

# Akira Furusawa: 'I've found a niche in Belarus'

Akira Furusawa not only teaches Belarusian students the language of the Land of the Rising Sun, but acts in television shows, gives master classes in origami and advises Minsk's sushi bars

By Yuri Chernyakevich

Thirteen years ago, having graduated from the Tokyo Institute of Russian Language, Akira moved to Belarus. He married and now works as a senior teacher at the Department of Oriental Linguistics and Country Studies, at the International Relations Faculty of the Belarusian State University. He knows well the character and way of life of Belarusian students.

Here, he tells us that not all Japanese meet the stereotype, discusses the merits of studying in Belarus over Japan and explains how Japanese students differ from those at the Belarusian State University.

## Second Dragon — continuing a dynasty

I'm delighted that so many Belarusians want to learn about Japan and the Japanese people. I always share my knowledge with pleasure, telling everything I know, and sharing my impressions of life in Belarus. Initially, I wasn't sure that Minsk was the place for me. However, once I became familiar with the Nemiga suburb and saw the quay, I changed my mind. I have no regrets, especially as I met my Belarusian wife here. She's a fashion designer. I knew an actor who was in a Japanese style staging of Chekhov's 'Three Sisters' and I was giving advice. Veronika was in charge of costumes, which is how we met. Our son is called Ryuji, which means the Second Dragon. My father is Ryuichi — the first Dragon, so I'm continuing our dynasty of Dragons.

## More to Japanese cuisine than sushi

To tell the truth, there are a great many stereotypes about Japan; I'm always hearing them! When I show children how to make origami, I ask them what they know about the country, being ready to dispel thoughts of Samurai, ninja and Pokémon on the streets of Japan. Some ask me if I know Jackie Chan — even though he's Chinese, rather than



Akira Furusawa surrounded by his young Belarusian friends

Japanese! People also tend to think that we only eat fish, which is absolutely wrong. We do eat meat dishes.

Even as a child, I dreamt of learning to cook; I like to cook more than eat. Accordingly, I agreed with pleasure to a request from a Minsk sushi bar for some other traditional Japanese recipes, so that Belarusians might learn that our cuisine extends beyond sushi. Actually, in Japan, we don't make sushi at home, as many Belarusians do.

During my time in Belarus,

I've tasted marrows, draniki, brown bread and suet for the first time. I liked them immediately and I also like local dairy products. Your sweet curd cheese bars are a real treat!

## Differing psyches

Japanese and Belarusian people do have a very different mentality, as I realised as soon as I began teaching. In Belarus, those aged 17-18 behave as adults, un-

like their peers in Japan. Also, I'd say that students here are more diligent and take their studies seriously. In Japan, it's very difficult to enter university but, once they've gained a place, students tend to relax, spending more time promenading than studying.

In our country, it's very important from which university you graduate. Tokyo University graduates will have a brilliant future, even if they've hardly learnt anything over their four years! The situation in Belarus is different, which I prefer.

## Learning more about Belarus

Recently, Belarusians performed well at the Olympic Games, making the country better known to the Japanese. They now know your gymnasts and hammer throwers: Vadim Devyatovsky, Ivan Tikhon and Oksana Menkova. Many know about Belarus being affected by the Chernobyl nuclear power station disaster and of the assistance rendered to Japan after our tragedy at Fukushima. Children from Japanese Sendai have been coming here to improve their health. It's been lovely to hear people say that they're glad to offer such help, in gratitude for Japan's assistance in the years after Chernobyl. People remember and say that it's their turn to help.

I feel confident that relations between our countries will develop further, so learning Japanese is important. I'm delighted to think of our graduates engaged in strengthening relations between Belarus and Japan. They often take jobs with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, or at the Embassy of Japan in Belarus.

## Origami is more than a hobby

I have one pastime I never wish to give up: visiting children in hospital to teach them origami. I used to go more often but my own family takes more of my time now. However, I try to go at least once a year. In truth, such children once helped me, as I knew nobody on arriving in Belarus. It was by visiting these

children, telling them about Japan and teaching them origami, that I received moral support. I continue to correspond with many of them, and to visit them.

I began acting recently, taking roles in Russian television shows. I don't consider myself to be an actor, although I'm listed as such on some Russian sites. I do enjoy the process of dramaturgy though. When I lived in Tokyo, I participated in student theatre. I'd love to direct but am currently translating some Japanese plays into Russian, so that Belarusians can learn more about Japan.

## It's satisfying to feel needed

I have no plans to leave Belarus, as I like it here — and I feel needed. In Japan, I'd find work as a teacher or translator but it wouldn't be difficult for an employer to replace me. Here, it's impossible to replace me. *Being needed is truly satisfying; I've found a niche in Belarus.*

## Centre of book gravity

In 2017, Belarus celebrates 500th anniversary of national book printing

By Lyudmila Ivanova

Polotsk's Frantsisk Skarina founded a printing house in Prague 500 years ago, releasing the first printed Belarusian book on August 6th, 1517: the Psalter. It's no surprise that Belarus wishes to be chosen as World Book Capital in 2017: a title annually selected by a committee comprising representatives from UNESCO, the International Publishers Association (IPA), the International Booksellers Federation (IBF) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Madrid was the first city to be awarded this honorary title,

in 2001, with Yerevan chosen in 2012 and Bangkok in 2013.

Applicant cities submit a prospective programme of events, so *Litaratura i Mastatstva* (Literature and Arts) newspaper recently organised a round table discussion, to allow ideas to be shared. Meeting at the Press House, Ales Susha, the Deputy Director of the National Library (one of the initiators) noted that Minsk would be a great venue for the global holiday, being ready to welcome all tourists. Of course, the most important aspect is for the host city to demonstrate a love of book culture and of reading, so every citizen has a role to play.

Natalia Zaderkovskaya,



The Book Printing Museum in Polotsk

of the Culture Ministry's Department for Culture Institutions and Folk Art, tells us that a working group has been set up to collate proposals for events, with the regions being encouraged to contribute. The Chairman of the Belarusian Culture Fund, Vladimir Gilep, adds that Minsk's application for the

title of World Book Capital has been included in the UNESCO plan for 2014.

Naturally, competition for the honour is fierce, so public organisations and state institutions are eager to help with the bid. All agree that Minsk could be the perfect venue for the world book holiday in 2017.

## Online city celebrations

Vitebsk's Pobedy Square broadcasts live online via IP-camera

By Alena Tikhonova

The Deputy Chair of the Vitebsk City Executive Committee, Zinaida Koroleva, tells us that the City Executive Committee has helped to set up the online portal, aiming to promote Vitebsk as a tourist destination. She explains, "The city authorities are supporting the use of the Internet portal to organise online broadcasts from Vitebsk, with contemporary technologies allowing us to advertise our destination all over the globe. We hope that the city's online presence will

help us attract even more tourists." She adds that, this past year, Vitebsk's service exports growth rate stands at by 133 percent.

Andrey Lapin, who heads the website, notes that the first of the city's IP-cameras has been installed on Pobedy Square, so that the whole world could see how Vitebsk celebrated the New Year 2014. "We plan to install several more cameras across the city, with residents helping us choose locations. We'll study all proposals and then define the number of cameras: at least five," Mr. Lapin notes.