> Among his secret teachers were Jaworski and Jabłoński, as well as many other distinguished scholars and scientists, including philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbiński, logician Henryk Hiż, and psychologist Stefan Baley. After the war, in 1946, Kotański obtained a Master's degree in philosophy, which was awarded to him on the basis of a report presented to the Scientific Council of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Warsaw by Witold Jabłoński. This was only logical, as Jabłoński was the person most familiar with Kotański's course of studies in the underground education as well as with his work on the semantics of lemma organization in Chinese and Japanese character (ideogram) dictionaries. Years later, Professor Kotański explained that during his studies he had sought "to acquire a reliable knowledge of the Asian Far East, as well as to acquire a competence of a scientist who would be able to explore the issues relating to distant societies and cultures and interpret them objectively."<sup>7</sup> In 1947, he became an assistant, in the 1948/49 academic year – a senior assistant, and then, in 1950/51, he attained the position of assistant professor at the Seminar (since 1951, the Chair) of Chinese Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies (since 2008, an independent faculty).<sup>8</sup> His duties included conducting Japanese classes. Initially, these were limited to practical lessons on Japanese writing, but later also included Japanese studies seminars as

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<sup>6</sup> After the invasion in 1939, the Germans started to occupy Poland and soon closed all institutions of higher education, including the University of Warsaw.

<sup>7</sup> W. Kotański, "Wspomnienia z początków japonistyki w Polsce i inne refleksje" ["Memories from the Beginnings of Japanese Studies in Poland and Other Reflections"], *Japonica* 2000, no. 12, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Skład Uniwersytetu na rok akademicki 1948–1949* [University Staff for the Academic Year 1948–1949], Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1948, p. 76; *Skład Uniwersytetu na rok akademicki 1950–1951* [University Staff for the Academic Year 1950–1951], Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1951, p. 20.

well as introductory classes on Japanese literature and grammar (both colloquial and literary).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Kotański took the path of a Japanologist and started his professional, scientific, and didactic career at the University of Warsaw. He became an outstanding researcher and an expert in the field of Japanese culture<sup>10</sup> as well as an efficient and assiduous organizer of Japanese Studies at the University of Warsaw. However, the ultimate choice of a specific field on which he would eventually focus was preceded by a long search. Shortly after the war, he was faced with a serious dilemma: should he specialize, as Jaworski had suggested earlier, in the Buddhist doctrine, or should he find his own path? He decided on the latter, as the originator of the former idea had died during the war, and his collection of Buddhist *Tipitaka* had perished in a fire. Kotański began his independent research in lexicography. He initially intended to bring to life Umeda's past idea, that is to create a Japanese–Polish dictionary, but he soon abandoned this project. Instead, he began studying translation theory, which in turn allowed him to broaden his knowledge of the Japanese language by researching its earlier phases of development. The result was a doctoral dissertation titled *Problematyka językoznawcza w przekładach ze współczesnego języka japońskiego* [*Linguistic Problems in Translations from Contemporary Japanese Language*], based on which he received his doctoral degree in 1951. This led him to become a senior academic staff member (that is, an independent scientist) in 1952. Consequently, the Rector of the University of Warsaw approved the establishment of the Japanese specialization within the Chair of Chinese Studies.<sup>11</sup> From that point on, students interested in the subject could attend classes on Jap-

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<sup>9</sup> *Spis wykładów na rok akademicki 1949–1950* [*List of Lectures for the Academic Year 1949–1950*], Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1950, p. 62; *Spis wykładów na rok akademicki 1950–1951* [*List of Lectures for the Academic Year 1950–1951*], Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1951, pp. 82–83.

<sup>10</sup> He is the author of a number of publications, see e.g.: “Bibliography of Publications by Professor Wiesław Kotański,” ed. A. Ługowski, [in:] *Księga dla uczczenia 75 rocznicy urodzin Wiesława Kotańskiego* [*Anniversary Volume Dedicated to Wiesław Kotański on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*], *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 1990, no. 46 (2), pp. 13–21; “Wykaz prac Wiesława Kotańskiego za lata 1982–1994 z adnotacjami treściowymi” [“A List of Wiesław Kotański’s Works between 1982 and 1994 with Content Annotations”], *Japonica* 1994, no. 2, pp. 171–187.

