

EVENT SUMMARY:

Book launch

Tango in Japan: Cosmopolitanism Beyond the West

With Author Dr Yuiko Asaba

Wednesday 5 March 2025

Dr Yuiko Asaba's Talk:

Thank you to the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation for kindly hosting a book launch event for my book, 'Tango in Japan: Cosmopolitanism Beyond the West'. To briefly introduce my background, I am a music scholar with a specific focus on looking at Latin American music in East Asia, currently specializing in Argentine tango. I am also trained as a tango violinist in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I performed as a tango musician for many years after having been educated as a violinist in Japan. I moved to the UK at the age of 13. My aunt in Japan is an important figure as a tango violinist in Japan. Before I left for the UK as a child, I grew up surrounded by tango in Japan. This background became a fundamental embodied knowledge before I embarked on my research on tango in Japan.

Let us briefly look at the historical overview of tango in Japan. Just to briefly introduce tango in Argentina itself, around 1870 was the beginnings of tango as a genre in Buenos Aires, in the Boca area of Buenos Aires. It quickly spread internationally and arrived in Japan in 1914. Japan's first tango performances were in Yokohama and Tokyo in 1914. Between 1946 to the late 1970s was the so-called Japanese 'Golden Era of Tango' where many post-war tango stars were born and very active. They also toured Argentina as well as Europe and America from Japan as tango musicians from Japan. From the 1980s onwards, many new tango groups continue to emerge in Japan. I will introduce many young tango musicians in Japan, for example, Hayakawa Jun here performing in Tokyo in 2022, who is a formidable bandoneonist. Also Kawanami Yukie - she's very creative with her new tango outputs, also a bandoneon player.

Why do Japanese people love tango so much? One Argentine musician turned around to ask me this question during a tango orchestra rehearsal in Buenos Aires in 2008. I was living in the bustling capital

city of Argentina, Buenos Aires, performing as a violinist with the Orquesta Nacional de Música Argentina Juan de Dios Filiberto. This question was asked by this colleague, pictured on the PowerPoint here. This picture is from the time I toured with this tango orchestra at the Festival Nacional del Tango de la Falda in the province of Córdoba in Argentina. This was the orchestra with which I performed, and this colleague used to turn around to ask me these questions about tango in Japan.

As I conducted fieldwork while living as a tango musician in Buenos Aires for over five years, my background as a Japanese individual inspired many friends in Buenos Aires to ask me questions similar to the above: “Why tango in Japan?” These questions were often followed by personal anecdotes from tango concert tours that they had undertaken across Japan, or stories they had heard about concerts given by Japanese tango musicians in Argentina. Such stories about tango in Japan during my fieldwork, together with my embodied experiences of working as a tango violinist in Argentina and in Japan, revealed to me the significance of tango in Japan embedded in the Trans-Pacific Japan-Argentina connections that have bypassed the Euro-American West dating back from the early 20th century to the present day. This research on the transoceanic musical connections between Japan and Argentina eventually became my book.

To briefly touch on the idea of cosmopolitanism that is in the title of my book, my idea of cosmopolitanism in this work is that it embodies the multiple layers of tension in aspiring to belong to the world. It illuminates the constant processes that go in between attraction and rejection, the multiple aspects of inclusion and exclusion in these processes. In my book, I show this tension of cosmopolitan endeavours outside of the Euro-American West.

I will now introduce you to the contents of my book. I start with the preface, ‘why tango in Japan’, really unpacking my background as a tango musician, also having grown up surrounded by tango until the age of 13 in Japan. I also explain how that impacted my positionality in the research. Also, in the introduction, I unpack the notion of cosmopolitanism that I employ in this book, and also the history of the Japan-Argentina connection. The first chapter is titled ‘Authenticating Tango in Japan’. The second chapter deals with regulating and also fashioning the body through tango, so looking at the dresses that the tango performers wear in Japan. The third chapter looks at ‘Knowledge, Patronage, and Japanese Tango Fandom’. The fourth chapter, ‘Performing emotion and the idea of middle culture in post-World War II Japan’ in the high brow, middle brow, low brow, that sort of way of measuring cultures. The fifth chapter, looking at the institutionalization of tango in Japan. In conclusion, looking at tango and cosmopolitanism in Japan as concluding thoughts.

In today's talk, I will highlight three moments out of such cosmopolitan endeavors that I discuss in my book. First, the history of the Japan-Argentina nexus in the early 20th century. Second, aspects of regulating tango's dancing bodies in Japan. Third, performing emotion through tango.

