The Responses and Reactions to East Asia of Its Scholarly Study by the West

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Though since the 1940s Western scholars have made remarkable progress in East Asian studies, they cannot match the overall contributions of indigenous scholarship. Except when subjected to rigid political control, as in late prewar and wartime Japan and post-1949 China, the Chinese and Japanese themselves have played central roles in the study of their respective cultures. They have had no emotional "hangups" or feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis Western scholarship in East Asian studies. While the Japanese seem to be more sensitive to outsiders' views than Chinese are, both scholarly communities, I believe, are extremely proud and self-confident, and justifiably so.

This does not mean that they have been entirely indifferent to the works of Asian specialists in the West. Inevitably, there are political implications to studies of modern and contemporary history, especially during the heated ideological climate of the post-World War II period. But if some Chinese and Japanese scholars feel that some of their Western colleagues have misread or distorted developments in their respective countries, there are others who think differently. There is no total East-West confrontation, but shared differences on both sides. Controversial interpretations, for example, of Kuomintang and Communist China, or pre-World War II Japan are not exclusively Asian or Western, but reflect the variety of views that prevail in the East and West, and which are inherent to any field of cultural or historical study. In this sense, academic controversies in East Asian studies are no different from those in British, Russian, French or American studies. They are not geographically or ethnically rooted, but are simply interpretations that either deliberately support particular political persuasions or unintentionally lend themselves to polemical use. The difference
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is that Chinese and Japanese have dominated the totality of East Asian studies to a greater degree than Europeans dominate the study of their respective national cultures. There are several reasons for this.¹

In China and its cultural “younger brother,” Japan, Confucianism produced a secular scholarly tradition of unique productivity and resilience. No people has ever attached more importance to the written word than the Chinese. None has ever had a deeper sense of history or has invested as much effort in recording and studying history. Nor has any people accorded more prestige and power to a secular elite stratum chosen primarily on the basis of literary and scholarly competence. Furthermore, East Asian civilization developed coherently and continuously since its formation, unretarded by cultural conquest or long periods of stagnation. It entered the modern age as a mature but still vigorously productive civilization.

Even before the impact of modern, industrial civilization, Chinese and Japanese intellectuals were already pursuing rational inquiries into their histories and cultures. Despite the magisterial authority of Neo-Confucianism (in China since the thirteenth century and in Japan since the seventeenth), independent, skeptical, and unorthodox thinkers appeared in both countries before the nineteenth-century clash with the West. Individual scholars in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China and Japan had already made significant advances toward the scientific method of historical criticism. The intrusion of the West and the undeniable evidence of its material superiority sowed doubts about traditional institutions and induced deep soul-searching concerning national survival. Yet their ingrained rational, secular orientation enabled Chinese and Japanese intellectuals to adapt new ideas and techniques whenever these seemed applicable. Religious dogma did not hamper scholarly pursuits. In a reversal of the traditional flow of intra-East Asian cultural stimuli, first the Japanese and then the Chinese modernized their general educational systems and research facilities, and incorporated modern, scientific methods in the study of their respective cultures.

However, indigenous East Asian scholarship did not benefit as much from Western Sino-Japanese studies as it did from generally applicable Western theories, methodologies and disciplines. Chinese and Japanese adapted the ideas and methods of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Marx, Ranke, Weber, Malinowski, etc. to the study of their own histories and cultures. In disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology and linguistics, where Europeans pioneered the East Asian field, Chinese and Japanese quickly mastered the new techniques, usually through the direct influence of Western teachers in Asia or abroad, and soon achieved pre-eminent status on their own. Bernhard Karlgren of Sweden, for example, is generally recognized as the founder of modern scientific research on the Chinese language. He began publishing his important Études sur la phonologie chinoise in 1915. By the 1930s, however, modern-trained Chinese linguists, most notably Y.R. Chao, who had studied with Karlgren and French sinologists, had built upon and improved Karlgren’s ground-breaking work.²

Given their intellectual self-confidence, Chinese and Japanese had no difficulty in acknowledging the contributions of foreign scholars, when they became aware

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China and Japan

of such contributions. They did not need the direct help of foreign scholars to
discover the glory of ancient East Asia and to analyze its modern dilemma. (The
example of a Fenellosa who taught Japan to treasure its classical art is a minor
exception.)3 Nor did they suffer from colonial rule, with its damaging emotional
effects and demeaning consequences for indigenous learning.