<sup>11</sup> *Skład Uniwersytetu na rok akademicki 1952–1953* [*University Staff for the Academic Year 1952–1953*], Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1953, p. 19.

anese culture starting from their first year, and after five years they could receive a Master's degree in Japanese Studies. In the academic year of 1954/55, Kotański became a deputy professor of Sinology, and a year later he was appointed assistant professor, which in the academic year 1957/58 allowed for the creation of an independent Japanese Studies program. The Department of Japanese Studies and the Department of Chinese Studies were both part of the Chair of Chinese Studies.<sup>12</sup>

Kotański's knowledge of Japanese culture, religion, and language was further deepened during his thirteen visits to Japan. He took his first trip there between December 1, 1957, and August 31, 1958, thanks to the support of the University of Warsaw. It should be noted that he was the first Polish Japanese studies scholar to visit Japan after the war. This was, as Professor Kotański wrote:

A scientific reconnaissance. First of all, it made me aware of the possibilities and difficulties faced by the Japanese studies scholars in their scientific activity in this country. [...] This trip was planned very extensively, so as to ensure that every area in the Japanese Studies program (i.e., geography, history, literature, language, art) could benefit from a person's own experience in it and could be based [...] on direct practice, which, until now, I have lacked. Without this, my knowledge of Japan, which, until then, was based solely on books, was not sufficient.<sup>13</sup>

During this first visit, Kotański collected materials for his research, established contacts with scientific, academic, and cultural institutions, as well as traveled around Japan to broaden his knowledge of the country. He spent some time at the University of Tokyo and Kwansai Gakuin University in the city of Nishinomiya, where his good friend from the pre-war era times, Umeda Ryōchū, was working as a professor. It was from

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<sup>12</sup> *Skład Uniwersytetu na rok akademicki 1954–1955* [University Staff for the Academic Year 1954–1955], Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1955, p. 25; *Skład Uniwersytetu na rok akademicki 1955–1956* [University Staff for the Academic Year 1955–1956], Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1955, p. 35; and *Skład osobowy uczelni na rok akademicki 1957–1958* [University Staff for the Academic Year 1957–1958], Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1957, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> W. Kotański, "Japonista w Japonii" ["A Japanologist in Japan"], *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1959, no. 2, p. 172.

him, and also from Yonekawa Kazuo, a literary scholar working at the University of Tokyo, that Kotański received some particularly valuable books. This first trip to Japan also had an impact on the development of Japanese Studies at the University of Warsaw, as it was then that Kotański gathered knowledge on how to teach the Japanese language. To this end, he visited schools and talked to teachers, students, and their parents.

As a side note, I would like to add that it took Kotański many years to develop and perfect the method of teaching *kanji*. I had a first-hand experience of his efforts as one of the students in his writing classes. We were lucky that during our studies we had at our disposal two textbooks for learning *kanji*, both authored by Wiesław Kotański.<sup>14</sup>

During that first visit, Professor Kotański also met with experts in the field of language, literature, and history. He discussed with them the methodology of teaching, the development of guidelines for writing Master's theses and doctoral dissertations, as well as his plans for the general development of Japanese studies in Poland. He also asked several of those scholars to compile a list of quintessential books in each of their respective fields within the area of Japanese studies. Later, he admitted that "history was probably the most underrepresented, as I treated it a bit offhandedly."<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the connections made at that time, the Japanese Studies in Warsaw received many books that later proved to be crucial for the development of the program. At that point, professors Umeda and Yonekawa played a particularly significant role. In the 1959/60 academic year, Yonekawa Kazuo, on Umeda's recommendation, became the first postwar Japanese lecturer at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw.<sup>16</sup> He was a scholar in Russian studies, and above all a translator of Polish literature (he translated works by Andrzejewski,

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<sup>14</sup> W. Kotański, *Teksty do nauki pisma japońskiego dla I roku [Texts for Learning Kanji for First-Year Students]*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 1973; *Drugi stopień nauki pisma japońskiego [Second Level of Kanji Learning]*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 1976.

<sup>15</sup> W. Kotański, "Japonista w Japonii," p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> *Skład osobowy i spis wykładów w roku akademickim 1959–1960 [Staff and List of Lectures for the Academic Year 1959–1960]*, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa 1959, p. 73.



Gombrowicz, Gałczyński, and Tuwim). He worked at the Japanese Studies for seven years, instilling love for Japan in the students, who, at the time, still constituted a very small group.

