

Talking to the World: Esperanto and Popular Internationalism in Pre-war Japan

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Japan's relations with other nations, both those in Asia and in the West, represent one of the key themes of its 19th century and 20th century history. Events such as the Perry Mission of 1853-54 or the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-05 marked pivotal moments and changes in how Japan interacted and dealt with its neighbours and those further afield. More abstractly, a key element of Japan's modern trajectory has been the question of where it sat, or should sit, in the wider world and emerging international system. Intellectuals and writers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, Nakae Chōmin, and Okakura Tenshin, among others, wrestled with the issue of Japan's position in the world.¹

But beyond the international politics and high profile treaties, the political and philosophical treatises, there is also another history of Japan's imagining of its own place in the world and its engagement with the peoples of other nations. This is a bottom-up history that seeks to explore how and why ordinary Japanese subjects from across the nation and within the growing empire sought to connect with those beyond Japan's borders. In short, the story of Japan's international relations is not restricted to diplomatic and intellectual history: it has a popular dimension too.²

This essay explores some of the history of Japanese popular internationalism, through the vehicle of advocates and users of the planned language, Esperanto. Esperanto, a language designed to be easy to learn in order to promote inter-cultural and inter-ethnic exchange and mutual understanding, proved popular in a Japan which was eager to make contacts with other nations. Especially in the 20th century, Japanese Esperantists not only imagined a range of alternative alignments of the world, and Japan's place within it, but they also used their language to start to bring those visions into being.

Although Esperanto never gained the mass international uptake that its advocates hoped for, in Japan the range of people drawn to the language was remarkable for its intellectual, philosophical and political diversity. From scholars to politicians to religious leaders, a diverse body

of famous historical figures experimented with Esperanto, but perhaps a more significant measure of the interest which it inspired was the body of 'ordinary' Japanese people who studied, promoted, and sought to use it.³ There are three important dimensions to the history of Esperanto in Japan. Firstly the range of motivations people had for making contact with the wider world; secondly the role of language in that contact; and thirdly the potential of Esperanto as a practical tool for making contact – internationalism as a practice as well as an idea.

To take these three themes in order, firstly the movement shows how widespread the urge was in Japan to make contact with the wider world. Japanese Esperanto was almost entirely self-motivating – a grassroots, bottom up movement that received little to no support from the state, and yet which, if not a mass movement in terms of scale, nevertheless spanned the nation's geography and attracted people from a wide range of professions, backgrounds, and political views.

Secondly, the history of Esperanto in Japan shows how important language was, and remains, in times when international contact is popular. That is, if you want to engage in some form of international or border crossing activity, if you want to make contacts overseas, or make friends, or exchange information, then you need a common language to do so. In a way, this is obvious and trivial. But in general when we as historians think about these encounters, and other examples of what we call transnational connections, we tend to ignore the problems of language in our desire to look at what was possible and what meanings were produced. There is good reason for this, but by looking at Esperanto we bring back into focus the fact that language, far from being a transparent medium of communication, is the source of misunderstandings and frictions as much as of new meaning. Also, the choice of which language to use in a given situation can be quite revealing of the nature of the contact which is being made.

Finally, Esperanto was an innately practical idea. That is to say, while internationalism can often take the form of an intellectual schema and thus remain little more than an idea, or possible political manifesto, by contrast Esperanto encouraged activity – you could 'do' Esperanto, as well as 'thinking' or 'believing' Esperanto. So in Japan we get Esperanto scientists seeking to disseminate their work better through Esperanto;

likewise doctors, socialists, members of various religions, and even just people looking to make friends, Japanese abroad and foreigners in Japan, all made concrete connections through it.

What is Esperanto?

