Dr Cobbing's research focuses on cultural relations between Japan and the West with particular reference to the experience of samurai travellers and the diaries they kept during their explorations abroad. His PhD on this subject resulted in a monograph, “The Japanese Discovery of Victorian Britain”, and he was subsequently involved in a major project to translate the official account of the Iwakura Embassy's travels in the West. Now available in English for the first time, this chronicle offers a wealth of insight into the Meiji State's perspectives on Western models at a formative stage in the development of modern Japan. In the context of international history he has written several studies on Meiji diplomats who were actively involved in negotiating the revision of Japan's 'Unequal Treaties'. In a recent collaborative project he has also published a comparative cultural study of Meiji Japan and Victorian Britain in the shape of a biographical work on a samurai called Kawada Ryokichi, based on the letters he received during the years he spent as an overseas student in the Glasgow shipyards.

Dr Cobbing's current project is “Kyushu - Gateway to Japan: a cultural history”. This reflects the interest he developed in regional history during the years he spent on the island of Kyushu in southwestern Japan. At the same time he is involved in a project to edit an interdisciplinary collection of papers by East Asian Studies specialists on the theme of Hakata (modern-day Fukuoka), an important port in Kyushu, which historically has played a key role in Japan's relations with continental Asia.

Funding for the Japan seminars in the series has been generously provided by the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation

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