At the beginning of the 1960s, inspired by a bibliography of Japan-related publications compiled by Kamil Seyfried (who was also a Japanologist, as well as Umeda's student and friend),<sup>17</sup> Kotański began researching the history of knowledge of Japan in Poland. Several works were created during that time – among others, an article about cultural relations between Poland and Japan<sup>18</sup> which later became an inspiration for my own research on the history of the Poland–Japan contacts. Soon after that, however, the Professor turned his interests towards literary translation. Thanks to that decision of his, Japanese literature enthusiasts today can read precious translations of many pieces of classical literature. Out of the texts he worked on, the translations of the most representative and valuable Japanese works written between the eighth and fourteenth centuries have been published in the anthology *Dziesięć tysięcy liści. Antologia literatury japońskiej* [*Ten Thousand Leaves. Anthology of Japanese Literature*].<sup>19</sup>

In the summer of 1969, Kotański – since 1967 already an associate professor – received a scholarship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science which allowed him to go to the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyūjo) in Tokyo. It was a difficult period in Japan, especially in the capital, where riots and strikes were continuously breaking out at universities, mainly at the University of Tokyo (since January 1969). In such a turbulent time, new academic connections were difficult to forge, but Professor Kotański managed to meet with several people interested in teaching Japanese at the University of Warsaw – these arrangements would come to frui-

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<sup>17</sup> A. Żuławska-Umeda, "Kamil Seyfried (1908–1982)," *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1984, nos. 1–4, pp. 201–204.

<sup>18</sup> W. Kotański, K. Seyfried, "Stosunki kulturalne między Polską a Japonią" ["Cultural Relations between Poland and Japan"], *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1961, no. 2, pp. 141–156.

<sup>19</sup> W. Kotański, *Dziesięć tysięcy liści. Antologia literatury japońskiej* [*Ten Thousand Leaves. Anthology of Japanese Literature*], PWN, Warszawa 1961 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2012). Kotański also translated e.g., Kawabata Yasunari's *Yukiguni* (1964) and Ueda Akinari's *Ugetsu monogatari* (1968).

tion in the future. However, the main purpose of his stay, as determined by the Japanese side, was, as Kotański wrote: “establishing closer contacts with the Polish center of Japanese language teaching [...], mutual presentation of research goals and teaching methods, and transfer of resources and experience.”<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the 1960s, Kotański focused on pursuing research in the field of semiotics. He was also researching Japanese religions, mainly the native Shinto. With time, the *Kojiki* chronicle became the main focus of his research, and he would continue to carry it out until the end of his life. *Kojiki*, a text dating from the early eighth century, is the oldest extant Shinto writing, a priceless work of national literature and a sacred text of the religion. The long-standing collaboration between Kotański and Toda Yoshio, a religious studies scholar and a professor at the Kokugakuin University who visited Poland in 1970, proved to be essential for the research of the text. The Kokugakuin University, a center of studies on the origins of Japanese culture and of Shinto, became the most important research facility for Kotański's own work. This was also thanks to Matsui Yoshikazu, Toda's student, who at his teacher's request came to Poland in 1974 to get acquainted with Kotański's research and to learn Polish. Matsui, a linguist and a religious studies scholar (later associated with Osaka International University), through translating Kotański's works into Japanese, would later become his “champion” in Japan as well as a commentator of his research on *Kojiki*.<sup>21</sup>

Kotański interpreted the collection of myths in *Kojiki* as a perfect plan conceived with the goal of preparing Earth for the gods' descent from the heavens – gods who would later form the imperial dynasty. His research was an attempt to uncover the mystery hidden in *Kojiki* under the impenetrable veil of the ancient Japanese language. Through the years, Kotański developed a unique field of study he named “kojikology.” He believed that the names of deities and other characters were the key

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<sup>20</sup> W. Kotański, “Notatki z podróży do Japonii” [“Notes from Travel to Japan”], *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1970, no. 2, p. 139.

<sup>21</sup> Matsui is also a translator and editor of Kotański's works on *Kojiki* – *Kojiki no atarashii kaidoku. Kotansuki no Kojiki kenkyū to gaikokugoyaku Kojiki* [New Approach to the Understanding of *Kojiki*. Kotański's Method of Decoding the Meaning of *Kojiki* and Translations of the Book], Kinseisha, Tokyo 2004.