

## Introduction

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What is the past? If this question is familiar to us, the answer can never be the same from one person to another. Some underline the richness of the knowledge about our past to construct our present and future; some deny this richness and recommend that we be liberated from it to create a better present and future. However, these two visions share the conviction that our present is under the influence of the past, even if we can never grasp this past entirely. Indeed, this mixture of presence and absence can be vital for our attachment to the past, an attachment to the past that not only is “a particular attention to the *facts* of the past, but also a questioning *of* the past as a foundation or a prominence of our present,”<sup>1</sup> according to Gianfranco Rubino, who adds, moreover, that this interest toward the past stimulates some interrogations and “makes history (or prehistory) much more than a theme or a backdrop: it is a vehicle for questioning, the source and goal of a quest and an investigation.”<sup>2</sup> Since ancient times, many people have thought about this particular nature of the past. Saint Augustine offered his own profound thoughts about time in his *Confessions* as follows:

What is now clear and unmistakable is that neither things past nor things future have any existence, and that it is inaccurate to say, “There are three tenses or times: past, present and future,” though it might properly be said, “There are three tenses or times: the present of past things, the present of present things, and the present of future things.” These are three realities in the mind, but nowhere else as far as I can see, for the present of past things is memory, the present of present things is attention, and the present of future things is expectation.<sup>3</sup>

Here, Saint Augustine clearly shows us the intimacy that we have with the past, intimacy existing in the very center of ourselves: whatever the time that we consider, we are always in our present. This explains why the past has become an inspiration

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<sup>1</sup> Rubino, Gianfranco (dir.). *Voix du contemporain. Histoire, mémoire et réel dans le roman français d'aujourd'hui*, « Studi e testi », n. 5. Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2006, p. 9. (The quotations from this work are translated by Chiara Ramero.)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Saint Augustine. *The Confessions*. Introduction, translation and notes by Maria Boulding. New York: Now City Press, 1997, p. 300.

not only for films, novels, fine arts, and games, but also for political or even military projects, which are matters having a great and urgent actuality for ourselves who consider this past.

However, this “ourselves” is a very complex object. As it is our memory, our perception is never neutral on any matter, because our perception is affected not only by our knowledge about the “facts” but also by our mental, emotional, and physical conditions and experiences and our cultural background. “Each society thinks ‘historically’ with its own instruments,”<sup>4</sup> said Michel de Certeau in 1975. In addition, even if historians want to be objective in their description of things past, they “work on a material to transform it into history [*en histoire*]”<sup>5</sup> and they can never be exempt from the influences of the major narratives of each period. If it is the historian’s relationship with a lived experience that allows him or her to revive the traces of a past, in the arts (works of fiction, paintings, films, etc.), this relationship is transformed into a narrative, weaving links between the different eras. “Thus, founded on the break between a past, which is its object, and a present, which is the place of its practice, history never ceases to find the present in its object, and the past in its practices,”<sup>6</sup> even beyond the historiographic field. Perhaps the past cannot exist if there is no present or future. Talking about the past is possible only when we are in our present and/or we expect our future.

The present volume is a record of the international conference, “The past as a source of imagination and inspiration: The strategy, function, and diversity of historical narratives,” held on February 27, 2020, at Tohoku University in Sendai. As we can see in this volume, we approached the past as a source of inspiration for literary, artistic, philosophical, and even social practice perspectives.

Our intellectual and cultural lives have always been inspired by the past. The contribution of Luo Han shows us how we can refer to past academic heritage, in this case, in Japanese linguistic and Japanese language education, to get out of the impasse of research and produce more sharable results, in this case, today’s world. In addition, Kuroiwa Taku illustrates the case of Ban Takeo, a Japanese philologist who specialized in French literature and worked most actively before WWII, who presupposed cultural transfer in the past and elaborated a method to translate literary works by valorizing the language of the culture of origin. Here, knowledge of the past language can be a great help to receive and incorporate foreign cultures. However, a historical figure can become an entertainment personality, reflecting social change, and promote new cultural creations. Fu Wenting analyzes the flexibility as well as the

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<sup>4</sup> De Certeau, Michel. *L’écriture de l’histoire*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, Folio Histoire, 1975, p. 96. (The quotations from this work are translated by Chiara Ramero. ) The word *histoire* also means “story” in French.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

continuity of the figure of Okita Sōji, a legendary swordsman of mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Japan, according to his contemporaries, the media, and the public. The past can also be a reference that we can follow to create a better society. According to Alain Hien, the appreciation of the jocular relationship described in the constitution of the Manding Empire in the 13<sup>th</sup> century has contributed to reducing conflicts in West African communities. The reappraisal of this traditional practice in the modern era is a real issue that promotes social cohesion. Finally, we can recognize a synthetic investigation in the contribution of Chiara Ramero, who analyzes the traces of the past in the work of the French writer Janine Teisson and, in particular, those of the past of the deaf community, in former and present times, in the novel *Écoute mon cœur* (“Listen to my heart”), indicating how the author lets these two periods overlap, in order to suggest to readers an idea of inclusion for a better future.

Even if the invitees of the Grenoble Alpes University, Marielle Devlaeminck, Chiara Ramero, and Mathieu Ferrand, could not attend this meeting because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are glad to publish this volume as proof of our international collaboration (named “TOGA: Tohoku-Grenoble Alpes”).

First of all, we thank Murayama Tatsuya and Lorenza Bottacin-Cantoni, who co-organized the meeting of February 2020, and contributed largely to inspire the authors of the volume with their remarks. In addition, we can never forget the members of the International Graduate Program of Japanese Studies (GPJS), especially Ozaki Akihiro, who opened the meeting, and Izumi Airin, who managed the day’s logistics. We also thank Wang Xinyong, Nishitate Kunie, Ōhashi Ryōsuke, and Kotegawa Shōjirō, whose presence contributed significantly to the day’s profound discussion. Finally, we express our gratitude for the financial support of Tohoku University through its cross-appointment system.