Esperanto is an example of what is generally known as a planned, or artificial language. That is, unlike the 'natural' languages of the world – ethnic and national languages and dialects – it did not emerge through a haphazard process wrapped in the mists of time, but was the work of a single man, Ludovic Zamenhof, and a more-or-less single piece of deliberate effort. It is not unique by any means: there is a rich history of planned languages, the main branch of which can be traced back to the European Enlightenment. Planned language projects have been undertaken for a range of objectives, from philosophical languages aiming to expose the precise workings of reality, to more recent languages devised for film and television, which delight in such names as Eskybulauron, Nal Bino, Pasalingua, and Dothraki.⁴

Esperanto is the most successful example of a 19th century trend for 'international auxiliary languages', a linguistic response to an increasingly interconnected world. As one Dutch writer in Japan put it in the late 19th century:

In recent times the association between all the nations grows by month and by year, and thus those who would engage in the least exchange between the members of other nations must learn 1 or 2, or even 4 or 5 languages; for those who study, in politics or in trade, the inconvenience is not inconsiderable.⁵

Growing crossborder flows meant a greater need for communication and greater stresses on linguistic skills. National languages were irregular, hard to learn, and moreover reliance upon a single national language for communication (most likely French in the 19th century) would give an advantage to the native speakers of that language. An international auxiliary language was a potential solution to these issues. By designing a language that had a regular grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, it would be easy to learn, and by ensuring that it was a new language

with no national affiliations, it would level the playing field, preventing any single nation from greater ease of use.

The core idea was that everyone in the world would learn Esperanto, not to replace their own native language, but to augment it – a second world language to be used in a setting where a range of different linguistic groups were present. You would speak your native language at home and Esperanto abroad. But more than a simple pragmatic antidote to the anarchy of national tongues, Zamenhof hoped that the establishment of such a global lingua franca would lead to improved mutual understanding between various nations and peoples, and ultimately to a more peaceful world. Esperanto was not the first language proposed for this role. Before it, there was a brief period in which another planned language, Volapuk, was the most popular alternative. But from roughly 1890, Esperanto grew in popularity, marking the completion of its rise to dominate the world of auxiliary languages with a first international congress in 1906.

Esperanto in Japan

The first mention of Esperanto in Japan was in the late 1880s in relation to a brief flurry of interest in Volapuk, but it really arrived in 1906, in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War. The renegotiation of the unequal treaties, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and finally Japan's victory over Russia marked the culmination of a period in which Japan rose to something approaching equality with the great powers of Europe and America. Interest in Esperanto, which was booming in Europe at the time, was perhaps an unexpected consequence of Japan's rise to power.

The language was introduced to Japanese audiences from a number of different routes – some Japanese learned of it through the foreign language press, others picked it up from foreign teachers in Japan, and a few encountered it during travel overseas. Two, or perhaps three national associations were formed, eventually merging into a single body, and domestic textbooks and dictionaries began to be published. Most important of all, a body of learners, advocates, and users emerged, that was diverse, right from the outset. A sample of some of the early participants serves to illustrate this:

Futabatei Shimei, the Russophile and novelist, encountered Esperanto in Vladivostok, where he struck up a friendship with a leading Russian Esperantist. His textbook, translated from Russian, was one of the most popular of the early ways to learn, and while he later distanced himself from Esperanto, in the first few years he wrote a number of magazine articles promoting it to a wider audience.

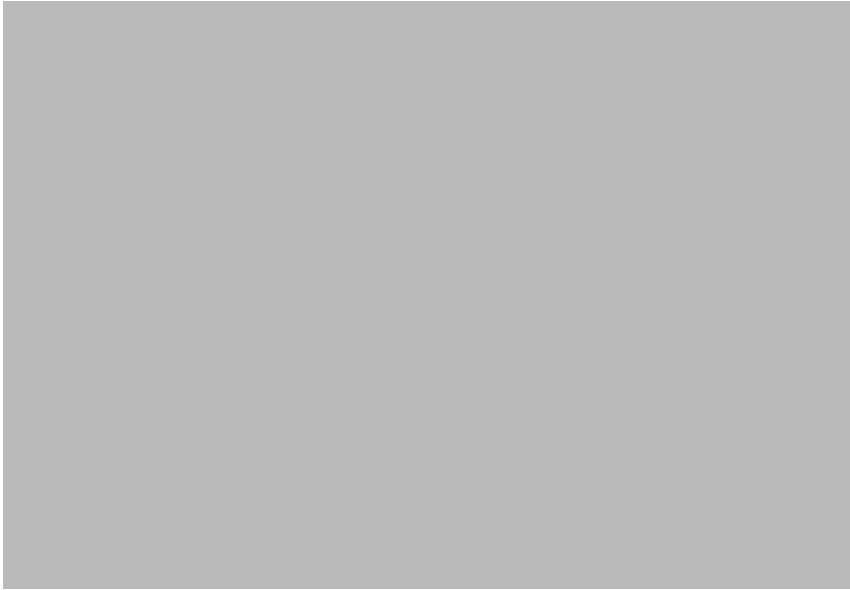
Kuroita Katsumi was, in 1906, a young professor of Japanese classics at Tokyo Imperial University but later he was best known as one of the leading figures in the writing of conservative national histories. He was the first leader of the Japanese Esperanto organisation, essentially the central figure in Japanese Esperanto until the early 1920s.

