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Jeffrey Angles

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[Dr. Jeffrey Angles](#)
Assistant Professor
of Japanese
WMU Faculty International Researcher



Dr. Jeffrey Angles likes to describe himself as the accidental professor because, unlike many people he knows who planned to become teachers when they completed their educations, he was more focused on the immediate goal of studying Japanese literature and translating. In the process of reading so much, he says that he found himself with a Ph.D. almost before he knew it.



It was a study abroad experience in Japan as a 15-year-old that eventually directed him to a career path that landed Angles at WMU as an associate professor of Japanese literature, language and translation studies in 2004. He now also serves as director of the University's Japanese language program and the Michitoshi Soga Japan Center.

“As a teacher, I would be very bored if I was teaching this stuff and thought it wasn't making a difference or that I wasn't connecting with students,” Angles said. “I realize very few students are going to go on and specialize in Japanese literature—it's not my goal to make scholars of Japanese literature. My goal is to show people that there's this big world out there so intimately connected—full of business, cultural and historical connections. People don't always realize that

understanding the connections between our lives and those of other people makes everyone's lives richer. When I see students responding to that knowledge, I love it."

In addition to courses about Japanese cultural history and literature, he also often teaches Japanese 1000. "Students see my face and they realize a non-native speaker can do it," he said. "It's my belief that in the first semester or two students decide if they will be a Japanese major or minor, so I think it's important to be enthusiastic and show how much fun it can be."

Japanese literature has become the focus of Angles' research, and he has earned international recognition in that field. In just the last year, he has received invitations to give special lectures at several universities in the U.S., Japan, Australia, and Germany, and he has participated in conferences in England and Estonia. Areas of interest include the history of translation and translation theory in Japan, expressions of romance, sexuality, and desire—especially same-sex desire—in Japanese literature, and the development of modern and contemporary Japanese poetry.



In 2009, Angles received the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature, and in 2011, he received the Landon Translation Award from the American Academy of Poets. Both of these prizes were for his translation "[Forest of Eyes: Selected Poems of Tada Chimako](#)." Another book of translations, "Killing Kanoko: Selected Poems of Hiromi Itō," published in 2009 by Action Books, was a finalist in the poetry category of the Best Translated Book Award offered by Three Percent. During the 2009-2010 academic year, he served as a visiting professor to conduct a major research project on the cultural history of translation in Japan by invitation of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto.

Angles has won grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the PEN American Center for his translation of the memoirs of the contemporary poet Mutsuo Takahashi. In 2008, he was invited to the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. to serve as the curator for the literary events in the Japan: Culture+Hyperculture Festival. He has also been interviewed on NPR's "All Things Considered" about the short story collection "Japan: A Traveler's Literary Companion," which he co-edited with J. Thomas Rimer.

Angles' translation of Takahashi's "Twelve Views for the Distance," is due out in 2012 from University of Minnesota Press. Angles describes the book as a coming-of-age memoir in which the author recalls the Japanese empire, living through World War II, the extreme poverty created by the war, and the post-war years as the country began to get back on its feet.



It's a story of a boy who grew up in poor rural southwest Japan very far away from any big cities," said Angles of the book he first read in 1995. "He describes all sorts of major events through

the eyes of a child. For some time, Takahashi lived near the seashore, where the allies had heavily mined the sea. He recalls hearing explosions, running to the shore to watch ships burn and sink, then swimming out to salvage the fish killed by the explosions. The war, which of course was a very ugly thing, was incredibly weird and exciting from a kid's point of view. It's a beautifully written memoir full of surprising and interesting moments like that."

Translations involve a strange kind of torturous love, says Angles. He said it takes a long time to do one well because the translator needs to produce the translation with the same aesthetic impression as the original manuscript. That is not always easy, especially when languages are as radically different as Japanese and English. Translating Takahashi's memoir was a six-year project Angles started in 2005 and completed in many, tiny increments of a half hour or more of uninterrupted time.

"I sat in a room with my dictionaries, the Internet, Microsoft Word and my computer," he said. "This particular translation was especially challenging because Takahashi grew up in rural southern Japan, speaking a dialect of Japanese that's very unlike the standard Japanese most people speak. He's bi-dialectic. When he was at home, he would speak in a really heavy dialect that outsiders can't understand very well, and the book represents that speech phonetically. I decided that if I translate it into the English of southern Ohio or West Virginia, which is a dialect I know and can speak, it would sound really weird to readers from California or England. What I decided to do for the passages in dialect was to render them in a colloquial language with lots of contractions, but not with so much slang that it begins to sound like it's from one particular place. I didn't want it to sound too absurdly tied to one particular place. It was incredibly difficult to get the right tone."



