



**University of
Zurich^{UZH}**

Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies – Japanese Studies



Tradition Adrift: The Institutionalization of Cultural Heritage Appreciation in Modern Japan

Thursday, 22 October 2026, 16:15-17:45

Room KOL-E-21, Rämistrasse 71, 8006 Zürich

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Abstract

Why do Kyoto and Nara seem natural places to encounter “Japanese culture” today? This question concerns how cultural practices become linked to national identity within the nation-state. It asks how cultural heritage appreciation became institutionalized in modern Japan. Rather than treating heritage policy, mass media, tourism, and school excursions as independent causes, it traces their changing connections from the late nineteenth century through the postwar period.

State heritage designation created an institutional foundation, while mobility and print media opened possibilities for travel and interpretation. Yet wartime mass mobility did not automatically produce mass heritage appreciation. Japan’s defeat and the Occupation severed links between school travel and pilgrimage to imperial sacred sites. Schools, families, travel agencies, railways, and media were reconnected. Through repeated postwar school excursions, both the routes to Kyoto and Nara and the ways of seeing temples, Buddhist statues, and historic sites as cultural heritage became increasingly taken for granted.

I distinguish empirical findings from sociological interpretation: cultural national identity can be reproduced through repeated everyday practices, not only through explicit ideology. This shifts attention from the “invention” of tradition to its persistence. I call tradition’s long-term persistence through changes in meaning, practice, actors, and institutional support “Tradition Adrift.”

Short Bio

Akimasa Suganuma is an Associate Professor at Kyushu Sangyo University (Fukuoka, Japan) and currently a Visiting Researcher at Ruhr University Bochum. He is a historical sociologist specializing in tourism, cultural heritage, and nationalism in modern Japan. His research examines how particular ways of seeing and experiencing cultural heritage become socially established and reproduced through institutions such as education, tourism, transportation, and media. His recent monograph, *Tradition Adrift: A Historical Sociology of School Excursions and Cultural Heritage Appreciation* [流転する伝統：修学旅行と文化財鑑賞の歴史社会学] (Shinyosha, 2026) [in Japanese], traces how visiting Kyoto and Nara to appreciate cultural heritage became a taken-for-granted cultural practice in modern Japan. His current research extends these questions comparatively to industrial heritage and collective memory in Japan and Germany.