Osugi Sakae, one of the most significant Japanese anarchists, was in prison in 1906 when the first Esperanto meetings were being held, but while there he began to study the language and on release was a very active participant, writing the first Japanese to Esperanto translation (a version of the Momotarō fairy tale), forming an Esperanto night school, and introducing the language to a number of expatriate Chinese students who went on to form the foundation of the Esperanto (and Anarchist) movement in China.

These, and others such as Hayashi Tadasu, a participant in the Meiji restoration and later Foreign Minister, Oka Asajirō, leading populariser of Darwinian evolution, and Adachi Arato, editor of the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, were early participants in the Esperanto community, while others such as figures on both left and right – Kita Ikki, Kōtoku Shūsui and Sakai Toshihiko, for example – while not necessarily active learners, all made mention of it in their speeches and writing.

1916 and the Second Generation of Japanese Esperanto

This first wave of Esperanto in Japan essentially revolved around spreading knowledge and understanding of the language. With the passage of time, and with developments in the Esperanto community both in Japan and elsewhere, this transformed into using Esperanto for a range of other activities. In Europe, Esperanto unsurprisingly experienced



Script reading club held at the 2nd floor of the Nakamura salon. Akita Ujaku (front left) and Vassily Eroshenko (third from the right). Photo: Nakamura (中村屋).

a lull in activity during the First World War. At the same time in Japan, while it was less popular than in the immediate wake of the 1906 boom, Japanese Esperantists were in some ways freer to develop their own ideas without the more dominant European influence.

Indeed, from the middle of the Taishō period (1912-1926), Esperanto formed a part of a rich network of transnational activity which developed in and centred upon Tokyo. At the heart of much of this web of different ideas was a young Russian, Vassily Eroshenko. Eroshenko was blind as a result of a childhood illness, but he refused to be held back by this, travelling widely across first Europe and then Asia. He came to Tokyo in 1914, immediately plugging into the existing Esperanto community and from there into an increasingly wide variety of different movements and groups. For example, he was active with the Bahá'í mission to Tokyo, the Shinjinkai student group at Tokyo Imperial University, and the Nakamura bakery. Each of the following was connected to Esperanto and to other transnational activities, importing foreign ideas, engaging with foreign visitors, and seeking to site Japan within a wider vision of world culture and civilization:

Bahá'ísm, a religion from Persia, included Esperanto – a language designed to bring the peoples of the world together – as a key part of its vision of social equality and religious understanding. They established a mission in Tokyo in the early Taishō period, run by Agnes Alexander, the daughter of Hawaiian Christian missionaries. Eroshenko, while never a convert to Bahá'ísm, was close to Alexander and helped promote her work in Japan, as did several other Japanese Esperantists.

The Shinjinkai was an influential student group based in the elite Law Department of Tokyo Imperial University. They experimented with Esperanto in debates with Korean and Chinese students, among a range of other radical ideas. Eroshenko visited them and was an inspiration for some of their members.