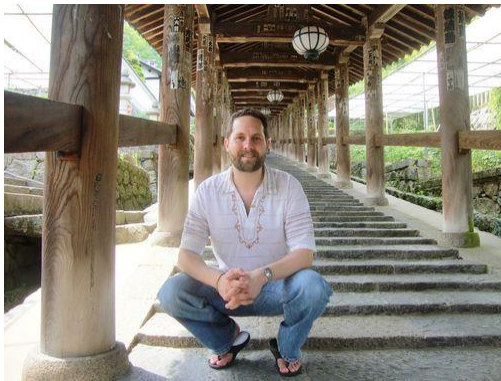
Angles said translating and researching literature offers a way to learn about a culture from the inside—to hear what people are saying about their country, its history and their experiences. "Literature is one of the most important artifacts of cultural history," he said.

Much has been written about Japanese prose, but Angles said there has been relatively little translation of and research conducted on Japanese poetry—a genre that is so popular that almost all newspapers, from the local to the national level, feature a poetry column.

"My interest in Japanese poetry has emerged in recent years," he said. "Through the course of my research I realized that poetry is the least studied genre of writing in Japan. I thought that was very bizarre because people in Japan read a lot of poetry. It's an important way that they engage in self-expression."

He's also interested in the expressions of ideology in the modernist Japanese literature of the

1920s and 1930s, when Japan had attained status as a “modern society” and had become as powerful as some European nations.



“Japan had turned into an adult nation and was wondering: what are we doing? Who are we? It was an incredibly interesting time,” he said. “People were thinking about all sorts of things—what kind of nation they wanted to become, how they wanted to live, what emphasis they should place on human rights, what role women should play in society. They were rethinking everything about their society. Literature from that period is so interesting and provocative; it gives you tons to talk about.”

Another key research interest for Angles is the representation of same-sex desire in Japanese literature, which was prompted in his college years when there was an ever-increasing amount of scholarly interest in studying the history of how people think about relationships between members of the same sex.

“At the time, there was a lot of fiction about same-sex desire, but no broad-ranging studies,” he said. “When I asked my advisor to point me to some reference materials about both same-sex friendships and erotic relationships, he said there weren’t any available. I set out to write one.”

Angles earned his Ph.D. in 2004 with a dissertation about representations of male homoeroticism in the literature of Kaita Murayama and the popular writer Ranpo Edogawa. This is the basis for his book, “Writing the Love of Boys,” published in 2011 by University of Minnesota Press.

From the relatively flat topography of his boyhood home in Columbus, Ohio, Angles traveled for the first time to mountainous Japan when he was 15 as a high school foreign exchange student. He lived for three months in the small, southwestern Japanese city of Shimonoseki in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

“I traveled to rural southwest Japan...I'd been to the ocean twice, but I was sent to a small port town with lots of fisherman, and I stayed there where the mountains practically rise out of the sea—it was incredibly dramatic and beautiful,” he said. “The landscape was amazing. As I fell in love with my surroundings, I knew without a doubt that I wanted to be successful at reading and writing Japanese. I knew I had to come back.”

He found every reason to travel back to Japan, including working as an intern at a car parts company and a coordinator for international relations in a local government office. Upon his return to the U.S., he was hired by another Japanese company, which helped Angles realize that working in the business world was not exactly what he wanted to do.

“I thought about going to work with the State Department, but



decided against it,” he said. “So, I decided on a whim to attend graduate school and I was accepted at Ohio State with a full fellowship. That was the same place where I had earned my bachelor’s degree in Japanese and international studies.”

He completed a master’s degree in Japanese literature in 1997 and his Ph.D. in 2004.

In September 2011, Angles was named director of WMU’s Michitoshi Soga Japan Center, a community resource as well as a venue for coalescing research and scholarly activity at WMU that focuses on Japanese language and culture.

He was also co-author of a recent grant application to the Japan Foundation’s Institutional Project Support Program with colleague, Dr. Stephen Covell, professor of comparative religion, which netted a \$140,000 award to enhance Japanese studies at WMU. The University was one of just eight institutions nationwide selected to receive a share of the nearly \$2 million awarded by the foundation for its 2011-12 award cycle. The grant will help fund a regional outreach coordinator position for the Japan Studies Program, as well as a faculty position in premodern Japanese culture and two workshops each year. Those initiatives already receive major support from the university’s Diether H. Haenicke Institute for Global Education and College of Arts and Sciences.



Story by Nate Coe

[Jeffrey Angles ジェフリー・アングルス webpage](#)