At the same time, Western scholarly studies of East Asia lagged far behind
indigenous accomplishments. Interest was only slowly aroused and expertise
difficult to acquire. The West had no obvious incentive to study the Far East. Of
all the great culture areas, the Sino-Japanese has been the furthest removed from
Western tradition. The religious, historical, cultural and linguistic roots which
Europe has sought, for example, in the Middle East, do not exist in the Far East.
Nor was there a political or military incentive for intensive study of the Far East,
since it did not figure in global geopolitical struggles until the nineteenth
century, and afterwards neither China nor Japan fell under Western colonial
domination. This relative lack of scholarly interest and incentive was reinforced
by the great difficulty in learning to handle Chinese and Japanese language
materials, and in utilizing the voluminous historical records, texts and comment-
taries which are especially available in Chinese.

Except for France, where the academic study of China launched by the Paris
Jesuits in the eighteenth century still continued, the West neglected the scholar-

y study of East Asia until the end of the nineteenth century. (I am excluding
from the category of scholarly study most works by the amateurs or part-time
scholars—missionaries, merchants, diplomats and travelers—whose best contri-
bution was in translating traditional East Asian works and incorporating the
traditional interpretations which their local assistants supplied.) Then, starting
with Edouard Chavannes (1865-1918)—the “father of modern Western si-

ology”—French and other Continental Europeans raised Chinese studies to a
high professional level in the West.4 The few great sinologists of the late nine-
teenth and early twentieth centuries made original contributions, especially in
ancient studies and archaeology and, as has already been mentioned, influenced
some Chinese scholars. Sometimes, however, because of the prevailing attitude
of self-sufficiency in Chinese scholarship, the value of these foreign contributions
was not widely known immediately. For example, Feng Ch’eng-chün, who
eventually translated works of several French and other European sinologists, at
first ignored a book given to him by Chavannes because it appeared to be
translated from Chinese sources. At that time, before 1911, Feng was more
interested in translating Western works in social and political philosophy. Only
years later did he realize that Chavannes and other Europeans, as well as
Japanese scholars could tell Chinese things about their own history that they did
not know. He published his translation of Chavannes’ book in 1926 and then
continued with others.5 These were mainly works dealing with China’s periph-
ery—her historical contacts with Southeast and Central Asia—and with the
history of Buddhism, fields of study in which the knowledge of foreign sources
and languages is essential, and which had been neglected or inadequately
understood by Chinese scholars. (Westerners have also pioneered in the study of
China’s modern foreign relations because they had easier access to foreign

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sources.) Also, the value of Karlgren’s work, mentioned earlier, was not generally recognized in China until 1940, when Y.R. Chao and his colleagues translated and revised it.6

By the end of the 1930s the Chinese, at their own universities and the Academia Sinica (founded in 1928), began mastering the new disciplines and applying rigorous scientific criteria in studying their culture. Their research, published in their own numerous academic journals, and in books and monographs, contributed greatly to all aspects of Chinese studies. This had been achieved despite the internal turbulence and foreign crises that characterized the declining years of the Manchu dynasty and the early Republican period. If the Japanese had not invaded in 1937, subsequent progress would have been much faster.7

Japan, of course, benefited from a more stable climate for the growth of independent, modern scholarship. By the turn of the century, some fifty years after Perry’s historic visit, Japan was well-equipped with libraries, scholarly journals and research institutes.8 Japanese contributed the most significant research, not only in Japanese studies but in those aspects of Chinese studies that have particular historical relevance for Japan, e.g. Buddhist and T’ang dynasty studies.

As in the China field, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western work in Japanese studies was done largely by amateurs with the help and collaboration of Japanese scholars, e.g. Brinkley and Kikuchi, and Murdoch and Yamagata. As in China, native scholarship influenced Western translators and interpreters of classical literature. Similar, too, was the early Western emphasis on works dealing with foreign relations. It was only in 1931, with the publication of Sir George Sansom’s Japan: A Short Cultural History that “Western scholarship on Japan reached a degree of maturity.”9 Sansom’s work, moreover, was “based on full control of Japanese secondary sources.” This reflects the great disparity—true for Chinese studies as well—between East Asian and Western achievements in East Asian studies before 1945.