Argentine tango has been internationally popular since the start of the 20th century. In Japan, tango was introduced from the Euro-American social dance circles as a modern practice during Japan's so-called modernization in the 1910s, attracting curiosities and interests from across Japanese society. Despite tango's initial introduction via Europe and North America, however, Japanese musicians and dance aficionados quickly turned to Argentina in search of tango's so-called origin from as early as the 1920s. In Japan today, Argentine tango is widely performed in concert venues, tango milonga parties, and expensive bars and restaurants that are dedicated only to offering tango music played by live bands every night. Tango is popular among the younger generations of Japanese people, as seen by the thriving tango orchestra, 'Orchestra de Tango Waseda' at Waseda University in Tokyo, a student-led professional tango orchestra that performs in major concert venues and at dinner shows. Today there are around 20 professional tango ensembles and over 50 tango fan associations across Japan. I analyzed the constructions of Japanese tango scenes in chapter five of my book.

So, at this moment, let us now watch a performance of tango in Japan, performed by Japanese tango dancers, Ryo and Hazuki, the dancers who are featured on the cover of my book, and tango ensemble 'Astrorico' in Japan, who are also featured on the book cover. This performance featured a libertango, an iconic tango piece by the legendary Astor Piazzolla.

At this point, I would like to talk about tango in Japan as integral to the early histories of modernization of Japan. Critical to note is that in Japan's historical processes of internationalization in the early 20th century, tango came to be perceived by Japanese dance aficionados and musicians as a modern new vehicle of expression. The Japanese historical embrace of the modern therefore also looked beyond the West. While writings on Latin America had appeared earlier in Edo and Meiji geographical studies, Japan's interest in Latin America proliferated in the Taishō period from around 1912. Amid these rising interests and imaginations surrounding Latin America and Japan, on February 3, 1898, Japan and Argentina concluded the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation, establishing a diplomatic relation between the two countries.

At this time, Argentina and Japan were involved in modernising efforts to establish unwavering positions in the international communities. The Japan-Argentina connection was intertwined with each other's modernising horizons from the start, and key historical events to remember here involving the mass Japanese migration to Latin America. Japanese emigration to Latin America from the late 19th century was motivated by Japan's entry into takushoku colonial politics and the Japanese

government's attempts to tackle increasing rural poverty in 10th century Japan. The Japanese state politically encouraged Japanese rural farmers to cultivate foreign lands and to export their products back to Japan. In particular, the so-called ABC countries, namely Argentina, Brazil, Chile, were Japan's target interests. A significant amount of financial data on the ABC countries was collected as a result of this interest.

Extensive studies on Latin America in Japanese governmental writings began to appear and exoticized images of Latin America in the Japanese popular press followed, playing key roles in creating the Japanese imagination surrounding Latin America. Precisely around this time, tango-like dances in silent films, such as the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse', released in Japan in 1922, and 'Blood and Sand', released in Japan in 1923, both featuring Rudolf Valentino, sonically and visually shaped early 20th century Japanese imaginations of Argentina and Argentine masculinity. Just prior to the releases of these films in Japan, tango dance arrived in Japan in the 1910s via the Euro-American social dance networks.

An article appeared on the 14th of August 1913 in the morning edition of the Tokyo Asahi Shimbun newspaper. The report, titled 'The Euro-American Scandalous New Dance Towards the Collapse of Public Order,' stated that the new dancers, which included tango, were "tormenting the European and North American fashionable circles". The Japanese article then concluded "it is not mistaken to say that tango will cause public moral corruption in our Japanese society". The photo on the PowerPoint here titled 'Scandalous Dance in the West,' one of the sexual dances, the dance of tango, portrayed North American dancers Florence Walton and Maurice Mouvet dancing the tango as an accompanying feature of the article that was published just a few days before. Despite discourses in Japan surrounding the corrupting nature of such dance, tango arrived in Japan the following year, in 1914, for a diplomatic gathering, thereafter causing a sensation across Japanese society.

One of the first performances of tango was given by dancers Mrs. Weldon, known to be an eminent tango dancer in the United States, and her son at a ball held in a grand hotel in Yokohama on the 5th of May 1914. Their performance was demonstrated to 60 foreign guests with a few Japanese officials present. The following comment by the American dancer herself, quoted in this Japanese article, caught my particular attention: "Tango dance is not vulgar. When it is danced by an elegant person, it becomes elegant. But when someone vulgar dances it, it turns into a vulgar dance." Through the use of the dichotomy, the elegant-vulgar binary here, the class and racial discourses surrounding the reception of tango is observable here.

