

JSPS Research Experience

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I came to Japan in order to research the economic and ecclesiastical history of the period between the First and Second Crusades, building on my doctoral thesis that focused on political and cultural history. This fellowship was an ideal job to have immediately after my doctorate ended for several reasons, and I would hugely recommend it to anyone in a similar situation.

My supervisor, Prof. Otsuki, is a specialist in the period immediately preceding my own, and working with him was the first thing that attracted me to Japan. As it happened, he is also Dean of the University, which on the one hand meant that he had less time to work with me directly, but it also meant he was hugely supportive of me pursuing my own goals and giving feedback when he could. Over the last few years of the doctorate I had the ideas for many short projects, that in the name of staying focused on the thesis, teaching, and such, I had to set aside. This fellowship gave me the time to work on all those projects with the full support of a world expert, and the library resources at Hitotsubashi were as world class as I could need. I was in fact surprised that a social sciences specialist university in Tokyo had such a vast collection of medieval and Byzantine texts, and so if you're reading this, definitely take on board that this is a huge positive in carrying out research in Japan.

Though admittedly (and understandably) there were fewer conference and seminar events in western medieval history than in Europe and North America, with the support of JSPS, Hitotsubashi and Prof. Otsuki I was able to attend conferences in Serbia, the UK, Canada and Australia as well as Japanese events, bringing my research to a literally global audience. Equally, I had a hugely generous book budget, and so for the few books that were not in the library, Hitotsubashi were able to make up the shortfall. As such, in addition to conferences, I was able to publish three academic articles, and one media piece for a wider audience that gained 25,000 readers and was republished by multiple news outlets. Producing this amount of research in addition to my more long-term work on economic and ecclesiastical history, which together with my thesis will make up my planned monograph, would never have been possible without this research fellowship, and so I cannot recommend it enough.

When it comes to the Japanese academic environment, I would say it is much harder for humanities scholars than for scientists, if for no other reason than where my scientist colleagues were immediately provided with a lab group to work with and integrate into, as a humanities scholar you don't have that immediate support network provided for you. As such, you'll need to be a bit more pro-active about finding colleagues and friends than you might in a European or American institution, but that's where the fact that you're in Japan comes into it's own. Naturally the opportunity to travel around Japan and the rest of Asia is an incredible one, and it has led to some great experiences, as well as enhancing my research as I am currently writing global history pieces comparing Japan to Byzantium. On another note, I would say I was helped hugely by a British colleague on the faculty, who helped me out with the complexities of settling in, such as setting up a bank account, my residency card and all the rest. Finding someone similar should definitely be your priority as well, but JSPS were also there to help in case of further difficulties.

Overall, a great fellowship that I would recommend to anyone, and if you are a medieval or Byzantine scholar thinking about research in Japan, I'd be happy to advise you if you contact me at m.lau@oriel.oxon.org.



A photo of myself, my colleague Dr. Lewis who helped me out with all the things an expat need to know settling into Japan, and my supervisor Prof. Otsuki, outside the Hitotsubashi west campus (R->L)



Myself on a research trip investigating Japanese sites contemporary to my own period of research, this one at the Fushimi Inari Shrine just outside Kyoto.