Afterwards, of course, the picture changed. While civil war and ideological biases hampered indigenous Chinese scholarship, Western sinology flourished. It now produces the greatest variety of interpretive and intellectually stimulating work. Western scholarship on Japan has also grown much more sophisticated during the post-war decades, yet few Westerners would deny that they still have a great deal to learn from Japanese colleagues.10 I doubt, however, whether there is as yet a comparable Japanese acknowledgement of Western contributions. (For example, it was only through a chance visit to Germany that the Japanese author of a recent book on the history of the Japanese language heard about Sansom’s An Historical Grammar of Japanese, which was published in 1928. And then he misspelled Sansom’s name and erroneously identified him as an American.)11

However, non-Marxist Japanese social scientists closely follow Western trends in general social science theory and methodology. Some frankly acknowledge a Japanese lag in the social sciences. But if a Japanese academic can build a reputation by becoming a disciple of a particular Western social scientist, he could not do so by becoming a disciple of a Western scholar on Japan. On the
other hand, as will be indicated later, Japanese are becoming more appreciative of postwar Western studies on Japan. Furthermore, Japanese studies have not been as heavily loaded with political implications as modern Chinese studies have been.

Unavoidably, the Kuomintang-Communist conflict has percolated into the lives as well as the works of many Western scholars on modern China. During the struggle with Japan, scholarly as well as general public opinion in the West was strongly sympathetic to Kuomintang China, which eventually became a Western ally. However, scholarly diagnoses of the Communist victory in the subsequent civil war were generally not favorable to the Kuomintang. Whereas Chinese partisans of the Kuomintang and some Western scholars emphasized the Japanese invasion or the role of international Communism in explaining the Kuomintang's loss of the Mainland, many Western studies put the blame on Chiang Kai-shek's government, accusing it, among other things, of corruption and neglect of agrarian problems. They stressed the internal rather than the external causes of Chiang's defeat, and the nationalist, rather than the Marxist sources of Mao Tse-tung's success. Also, the general thrust of Western scholarly opinion was critical of the American government's policy of supporting Taiwan and withholding recognition of the People's Republic.

Dissenting views were not confined to Taiwan. As has already been pointed out, there have always been Western scholars whose reading of recent Chinese history approximates that of the Kuomintang, or who at least feel that many of their colleagues have been less than just in their treatment of the losers in the Chinese civil war. In fact, some of the most heated attacks on so-called "establishment" China scholars in America have come from other American scholars. This has been primarily an intramural quarrel in the Western community of China specialists.13 It is my impression that Taiwan scholars now treat the matter more indulgently, especially since Taiwan has proved its political and economic viability and benefits increasingly from comparison with the People's Republic. The Taiwan example would indicate that national self-confidence breeds dispension in responding to foreign scholarly studies. In this context, the following remarks made recently by a prominent Taiwan statesman are significant: "It is a truism that all modern disciplines are in some way international. Sinology . . . should not isolate itself from the outside world or cling to the imperfections of old scholarship . . . Sinology has become a world discipline; its studies carried out here or elsewhere are equally contributory and useful. The Chinese therefore must not think that they, alone, are the acknowledged legislators of sinology, or that researches must be carried out in this country to be of service to China. On the other hand, they need not belittle themselves."14

At the same time, Western scholars who tended to sympathize with the nationalist aims of the Chinese Communists, and with the objectives, but not necessarily the substance and methods of their social-economic program, did not score any points in the People's Republic. Objective evaluation of the work of foreign scholars was not possible in a society that denied freedom and independence to its own scholars. Under Mao Tse-tung scholarship was an ideological exercise designed to "serve proletarian politics." In the frenzied atmosphere of
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the cultural revolution (1966-1969) and its immediate aftermath, “virtually all scholarship,”—even dictionaries produced as late as 1965—became obsolete “because of changing criteria for correct political content.” Because of its alleged bourgeois or imperialist predilections, non-Maoist Western scholarship was either ignored or condemned. Thus, for a time, many American scholars in the China field had the worst of all possible worlds: they were criticized in Taiwan, anathematized in the People’s Republic, and subjected to Senator McCarthy’s witch-hunt at home.

