

Hiroshi Shoji 1949–2023

One of the foremost Japanese experts on Finland and adjacent regions, Hiroshi Shoji (庄司博史) passed away after a prolonged illness on 4 May 2023, at the age of 73. He was born in Osaka on 24 August 1949, and moved in the early 1970s to Finland, where he completed his bachelor's degree at the University of Helsinki in ethnography and linguistics, including the Finnish language, in which he retained full fluency during his whole life. For a couple of years in the mid 1970s he also taught courses in Japanese at the University of Helsinki, where this language, then still outside of the formal academic structures, was included as an optional subject within the curriculum of Comparative Altaic Linguistics.

After returning to Japan, Shoji continued his academic studies and took a master's degree at the Kansai University of Foreign Languages (関西外国語大学), or Kansai Gaidai, under the supervision of Yasumoto Tokunaga (徳永康元, 1912–2003), at the time the leading specialist on the Hungarian language in Japan. Already in 1977 Shoji established a connection with the newly-established National Museum of Ethnology (国立民族学博物館), or Minpaku, which was led by the eminent scholar and influential organizer Tadao Umesao (梅棹忠夫, 1920–2010). It was at Minpaku where Shoji made his lifelong career as a researcher and academic teacher, starting as a research assistant and ending as a full professor as well as, after retirement, an active emeritus.

Founded in 1974 and housed in a huge complex built on the site of the 1970 Japan World Exposition (Expo 70) in Suita, Osaka, Minpaku during its first years enjoyed a huge budget for the acquisition of collections, including both objects and library resources, from all over the world. Shoji actively participated in this programme from the beginning, and, as one of his first projects, he travelled around Finland acquiring ethnographic materials representative of the folk culture of the Finns, who came to have a prominent position in the first permanent exhibition of Minpaku. He later added collections also from Estonia and Lapland. Already after his retirement, he organized an exhibition of Saami culture, for which he collected materials during his last visit to Finland in 2018.

Apart from material objects, Shoji was also interested in the intangible heritage of the peoples he studied, including folk customs, religious traditions, folklore, and languages. On the initiative of Umesao as its director, Minpaku introduced a library of ethnographic films, the so-called Videotheque (*Bideoteeku*), which originally contained a rapidly growing number of analogue videotapes – later replaced by digital materials – that could be viewed on site in the museum. Shoji added to this collection many films that he made on his travels not only to Northern Europe but also to other parts of the world. One region in which he took interest was Amdo Qinghai at the frontier of China and Tibet. In the early 1990s Shoji completed a couple of field expeditions targeting, in particular, the Huzhu Mongghul people in today's Qinghai Province of the People's Republic of China. The films and audio recordings he made on these trips are already of historical importance.

From the late 1980s Shoji became actively involved in the issue of linguistic diversity. He was one of the initiators of a project that aimed at presenting the languages of the world to museum visitors in an audiovisual form with the help of increasingly sophisticated technical equipment. As the principal person in charge of languages at Minpaku he also organized events and exhibitions on the topic of linguistic diversity. A major enterprise was the organization of the Taniguchi International Symposium on language endangerment in November 1994, with a focus on the languages of the northern regions of the world. The symposium, which drew participants from Europe, Russia, North America, Australia, and Japan, yielded one of the first collective volumes ever published on this topic (*Northern Minority Languages: Problems of Survival*, 1997).

Among the languages whose survival was of special interest to Shoji were the different varieties of Saami, Estonian, and Ainu. He had close personal relationships with many ethnic and language activists in both Lapland and Estonia. In Estonia, he followed closely the development of linguistic activism among the speakers of Võro, and he also visited the remaining Seto speakers in Setumaa, southeastern Estonia, as well as in the neighbouring Pskov region of Russia. With regard to Ainu, he was among the organizers of the annual event at Minpaku in which Shigeru Kayano (萱野茂, 1926–2006), one of last speakers of Ainu and until today the only ethnic Ainu person to have served as a member of the Japanese Parliament, carried out a ritual, open only for a restricted audience, at the Ainu house installed in one of the exhibition halls of Minpaku.

Apart from Ainu, Shoji brought up the presence of immigrant languages, thus challenging the traditional image of Japan as a homogeneous monolingual society. He also conducted some pioneering fieldwork in multilingual communities in the Helsinki metropolitan region in Finland, long before the topic gained wider scholarly interest. In Japan, he founded an active research group focusing on multilingualization (多言語化現象研究会), which held its inaugural meeting in June 1999 and celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary after the passing of its founder in September 2024. He served as the editor of important scholarly reference works in the field.

From its early years, Minpaku has been actively engaged in various programmes for international collaboration. With the establishment of the School of Cultural and Social Studies in 1989, the research department of Minpaku became linked to the Japanese inter-university system of Advanced Graduate Studies (総合研究大学院大学), or Sokendai, which means that it trains doctoral students in relevant fields connected with ethnography and linguistics. Shoji, in his position as professor, also supervised his share of doctoral students from both Japan and various foreign countries. In this role, he was known as an easily accessible, supportive, and tolerant teacher with a great sense of humor. As a colleague and friend he was always externally calm and modest but internally warm and unfailingly reliable.

Hiroshi Shoji joined the Finno-Ugrian Society in 1984. He was also active in the Uralic Society of Japan (日本ウラル学会), as well as several other learned organizations. In Japan, he is missed by his Finnish wife Mia, as well as their daughter Marie and son Kei and two grandchildren.

Juha Janhunen & Riikka Länsisalmi

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1. Juha Janhunen was a fellow student of Hiroshi Shoji in Uralic and Altaic linguistics at the University of Helsinki in the early 1970s and a participant in his Japanese classes, as well as, later, Shoji's colleague at Minpaku in the capacity of a visiting fellow in 1985–1986 and 1994–1995. Riikka Länsisalmi was a research and postgraduate student of Hiroshi Shoji at Minpaku and Sokendai in 1992–1998.