Tango's introduction in Japan signalled one of the first instances in which the two words, 'elegant' and 'vulgar', directly translated into Japanese, 'eleganto' and 'varuga' were used publicly, and the arrival of

ideas surrounding this dichotomy regarding foreign entertainment and social manners set out by Japanese elites. Through these opposing ideas of elegance and vulgarity, tango in Japan represented a cosmopolitan yet dangerous other: a hugely attractive idea signalling modernity while at the same time threatening public order. Yet perhaps precisely because of the attraction of these combined ideas of danger and elegance that tango quickly gained popularity among the wider social classes in Japan from the 1910s, rapidly turning the public's eyes and ears to Argentina in search for Tango's origins from the 1920s.

For example, one of the key figures who introduced the Argentine style of tango dance to Japan, as opposed to the Euro-American version of tango, was the Japanese kimono shopkeeper Hyojiro Kato, through his aspiration to study what he called the roots of tango, by traveling to Buenos Aires in November 1934. In May 1935, Kato returned to Japan, bringing back not only tango dance knowledge, but many tango records, preparing the ground for a wide dissemination of this recorded music in Japan through major record companies across Japan, like Victor Records, etc. A figure like Baron Megata Tsunayoshi, for example, is another influential figure who introduced tango that was popular in Paris at this time to the Japanese aristocracy from the late 1920s. Tango dancing and tango music making became immensely popular in venues such as dance halls, cafes, and cabarets across Japan. Yet the elegance-vulgar binary surrounding tango in Japan was to be reflected further in the regulation of tango's dancing bodies in Japan.

During my field research in Japan in 2014, I encountered intriguing news that as of 2012, tango had become the target of regulation under the law known in Japanese in abbreviated form as the 'Fueiho Law', in English, 'The Act on Control and Improvement of Amusement Business'. The reenactment of this 1948 law led to arrests of many dance establishment owners in 2012 in Japan and resulted in the subsequent organization of pressure groups and dance support associations in Japan who protested against the application of this law to dance establishments. This movement led to a cluster of these laws that had included regulations on couple dances, including tango, being revised in 2015, leading to the final removal of police regulations regarding tango and couple dances from Japanese law in 2016.

What is the Fueiho Law? It was established in 1948, three years after Japan's defeat of World War II, at a congress held by the Japanese Parliament, prompted by the US occupying authorities during the Allied occupation of Japan, "to control public chaos and moral disorder" after the war. The public chaos referred to the sexual violence by the occupying servicemen on the Japanese citizen and derived in particular by the pressing concerns of the U.S. occupying forces to suppress the spread of venereal disease among the U.S. Servicemen who frequented establishments such as the so-called 'Special Comfort Facility Association', which was established across Japan at this time, as well as dance halls,

cabarets, and other entertainment Establishments, such as what was known as ‘special restaurants’, all catered for the occupying servicemen.

I now return to the 2010s when this law was re-enacted to regulate couple dancing, leading to the revisions of this law once again in the contemporary context. The pressure groups and dance support organisations in Japan who protested against this application of the Fueiho Law to dance establishments argued that prostitution no longer takes place in dance venues. In 2012, however, the National Police Agency published a part of the text from the official enquiry, along with the agency's response to this process. Stating that, “such traits dependent upon circumstances would trigger excessive pleasures between men and women, which will harm a benign and clean moral environment”.

As a reaction to tango having become the target of this law, a tango federation was established in Japan to provide nationally approved certificates for tango dancers to teach in Japan. This association not only provides the right to teach tango, but enables certified individuals to organise milonga dance parties while keeping their dance schools legally protected under the relevant category of the law. This tango federation continues to exist after tango's removal from police regulations that holds a certain authority among Japanese tango dancers. This defines the institutionalisation of tango in contemporary Japan, where an institution of teaching works as a legitimisation of tango.

Now I will move on to aspects of emotion. In Argentina, it is believed that in Argentine tango, a sense of intimacy is created in part through its expression of everyday feelings. For some, according to anthropologist Julie Taylor, a shared sense of bad luck in life that is perceived to have universal implications. It has quite a similar aesthetic to Enka in Japan, for example. In Japan, this aesthetic of emotion in tango performance has been adopted since the immediate years after World War Two. Throughout the history of Argentine tango in Japan, Japanese tango music aficionados and musicians have cultivated a discourse or narratives surrounding tango's associated aesthetics of emotion. These narratives of tango and emotion became further established in Japan in the years immediately after the end of World War II, a time when embracing the idea of modernity once again became the crucial ethos to rebuild Japan after its defeat in the war. Various Argentine tango music associations that were founded across Japan at this time nurtured this narrative surrounding tango and emotion through discussions in the widespread publications on Argentine tango in Japanese popular presses and via the Argentine tango music radio programs that were established during this war across Japan.