Fortunately, this situation has changed. The United States has made its political peace with the People’s Republic; Taiwan feels more secure; and what is most important, post-Mao China has retreated considerably both from its severe anti-Western posture and its most repressive ideological policies. In the interests of modernization, and security from the Soviet threat, China has opened its doors to the West and relaxed control of its intellectuals and scholars. While China is mainly seeking economic, technological and strategic benefits from contacts with the West and Japan, cultural and scholarly relations have also improved. Western China scholars have visited China and established contact with their colleagues. Some have been able to do research and participate in academic conferences which have led to stimulating exchanges. There have also been some reciprocal visits by Chinese scholars. In the last two years several Western books on modern Chinese history have been translated in China; probably more have been translated for restricted distribution. And many more have been purchased. Also, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences will this year publish in Peking a handbook of Chinese studies in the United States which will include a directory of American researchers on China, research institutions, foundations supporting China research, Chinese language collections, subjects of books on China, and a chronicle of events in American Chinese studies from 1976-1979. The Academy is also publishing an index to foreign books and articles dealing with China and a survey of foreign sinology during the last thirty years.

These are signs of positive reactions to non-Marxist Western scholarly studies of China and point towards the beginning of a true transnational dialogue. Ultimately, however, the acknowledged response and reaction to Western studies, like the quality of Chinese scholarship itself, depend upon the overall state of freedom of thought and expression. How the full realization of present trends could eventually affect Sino-Western scholarly relations can perhaps be anticipated by turning to the Japanese experience.

Postwar Japan eagerly absorbed new Western intellectual currents that had been shut out since 1937, when the outbreak of the China War marked the beginning of rigid thought control. As the postwar occupying power, America was the main source of new ideas and academic innovations. Liberal and left-wing sentiments predominated among Japanese intellectuals, who were anxious to retrace past history and discover the origins of the fanatic militarism that had stunted the growth of democracy at home and spawned aggression abroad. In searching for answers they did not require direct foreign tutelage, but applied new social science theories and built upon their own prewar liberal and leftist scholarship, which had been critical of official policy. Western scholarship on
Japan was not a major source of enlightenment: there were only a few serious wartime studies. Among those that did have an impact in Japan were Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston, 1946) and the writings of E. Herbert Norman, most notably his *Japan’s Emergence as a Modern State* (New York, 1940).  

Benedict's work was the best and least prejudiced of a number of wartime studies of Japanese "national character" that were written mostly by anthropologists who, like herself, had never been to Japan and who did not know the language. (The American anthropologist, John Embree, who knew Japanese, and whose classic study, *Suye Mura: A Japanese Village* (Chicago, 1939), was based upon fieldwork in Japan, stayed clear of these dubious "national character" explanations of Japanese militarism.) Benedict's conclusion, that there were psycho-cultural rather than historical determinants to Japanese aggression, is now considered untenable. The importance of *Chrysanthemum*, which was translated into Japanese in 1948, was that it helped stimulate the development of postwar Japanese social science. Since then, Japanese scholars, e.g., Nakane Chie and Ishida Takeshi as well as Western sociologists and anthropologists, have produced more authentic, less Europe-centered studies of Japanese personality and social structure. A recent Japanese reappraisal of *Chrysanthemum*, which gives Benedict credit for "an admirable understanding" of some aspects of Japan's prewar hierarchical society, is perhaps typical of Japanese generosity and tolerance in treating works by foreigners, even when the foreigners lack essential qualifications for such studies.

Norman has been in vogue in Japan longer than Benedict. But Norman, who made extensive use of Japanese secondary sources, especially those of prewar Marxist-oriented scholarship, did not provide Japanese scholars with any significant new insights. Instead, his understanding of the Meiji Restoration as a rapid but incomplete transition from feudalism in which lower samurai played a key role, was shared by some Japanese scholars and still has wider currency in Japan than in the West. His works are influential, in other words, because they echo interpretations that have originated in Japan. That a foreigner like Norman, who had a wide grasp of European as well as Japanese history subscribed to their interpretation, adds to the polemical strength of a whole school of Japanese historical thought which contends with both indigenous and foreign opponents.

