

Japan Search: Introducing a New Research Tool for Scholars of Japan and Its Region

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Pedro Iacobelli

The Japan Search Database

At a time when many libraries are struggling to maintain their budgets and collections and fieldwork travel is restricted, access to online research databases has become more important than ever for scholars around the world. This makes the new open access research tool ‘Japan Search’ (<https://jpsearch.go.jp/>) – launched in September 2020 – particularly welcome.

‘Japan Search’ is a portal website operated by Japan’s National Diet Library, linking the databases and catalogues of many university and regional libraries, the Japanese National Archives, museums and other public institutions. This means that a single keyword search can instantly track down material on your research topic across a wide range of archives. Though more recent material is often covered by copyright, so that your search will only locate the item, but not allow you to access its content online, for older material a large and growing number of books, documents, and images are fully accessible online; and the number is growing by the day.

The search system is still quite basic, and could usefully be further developed to allow more complex advanced searches using combinations of keywords. On the other hand, advantages of Japan Search include the fact that it is easily accessible and searchable in either English or Japanese (though the content is mostly in

Japanese), and that it provides helpful information on issues such as the copyright status of works and how to obtain permissions for reuse. A further handy function is a personal ‘bookshelf’, where you can store links to the material you are using, along with your notes on the material. (Look for the icon below, which is located on the top right-hand side of the main Japan Search screen) To add works to your shelf, click on the ‘heart’ icon on the main page for that item in the database.



There are also more advanced functions which allow researchers to work collaboratively on documents.

Here are a few samples of some of the material that we have been finding on ‘Japan Search’, to encourage others to explore its many possibilities.

We hope to expand this article with further

examples: Please inform us of ways to productively access Japan Search.

Research Use - Example 1 - Japan-South America relations (Pedro Iacobelli)

For the past five years, I have researched the ways in which Japan and the South American republics (particularly Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru) interacted during the early Showa period. I have directed special attention to diplomatic and economic relations, trying to visit the archives in Tokyo once every other year to copy documents and access materials that otherwise I would not be able to read or look at. In advance of each research trip, I surf a couple of online catalogues in an attempt to spot materials that may be useful. Since I started using Japan Search a few weeks ago, however, I have found books, photographs and maps of great value that are being kept in at least four different repositories. Although this may seem dry, I am collecting statistical information on Japan's trade with South America, On Japan Search. I have been able to access fully downloadable old books that explain in great detail the silk and cotton trade between Japan and Argentina and other countries. Also, a number of reports including copies of the original slips from the Latin American consulates in Japan describing the amount and price for each shipment. This is important because I can compare the Japanese data with trade statistics created in South America at the time and from there focus on the key actors behind the surge in trade between the two regions in the 1930s. I have enjoyed revising (and downloading) the published materials by the Nihonjū Nanbei Yushutsu Kumiai Rengokai (日本中南米輸出組合連合会); to my surprise, I could track its whole series of reports available not only in the National Diet Library, my usual starting point, but also in the National Museum of Ethnology.

The Japan Search allows searches across libraries thanks to its powerful search engine that connects over 100 databases, including digital archives from the National Archives of Japan and the National Diet Library and local repositories such as Eichi Library in Miyagi prefecture.

My favourite find on the system, however, is a photograph unrelated to my current research topic. Entitled “Sengohatsu no nanbei ijū hanayomei dan”, held in Nihon Shashin Hozon Sentaa. The picture—shot by Yoshida Jun from mid-range in the early postwar years—portrays a group of young Japanese brides embarking towards South America at the port of Yokohama. Not only was the trip to unknown (and sometimes unheard of) lands daunting, but it was also a common practice in those years for a bride to meet her future husband just before the wedding (as the next section mentions), making this sort of transoceanic voyage fraught with uncertainty for these young women. However, in this photograph, the voyager's gaze captures a moment of exhilarating emotions for the passengers. They wave their hands and Japanese flags to their relatives and friends at the wharf as the ship begins the journey. In most cases, these women never saw their loved ones in Japan again.