In this popular narrative, being able to convey a powerful emotion came to be considered a key factor in a good tango performance in Japan. These narratives surrounding tango and emotion in post-war Japan also nostalgically look back to before World War II, when tango was popular in Japan in the 1930s. In the 1930s, the well-known Argentine tangos like ‘La Comparsita’ and ‘Poema’ became huge

hits among the Japanese public. The two tango songs were to be recorded as part of a popular Japanese tango song after the war, reminiscing the pre-war era that has not yet experienced the utter destruction of World War II.

The outbreak of World War II led to the closure of dance halls and prohibition of popular entertainments across Japan, including ballroom dancing and other genres imported from the United States, such as jazz, due to the political climate at this time. However, tango, which was considered by the Japanese authorities to be distinct from what they called ‘the music of the enemy countries’, continues to warm Japanese people’s hearts in private settings even during the war. This familiarity with tango, being rooted in Japanese people’s everyday lives at this time, before and during the war, became a key incentive for the tango boom, the Golden Era of Tango in Japan, that followed the end of the war from the late 1940s to the 1970s.

Accordingly, Japan’s Golden Era of Tango not only refers to its boom after the war, but also to the era when tango represented comfort and hope at a time of political turbulence and tremendous threat to lives. So here are some key figures here of Japan’s golden era of tango. Fujisawa Ranko, who was dubbed in Argentina to be the diva of tango from Japan, who toured Argentina and Europe. Sakamoto Masaichi, another prominent Bandoneon player here on the left. Abo Ikuo, another key figure from the Golden Era of Tango, who toured with Fujisawa Ranko to Buenos Aires many times. Hayakawa Shimpei, who is also a bandoneon player, who led ‘Orquesta Típica Tokyo’ and toured Argentina across Latin America many times with his wife, Fujisawa Ranko, as the singer.

At this point, my attention turns to the emotionality in the voice of Japanese tango singer, the late Abo Ikuo. Abo Ikuo began singing Tango during Japan’s Golden Era of Tango and performed right up until his passing in 2021. Abo’s iconic position as a celebrated tango singer is evident from the description about his voice that many of his fans called expressive and beautiful, “a voice that directly reaches the audience’s heart”. His mastery of Buenos Aires Spanish, considered a critical ability in being able to express tango sentiment, and his ability to adapt tango’s emotional aesthetics for a Japanese audience, capturing the hearts of his fans and wider audiences, had made him a star in Japan.

I was fortunate to interview Abo Ikuo back in July 2015, and I was, of course, eager to learn more about the sentiment in his voice at this interview. During what became a four-hour interview, Abo Ikuo mentioned the word ‘sentimiento’, the Spanish word for sentiment, many times, and that even in his first tango vocal lesson back in the early 1950s, his teacher, who was an Argentine bandoneon player who resided in Japan in 1950s, told him that, “you have a sentimiento in your voice”. Abo repeated this particular phrase many times during our interview. Each time he repeated this phrase in Japanese, Abo enunciated the Spanish word ‘sentimiento’ with Spanish pronunciation and as though reciting a tango

lyric, creating an elusive feeling while emphasizing the importance of emotion as a key aesthetic of tango performance. With his facial nerve neuralgia, with which he was diagnosed in his early 20s, Abo recalled how he first discovered the pronunciation for the letter J or 'Jota', the Spanish throat sound that does not exist in Japanese language, through the physical limitation made inevitable by his severe facial paralysis.

Abo demonstrated how he pronounces the letter J in Spanish Jota, saying 'Jota', with his mouth slightly tilted towards the right, finding the precise position of the airflow in his mouth in order to pronounce it. He said, "if it had not been for my facial paralysis, I would not have met tango", explaining to me that his illness is what he called 'one of the life ingredients' that created the sentiment in my voice. I will now play a video recording of Abo Ikuo performing the tango classic 'En Esta Tarde Gris', which translates to: On This Grey Afternoon. This was televised in Mexico via Teleritmo, which was a broadcasting company in Mexico at this time in 1967.

Entangled with aspects of Euro-American modernity, Argentine tango was first brought to Japan through Western social dancing and quickly created a Japan-Argentina connection as early as the late-1920s. Japanese performers have embraced this foreign genre as a vehicle of new expressivity. Tango devotees in Japan have digested this knowledge, creating and nourishing a distinctly Japanese tango culture. The sounds of tango have provided comfort and a sense of hope to many during the most turbulent years of the 20th century. Over the course of more than a century, this genre has entered the hearts and accompanied the joy and suffering of many Japanese people.

In my book, therefore, I have sought to illuminate not only the 'why' of tango in Japan, but also the 'how', revealing the histories and contemporary dynamics of aspiration, desire, rejection, hope, entangled with racial and class tensions, and the internal regional complexities that continue to shape Japan's Tango Wells. Thank you very much.