In subsequent decades Japanese scholarship on Japan incorporated the newest disciplines and theories. The Japanese, moreover, play a leading role in modern China studies. A recently compiled bibliography lists more than 20,000 works in Japanese on modern China published by 3,200 authors from the end of World War II to 1978. In recent years Japan has been equipped both with the funds and the scholarly resources to patronize Japanese studies throughout the world. This is quite evident from a cursory survey of *The Japan Foundation Newsletter*. Here one finds a record of Japanese support, subsidization and stimulation of Japanese studies by foreigners. I would even venture the opinion that it is easier for a foreign scholar to get financial assistance from a Japanese foundation than it is for a native Japanese. This campaign to enhance Japanese
studies abroad is essentially no different from the efforts of other nations to foster knowledge of their cultures abroad. However, Japan is different in evincing greater concern with its overseas "image." Japanese are also different in persisting in their discussion of national identity—Nihonjin-ron. Perhaps this is a result of being unaccustomed to the global front-runner role into which economic success has catapulted her.

This new-found prominence has also exposed Japan to the semi-scholarly, quick study belonging to what has been aptly dubbed "The Scented Bulldozer" genre. Written after short stays in Japan by scholars who are not specialists on Japan, these studies purport to analyze the state of Japanese society and to plot its future. Herman Kahn's The Emerging Japanese Superstate (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970) and Zbigniew Brzezinski's The Fragile Blossom (New York, 1972) are typical of these books that, despite their untenable predictions, have a popular appeal in Japan because they usually flatter the Japanese ego. Japanese scholars and intellectuals are less happy. A Japanese professor told me that he considered it demeaning and insulting to be subjected to such "hit-and-run" studies by foreigners who, whatever their competence in other fields, have superficial knowledge of Japan. Flattery and gross exaggerations of Japan's achievements and potential do not necessarily go down well with the Japanese scholarly community.

Ezra F. Vogel's Japan as Number One: Lessons for America (Cambridge, Mass., 1979) is a case in point. A highly respected scholar on Japan, Vogel is obviously not in the same category as the authors just mentioned. The translation of Japan as Number One has been a bestseller in Japan. Yet, while they have not been as bluntly critical of the book as some Western scholars have been, sophisticated Japanese are highly skeptical of Vogel's thesis that Japan can serve as a model for America. The feeling seems to be that he has oversold Japan and not done justice to America. One Japanese is quoted as saying that "A book like this one is written simply to take advantage of the ignorance of the Americans." Another charged that Vogel's views were "self-serving . . . Japanese never considered America to be a utopia. This is why to have Professor Vogel now say all these things at this belated hour about how Japan is superior to America, must strike us as neither something for which we are particularly grateful, nor anything that gives us any special reason for rejoicing . . . The author's hymn of praise to Japan more often than not misses its mark."

Though Japan as Number One is not typical of Western scholarly studies on Japan—among which Vogel's other works hold a distinguished place—the book's rose-tinted portrayal of Japan does reflect a difference in perspective between segments of Japanese and Western scholarship on Japan. At the risk of generalizing I would suggest that Western, and especially American, scholars tend to emphasize the positive aspects of Japan's modernization, while Japanese scholars are more concerned with the seamy side. The difference in emphasis is not restricted to evaluations of contemporary society, but is also characteristic of studies of the Tokugawa, Meiji and other prewar periods. Many Western scholars, especially enthusiasts of the modernization school of the 1960s, tend to see the last one hundred years of Japanese history as a success story in which foreign
aggression and internal repression constituted aberrations that were not pre-determined by the circumstances surrounding the Meiji Restoration. More dubious voices are heard from Japan, where the roots of prewar militarism are traced back to what is considered the abortiveness of the Restoration. Hence the enduring academic popularity of E.H. Norman in Japan, and the relative obscurity, but not disrespect, which is accorded to Japan’s Emergence in the West. When I studied in a Far Eastern program which the United States Army sponsored during the war, Japan’s Emergence, along with Sansom and Embree, was on our reading list. I doubt whether it is included in many American undergraduate bibliographies today.