Source: 日本写真保存センター, Call No. 00002-00006-0015.

For foreign scholars, academic research on Japanese history involves overcoming several barriers, distance being one of the highest hurdles. As a scholar based in a country with a lack of Japanese studies material, let alone primary sources, the surge of electronic sources and the digitalization of libraries has granted me access to materials that otherwise I could only find in Japan, thus saving me precious time and research money (from public funds). Japan Search is another step in the democratization and dissemination of knowledge and I encourage other scholars to explore this tool and its many functions.

Research Use - Example 2 - Japanese and Ainu Explorers in Antarctica - A Meiji Era Expedition on Film (Tessa Morris-Suzuki)

I have been finding the Japan Search database a very valuable resource for an ongoing research project on the history of the indigenous people of Karafuto, but among the many wonderful resources I have encountered,

the stand-out item is the access that the database provides to *The Japanese Expedition to Antarctica* - a very early and remarkable example of Japanese documentary newsreel film-making, held by Japan's National Film Archive - Click on "Open in Source Archives" and then on "動画を見る"). This footage was taken by pioneering film-maker Taizumi Yasunao (1888-1960) and others in 1910-1912, during the first Japanese expedition to Antarctica, and was re-edited in 1950.

Though not widely remembered today, the expedition was an extraordinary, and in some ways a tragic, event. Its leader, Lt. Shirase Nobu (1861-1946), was an army officer with a single-minded determination to win a place for Japan in the competitive exploits of the twentieth century's so-called "heroic age" of polar exploration. In 1910, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen and British naval officer Robert Falcon Scott embarked on their race to be the first to reach the South Pole: a race that ended in triumph for Amundsen and disaster for Scott, who died with four of his companions in Antarctica in 1912. Shirase's expedition, which took place at the same time, received almost no support from the Japanese government, although it did have strong personal backing from elder statesman Okuma Shigenobu, and the venture was meagrely funded and rather poorly prepared.

One intriguing aspect of the expedition was the key role played by two Ainu men from Karafuto (Sakhalin) - Yayomanekuh (1867-1923, also known by the Japanese name Yamabe Yasunosuke) and Sisiratoka (dates unknown, Japanese name Hanamori Shinkichi). Shirase's exploration relied for transport on dog-sleighs obtained from Karafuto Ainu, who had been selectively breeding sleigh-dogs for centuries. Via the colonial *Karafuto Nichi-Nichi* newspaper, Shirase appealed to Ainu villagers to provide dogs for the expedition, and Yayomanekuh and Sisiratoka, who were senior figures in their respective villages, responded

by persuading their fellow villagers to lend their valuable animals to Shirase. The two men were recruited as dog-handlers, but ultimately became central figures in Shirase's small team of just thirteen explorers, performing a wide range of roles during the expedition.

The film includes scenes of the preparations for the expedition (including the training of the dog team in Tokyo's Ueno Park), Okuma and others farewelling the explorers, and shots of the expedition members in their fragile-looking vessel, the *Kainan-Maru*, as it heads towards the Antarctica. The team reached the continent in March 1911, but were forced back by thickening pack ice (vividly depicted in the film footage). Although this is not shown in the documentary, the expedition then retreated to Australia, where they spent seven months camping on the shores of Sydney harbour. Meanwhile, they had learnt that Scott and Amundsen were well ahead of them in the 'race for the pole', and so changed their aim from reaching the South Pole itself to conducting scientific exploration of then unknown areas of Antarctica. The footage included in *The Japanese Expedition to Antarctica*, despite its inevitably grainy quality, includes striking scenes of the explorers on the polar ice-cap and (more disturbingly) chasing penguins and seals through the frozen landscape. The final sections depict the expedition members stopping off briefly in Wellington, New Zealand, on the return journey, and then waving the Southern Cross flag (which they had adopted as their emblem) as they disembark on the wharf at Shinagawa in June 1912, greeted by rapturous crowds.

