

NEWS

NATIONAL

Romania's Japan education 'mother' going strong

BY HIROTSUGU AIDA KYODO NEWS

Angela Hondru is called the "mother of Japanese-language education" in Romania for her role in saving Japanese studies from extinction in her country in the 1970s and for her more than 30 years of dedication to the field since then.

Hondru was born in Deva in western Romania in 1944 and graduated from Bucharest University. She taught English at elementary and junior high schools before serving as a Japanese-language instructor at People's University and Bucharest University of Economics.

Hondru assumed her current professorship of Japanese literature and civilization at Hyperion University in 1997.

She has published numerous books on Japan, including "An Invitation to Japanese Literature," and has translated the works of famous modern novelists, including Natsume Soseki, Osamu Dazai, Yukio Mishima, Kobo Abe and Haruki Murakami.

She had little contact with Japan until 1975, when she saw a Japanese painting in India ink at an art museum in the Romanian capital. It was two years after she had become an English teacher following graduation from the school of English literature at Bucharest University.

"I was moved by its brushwork that was bold but subtle and simple," she said during a recent visit to Tokyo. "I was more surprised later when I saw a picture scroll depicting scenes from 'Genji Monogatari' ('The Tale of Genji') at the academy art museum."

Hondru, 64, recalled that in 1975, when Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu visited Japan, the nation's lone TV channel — which only broadcast from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. — devoted 30 minutes to a special program on Japan. She said the program showed bullet trains, expressways, the ancient capitals of Kyoto and Nara, Mount Fuji and geisha.

She attended a Japanese-language course at People's University taught by a Japanese Embassy staffer proficient in Romanian. Initially, 89 students attended the night class, using handmade teaching materials.

But two years later, she was the only student attending the class and after the diplomat returned home, she became his successor because there was no one else to do it.

"I spent seven to eight hours preparing for a 90-minute lesson," she said. "More than 30 years have passed since I started learning Japanese. The more I studied Japanese culture and literature, the more I fell in love with them."

But Hondru is more attracted to Japanese folklore. Her great uncle was a Romanian folklore scholar and in his fieldwork he took her to various parts of her country during her childhood.

"He was like (Japanese folklore scholar) Kunio Yanagida," Hondru said, referring to the father of Japanese folklore studies and the author of "Tono Monogatari" ("Tales of Tono"). "He told me many interesting stories. Influenced (by him), I am researching comparative Romanian and Japanese folklore," she said.

"There are many things in common (between Romania and Japan) in wedding ceremonies and funeral rites. For example, small change is placed in a casket. In Japan (it is for the departed to go across) the River of Three Crossings en route to the other world. In Romania it is the fare for the deceased to cross the river."

A recipient of the 2008 Japanese Foreign Ministry Prize, Hondru said people live their traditions such as the annual summer Bon festival and the New Year's holidays without being aware of them.

She noted particularly "kagura" festivals in Okayama Prefecture and Miyazaki Prefecture, which she called "wonderful." Hondru came to Japan in 2005 as a Japan Foundation Fellow to research kagura, a type of Shinto theatrical dance dedicated to shrine gods.

Referring to the Bichu Kagura festival in Okayama Prefecture, she said: "Young people working in urban areas return on weekends and take part in practice. On the day of the festival, they start in the afternoon and it lasts until the next morning. I watched it all three years ago. They were really serious and earnest."

Hondru said she wants Japanese to protect their traditional culture and identity: "I am concerned about young people, who seem to be a bit more interested in globalized culture. This goes for Romania, too."

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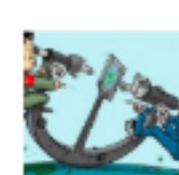
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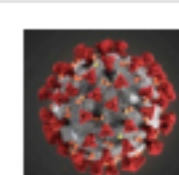
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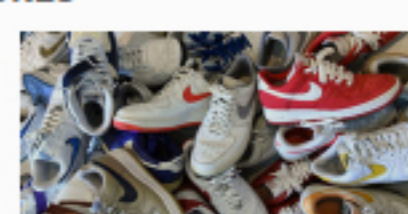


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