The Nakamura was (and still is) a bakery in Shinjuku. It introduced various foreign foods to Japan, such as Russian style bread and Indian curry. In addition, an artistic and literary salon was run by its owners, Sōma Kokkō and Sōma Aizō, with key interests in Impressionist style painting, sculpture, and Russian literature. Eroshenko lived in the Nakamura on a couple of occasions, helped Sōma Kokkō to study the Russian language, and was the subject of a pair of famous paintings by members of the salon.

Another famous foreign visitor to Tokyo who connected all three of these groups, visiting the Bahá'í and the Nakamura, and lecturing at Tokyo Imperial University, was the Indian Nobel Prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore. He came to Japan in 1916 on a tour, lecturing to thousands and fêted wherever he went. Vassily Eroshenko, together with other members of a literary group, the Red Hat Society, joined a vast crowd at Tokyo station to see him arrive from Osaka, shouting a greeting in Esperanto across the throng. According to some accounts, the two men argued about Tagore's conception of different (if compatible) Western and Eastern cultures and Eroshenko's cosmopolitan vision of a single humanity.

In the midst of Tagore's tour, Eroshenko left on a trip of his own, taking advantage of contacts through the blind community and the

Bahá'í faith to visit Thailand, India and Burma. When he returned in 1919, the Japanese Esperanto movement was experiencing a second great wave of growth, inspired by the end of the war in Europe and global hopes of establishing a greater and more lasting peace. Eroshenko's second visit to Japan was brief – his connections to the resurgent socialist movement led to his expulsion from Japan – but the second generation of Japanese Esperanto continued after his departure, larger and more sustained than the previous one, and home to richer and more complex forms of practice.

The 1920s and early 1930s were the highpoint of pre-1945 Japanese Esperanto. The language was present across the nation, with clubs in every prefecture and in all of the Japanese colonial territories. New textbooks were published, magazines proliferated and a series of radio courses attracted new learners apparently in the thousands. Scientists, doctors, Buddhists, Christians, and various different professions, as well as clubs across the nation, from major cities to rural villages, all began to publish their own Esperanto material, from small mimeographed magazines with tiny circulations to commercial books and magazines with national or even international reach.

For ordinary Esperantists in Japan in the interwar period, the opportunities to speak Esperanto to someone other than a fellow native Japanese speaker were few and far between, but chances to use the written language were more plentiful. As mentioned above, magazines and books were published widely, flowing overseas from Japan and from overseas into Japan, but letter writing was the most intimate use available. An advert placed in a correspondence wanted column in one of a number of Esperanto magazines might lead to thousands of replies from countries on all five continents. Some of these contacts led to relationships which lasted lifetimes, bridging the Second World War.

But Esperanto was not limited to personal relationships. The most high profile Esperanto moment worldwide was in the early years of the League of Nations, and Japan was a key participant there, too. Nitobe Inazō, who was then serving as Under-Secretary General, therefore a leading representative of the League itself rather than a national mission to the League, wrote an influential report on Esperanto, offering it a qualified seal of approval. Another young Japanese, Fujisawa Chikao, was

at the centre of an ultimately unsuccessful bid to gain official recognition and support for the use of Esperanto in education. Yet another Japanese at the League, the folklorist Yanagita Kunio, serving on the Permanent Mandates Commission, was also drawn to Esperanto. Despite an elite education and being well used to engaging with Western scholarship in his work, Yanagita found himself struggling to communicate when he arrived at the League. He worked hard at languages, but also saw Esperanto as a potential solution and a means of allowing less traditional diplomatic powerhouses to participate more effectively in the new international relations.

From the corridors of the League of Nations, to tiny villages deep in the rural hinterland, from elite intellectuals to school children and workers, the 1920s saw Japanese people using Esperanto in new and different ways, and in new and unexpected places.