In fact, though, the achievements of the expedition were rather quickly forgotten by the Japanese media and public, and its events were overshadowed by tragedy. The team was poorly provided with food and had inadequate means of preserving the foodstuffs they took with them. As a result, many of the dogs died of food poisoning, and Shirase ordered that most of the

surviving animals were to be abandoned in Antarctica to preserve food for the human members of the exploration team – a decision which caused great grief to the Ainu dog-handlers.

An even greater tragedy befell Sisiratoka – a brilliant storyteller with a deep knowledge of Karafuto Ainu tradition. Sisiratoka was unmarried at the time of the expedition, and on his return, as a reward for the enormous hardships he had endured, a marriage was arranged for him with the daughter of another Japanese expedition member. This proved a disaster – his bride found it impossible to adapt to the drastically different environment of life in a remote Karafuto village and soon left Sisiratoka, who then seems to have sunk into depression and alcoholism. Around 1917, he was arrested for murdering a fellow villager and sentenced to fifteen years' hard labour. He was eventually released in the city of Sapporo, and appears to have died there, disgraced and utterly forgotten. There is no precise record of when or where he died, and no monument to his remarkable life. Yayomanekuh, meanwhile, dictated his memoirs to the Japanese ethnographer and linguist Kindaichi Kyōsuke, and the resulting book was published in 1913 in Japanese with *rubi* showing the Ainu language pronunciation of the words. The story of Yayomanekuh and Sisiratoka has recently attracted new attention because it is the focus of Kawagoe Sōichi's novel *Netsugen*, which won the 2020 Naoki Prize for Literature (though Kawagoe's novel, while it generally follows the outlines of Yayomanekuh's life quite closely, completely fictionalises the life of Sisiratoka).

The Japan Search database also provides access to [the diary kept by the Shirase expedition's official record-keeper Tada Keiichi](#), which contains photographs and maps of the expedition route –

The Japanese Expedition to Antarctica is, of

course, on one of a range of early visual materials accessible via the Japan Search database. Others include a digitally restored segments of of Japan's first film - [of an 1899 performance of the kabuki play Momijigari](#) - and [a 1900 film of a sumo tournament in Ryōgoku](#). As well as providing links to material in the National Film Archive, the database offers easy access to a number of valuable archives of visual material which may be less well known to researchers outside Japan: among them [the Niigata Regional Image Archive](#), which has a rich collection of photographs and film from the early 20th century, and most of whose materials can be used for not-for-profit educational activities. These include not only visual material related to Niigata's local history but also films ranging from 1930s family holiday movies to some haunting newsreel footage of Tokyo in the immediate aftermath of the Great Kanto

Earthquake.

For further information on the Japan Antarctic Expedition, see:

Nankyoku Tanken Kōenkai (Shirase Antarctic Expedition Supporters' Association, trans. and ed. Lara Dagnell and Hilary Shibata), *The Japanese South Polar Expedition, 1910-12: a Record of Antarctica*, Bluntisham, Bluntisham Books / Eccles, Erskine Press, 2011.

Satō Chūetsu, *Nankyoku ni Tatta Karafuto Ainu : Shirase Nankyoku Tankentai Hiwa*, Tokyo, Tōyō Shoten, 2004.

Yamabe Yasunosuke, *Ainu Monogatari*, Tokyo, Hakubunkan, 1913.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki is Professor Emerita of Japanese History at the Australian National University. Her current research focuses on the history of the indigenous people of the Okhotsk Sea region, and her most recent publications include [Japan's Living Politics: Grassroots Action and the Crises of Democracy](#) (2020), [On the Frontiers of History: Rethinking East Asian Borders](#) (2020) and [The Korean War in Asia: A Hidden History](#) (edited, 2018).

tmorrissuzuki@gmail.com

Pedro Iacobelli is Assistant Professor of History at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile. He is the author of [Postwar Emigration to South America from Japan and the Ryukyu Islands](#) and co-editor of *Transnational Japan as History: Empire, Migration and Social Movement* (2016).