Also, I think that Japanese scholars are less reluctant to use the term “fascist” in describing prewar Japan than their Western colleagues are. It is also significant that while David Bergamini’s indictment of the Japanese Emperor—Japan’s Imperial Conspiracy (New York and London, 1971)—has been devastatingly criticized by Western scholars, at least one reputable Japanese historian has endorsed it. Inoue Kiyoshi has cited Bergamini to support the questionable thesis that the Emperor was personally responsible for Japanese aggression. There also seem to be different attitudes in studying the prewar Japanese-American tensions that led to Pearl Harbor. At a recent international conference, it was noted that Americans seem to look back to the Pacific War “as a mistake, one that led to many of the intractable problems confronting the United States today, while the Japanese view that conflict somewhat fatalistically, as perhaps the only instrument by which the incubus of fascism and militarism could have been exorcised.”

These are examples of a somewhat paradoxical situation: Western scholars generally take a more benign, and Japanese scholars a harsher view of modern and contemporary Japanese history. Why this is so is beyond the purview of this paper. Perhaps Western academics wish to compensate for the distorted and prejudiced popular image of Japan that prevailed before 1945 and which has not yet been entirely eradicated. Then too Westerners may view the Japanese experience in the light of Chinese and other non-Western efforts to modernize that have fallen short of expectations. Japanese intellectuals, on the other hand, take the insiders’ view: they know what it was like to have lived under oppressive, authoritarian government, just as they are more critical of the quality of life in Japan, despite the postwar, post-American occupation economic miracle. Also, some Japanese may resent what they see as a Western tendency to praise Japan only when it seems to resemble the Western pattern of industrial, capitalist development. And finally, many Japanese consider it valid for scholars to take well-defined ideological positions, and are suspicious of Western claims to value-free, empirical scholarship.

However, repeating what was argued earlier, despite these differences in style, emphases and nuances, there is no clear-cut East-West confrontation in Japanese studies. Diversity, as in the case of any scholarly discipline, prevails on both sides. And the Japanese, because of their greater productivity and inherently greater interest, offer a wider variety of scholarly interpretations than their Western colleagues. However, postwar Western scholarship has been producing
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excellent monographic studies that have earned scholarly recognition in Japan. A Japanese selection of one hundred books, deemed essential reading for their compatriots, includes three books by foreigners that enhance understanding of Japan: Japan’s Emergence by Norman; Marius B. Jansen’s Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration (Princeton, 1961), which disputes some of Norman’s conclusions; and Ronald P. Dore’s Land Reform in Japan (London and New York, 1959).34

Another point worth making is that scholars of Japanese and Chinese descent fill essential teaching and research roles in Western institutions. This of course enriches Western scholarship but complicates the task of differentiating between Eastern and Western scholarship on East Asia. On the other hand, in evaluating a scholarly work, why should one be concerned with the ethnic or geographic provenance of its author?

What has happened is that Japanese studies have become a truly international scholarly enterprise. The Japanese dominate the field, but encourage and engage in transnational dialogue and cooperation without any inhibitions or complexes. If allowed to develop the diversity of thinking which advances every field of learning, scholars in the People’s Republic could play a similar seminal role in Chinese studies.


8. Hall, Japanese History, p. 3.


17. See Anne F. Thurston and Jason H. Parker, eds., *Humanistic and Social Science Research in China: Recent History and Future Prospects* (New York, 1980).

18. See, for example, Zhuge Ji, "The Sino-American Symposium on Chinese Socio-Economic History from the Song Dynasty to 1900," *Social Sciences in China*, I, 4 (December, 1980), pp. 170-194. Other issues of this quarterly, published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, contain further information concerning international conferences and references to Western scholarly works on China.


21. *Japan's Emergence and Soldier and Peasant in Japan: The Origins of Conscription* were translated into Japanese in 1947; *A Forgotten Thinker: Ando Shoeki* was translated in 1950; and *The Face of Clio* was translated in 1956.


30. Yet interest in Norman may have revived in the West, thanks to Dower’s book and to sustained admiration in Japan.


34. Hagiwara Nobutoshi, in *Chūō Koron*, No. 943, May 1966, p. 409. But the Japanese are less happy, and for good reason, with the treatment of Japan in textbooks used in Western schools. But it is precisely because specialists have not written them that these textbooks are inaccurate. See Shimada Tatsumi, “Japan in Foreign Textbooks,” *Japan Quarterly*, 7, 2 (April-June 1960), pp. 188-192.