Left and Right: the Split in Japanese Esperanto

In the early 1920s, in addition to the rapid growth and breadth of the movement, what is remarkable about Esperanto in Japan is that it was a fairly cohesive movement, bringing almost all of the different groups and political views that were interested in the language into contact with one another in a single network and community of practice. In doing so, they brought different conceptions of the language into dialogue with one another. Zamenhof's vision of Esperanto driving greater mutual understanding imbued Esperanto with some form of ethic or underlying philosophy, *Esperantismo* in the language itself, but exactly what this should be was open to debate. Some argued that Esperanto should remain strictly neutral – that to be a true international language required it to remain unconnected to any single ideology. Others tied it to different internationalist or cosmopolitan views, some religious or political, and others perhaps little more than a loose sense of cooperation between nations. All of these views were housed within a single network that, for the most part, got along.

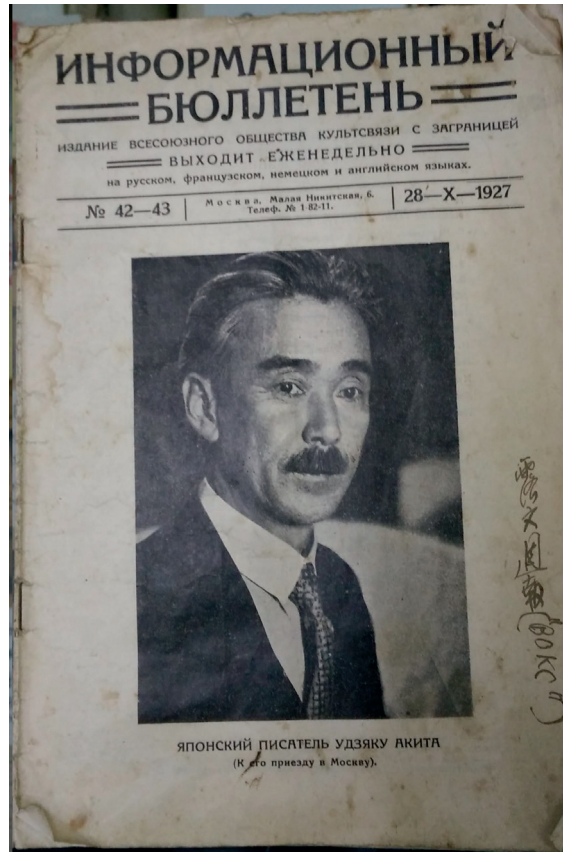
This situation began to change in the late 1920s. Socialism had retained a place within Esperanto in Japan since 1906, coexisting with all the other forms of *Esperantismo*, but in the 1920s an explicitly proletarian theory began to develop, seeded by ideas from the Soviet Union, arguing



A cover from *Kamarado*, a proletarian Esperanto magazine.

for a revolutionary form of Esperanto distinct from the existing 'bourgeois' movement. The two groups increasingly developed into distinct, parallel communities. The mainstream movement continued much as before, but the proletarian movement published its own textbooks, ran its own courses, and created its own organisations, tied to the wider proletarian arts movement. This was the product of both internal differences and external pressures – the state seeking to clamp down on organisations and individuals tied in any way to the communist movement or supported by Moscow. Those in the mainstream movement were understandably keen to distance themselves from the proletarian groups, and to show that Esperanto was not irredeemably left wing.

A good example of the socialist movement, and a nice counterpoint to Yanagita Kunio's experiences at the League of Nations, was a trip



Akita Ujaku on the cover of a Soviet magazine during his visit in 1927-28.

undertaken by Akita Ujaku to Moscow in 1927. Akita was a left wing playwright from Aomori, who had been introduced to Esperanto in the early Taishō period by Vassily Eroshenko, with whom he became close friends. He went to Moscow to attend the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. Although he went to Moscow already a committed Esperantist, while he was there he had a number of experiences which proved to him the real world potential of the language.

In response to the most high profile event for foreign delegates, the Congress for the Friends of the Soviet Union, Akita simply wrote 'language problems' in his diary. Akita, together with some leading



A poster for the 1940 Japanese Esperanto Congress, held in Miyazaki to coincide with the celebrations of the 2600th anniversary of Imperial rule.

Esperantists from Europe, sought to propose the use of Esperanto by the delegates to the Congress, but in the end it proved more successful in smaller scale personal encounters, leading to invitations to visit Soviet citizens' houses and clubs and workplaces, and giving him a window on the Soviet experiment he would otherwise not have had. He sang Esperanto songs on the train across Siberia, broadcast on Soviet radio in the language, and used it to communicate where otherwise he would have had to remain mute. For Akita, then, perhaps even more than Yanagita, Esperanto was a practical tool that allowed him to communicate in a transnational setting.

By the early 1930s, left wing Esperanto in Japan found it increasingly hard to operate, suppressed by the state and unable to organise legally. A

few individuals and small groups were still active, such as Hasegawa Teru, a Japanese woman who fled with her Chinese husband to China and continued to broadcast an anti-war message to the Japanese troops in China, or Saitō Hidekatsu, who began to develop ideas about the role of language in imperialism which have in recent years attracted new attention. However, these were scattered individuals and small groups in the regions: the national proletarian movement ceased to be a going concern.

On the other side of the debate, the mainstream, or 'neutral', movement found it rather easier than might be expected to reconcile ideas of Esperanto to the invasion of Manchuria, the war in central China and the increasingly oppressive domestic environment. Esperantists used the language to introduce the world to Japanese culture, Japanese literature, Japanese science, and also Japanese perspectives on world politics. They wrote translations of Japanese arts with a view to *kokumin gaikō*, 'citizen's diplomacy', or what we might now call 'soft power', and hoped to make use of the language to help the Western world get a better understanding of the role that Japan was playing in the East in order to understand why Japan felt it had to fight in China. Although it eventually turned inwards, no longer looking to connect overseas as it had for most of its history, this mainstream Esperanto practice continued right up until 1944.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show how the development of the Japanese Esperanto movement reflected wider interests in Japan's position in the world, and to recognise the problems faced by those seeking to make connections across nations, cultures and languages. Individuals such as Yanagita Kunio at the League of Nations or Akita Ujaku in Moscow found Esperanto to be a practical tool that might solve some of the problems they were experiencing, while at home a diverse group of Japanese turned to it in order to reflect their views and hopes for the world. Writing and reading magazines, exchanging letters across the globe, publishing poetry, scientific articles and political views; hosting radio programmes and receiving travellers from overseas; Japanese Esperantists put the language to a range of uses that was limited only by their imagination.

Notes

- 1 For example, Fukuzawa Yukichi (presumed), *Datsu-A Ron*, included as 'Goodbye Asia', in David Lu's *Japan: A Documentary History: The Late Tokugawa Period to the Present* (M. E. Sharpe, 1992), pp. 351–353; Nakae Chōmin, *A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government* (Weatherhill, 1992); Okakura Kakuzō, *Ideals of the East* (Dover, 2005).
- 2 Akira Iriye's *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Johns Hopkins, 1997) is one source of the idea of an international history which goes beyond states and state actors.
- 3 Counting the size of the Esperanto community (in Japan or worldwide) is a tricky problem. How active and how skilled does a person need to be in order to be considered an Esperantist? As a rough rule of thumb, the main Japanese organisation had somewhere between 1000 and 3000 members for most of the period up to 1945, but evidence from things such as sales of textbooks, uptake of radio courses, and figures from local clubs in towns and villages would suggest that there was a wider pool of people engaged with the language which was some multiple of this number.
- 4 Umberto Eco's *The Search For The Perfect Language* (Fontana, 1997) explores the Enlightenment history of philosophical language projects, while Arika Okrent's *In The Land Of Invented Languages* (Spiegel & Grau, 1999) is a mainstream book looking at the long history of planned languages taking in some of the more playful recent undertakings. A recent paper, (Detlev Blanke, 'How Not to Reinvent the Wheel... The Essential Scholarly Literature in Interlinguistics and Esperantology', *INDECS*, 13/5 (2015), pp.200-215) stresses the distinctions between these different types of planned language projects – those which remain experiments on paper, those created for recreation, and those with higher purposes in mind, for example – but the broad context of language invention is nevertheless a valid one.
- 5 Willem van der Heyden, *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 3rd January 1888.