

## JAPAN IN WAR AND PEACE

## Charting the End of the "Modern" Period

### CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE LITERATURE

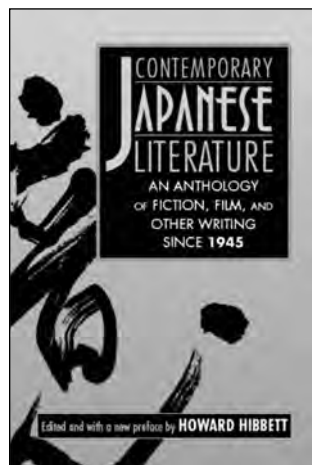
#### *An Anthology of Fiction, Film, and Other Writing Since 1945*

HOWARD B. HIBBETT, EDITOR

BOSTON: CHENG & TSUI, 2005

468 PAGES, ISBN 10: 0-887-27436-6, PAPERBACK

REVIEWED BY FAY BEAUCHAMP



Howard Hibbett's *Contemporary Japanese Literature*, first published in 1977, was reissued in 2005, making this well-known anthology again readily available. Except for the preface, the book is unchanged and provides a time-capsule of Japanese writing in the post-war period between 1945 and 1975. College or high school world literature teachers should own this book because the selections are highly readable and represent many canonical Japanese writers of the twentieth century. But teachers look-

ing for "contemporary" works need to look for additional texts to illustrate the wonderful diversity of Japanese fiction, poetry, drama, and film since 1945.

In a graceful new preface, Howard Hibbett, Professor Emeritus of Japanese Literature at Harvard University, comments upon his selections, including Abe, Mishima, Tanazaki, and the two Nobel Prize winners Kawabata and Oe. Hibbett himself acknowledges the remarkable international appeal of Banana Yoshimoto and Haruki Murakami to exemplify new trends after his 1975 cut-off. Much has changed since then, not only in Japanese literature and society, but also in international assumptions about literary merit. The "modern" bias toward works of personal introspection begins to appear old fashioned, but Hibbett's choices may also reflect the anthology's genesis in a publishing effort to enhance Japanese-American relations supported by the Japan Society of New York and the *Asahi Shimbun* of Tokyo.

The most dramatic choice, perhaps, is the exclusion of literature directly showing the horrors of World War II, both those of the American fire and atomic bombings of Japan, and those Japan

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brought to other Asian countries. In his reprinted "Introduction," Hibbett states that post-war Japanese authors treated hardships during the American Occupation with "ironic amusement" and a "humorous light" (xxi). Kojima Mobuo's "The American School," 1954, shows the effect of Japanese defeat in terms of forgotten chopsticks and blisters caused by high heels. Nowhere in the book is direct depiction of the effects of war. Yet even a glance at John Whittier Treat's *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* reveals the amount of poetry and stories Japanese published in the 1945–1975 time period expressing the harrowing experience of *hibakusha* (survivors of the atomic bombings). By 1969 Massuji Ibuse, for example, had collected diaries and other narratives and published *Black Rain* which depicted the panorama of devastation in 1945 and the lingering social and physical effects.

There is a similar exclusion of women's perspectives. There are two stories by women, but Hibbett excluded any selection by Fumiko Enchi and Sawako Arioshi, who were publishing in the 1950s and 60s their great novels of biting social and historical commentary centered on women's point of view. This exclusion may not be male bias as much as a preference for "the role of art as memory . . . conceived in highly personal terms" (Hibbett, xxi). In female author Yumiko Kurahashi's, "To Die at the Estuary," 1971, the personal reveries and sexual fantasies of a dying old man dominate the narrative. The *anime* classic "Spirited Away" makes the reader attentive to Kurahashi's references to a chemical plant built on a spit of land where ghosts used to roam, but her allusions to *Oedipus at Colonus* seem "modern" in a stale way.

In a telling introductory note, Hibbett quotes approvingly of Cyril Connolly's measure of excellence: "an imaginary experience which enriches our understanding of existence and which involves two or three people, not a whole society" (3). In the "modern" period, this emphasis on universal experience perceived in the individual was the mark of good literature. That the Japanese, in tandem with Western modern writers, embraced this critical criterion can be seen in an early story of Mishima, "The Boy Who Wrote Poetry." Mishima's narrator muses on the lack of "opposition or tension between the world he had yet to experience and the world inside himself" (288). "Universality" lies in the inner world of language. Teachers assigning this selection can make good use of the story to explore definitions of "modern" literature.

Hibbett does not exoticize twentieth century Japanese literature by choosing Zen-like puzzles; the fiction is coherent, with stories beginning, developing, and ending. But the collection can make students realize why the term "post-modern" was coined to characterize

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

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a new mode of writing that ricocheted globally after the 1970s. The marginalized, whether *hibakusha* or women, were valued when they "wrote back" to the center; it wasn't enough to be an individual in a sealed room: the outside world mattered.

Post-modern writers have become acutely aware of what a change of point of view can provide; points of view now shift so quickly and abruptly that ends begin and middles disappear! But authors such as Murakami are not just post-modern because of technique; partly due to Oe's Nobel Prize Speech of 1994, "canonical" Japanese literature can now be profoundly political and portray Japanese actions in China as Murakami and Kazuo Ishiguro have done, or comment bitterly on American "victor's justice" following Yoshimura Akira's lead.

Before ending this review, I would like to comment on one selection which even by itself justifies owning the book and perhaps using whatever pieces of it "fair-use" allows. This wonderful selection is the screenplay of the 1952 film *Ikiru*. Both faculty and students can benefit from analyzing this remarkable, brief screenplay written by Kurosawa. There is an interesting interplay of Confucian concern for the group and the aged, and Buddhist acceptance of dying and death. Reading the script in the context of this anthology, however, led me to ponder the reasons why the film appeared in 1952: While in other films Kurosawa evokes the sweep and passion of the samurai past, here the modern hero has become the salaryman, passing life in a bureaucracy Western and Eastern cultures have mutually engendered, a mundane life that numbs the soul. But it may be with this film that we need to stop analyzing what it signifies for a society at a particular time and place, and just relive the experience of seeing this film the first time and feeling the anxiety of whether Mr. Watanabe could ever find a moment of happiness. Whatever we search for in literature, either for ourselves or for our students, is found in this film and script.

At first I was irritated that this book, called "Contemporary Japanese Literature," was reprinted wholesale without warning on the cover when "contemporary" ended. But I had a change of heart. The book is vital to those studying world literature in the period 1945–1975, and for that purpose, it is rightly untouched and open for further analysis and reflection. ■

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## THE ASIAN AMERICAN CENTURY

BY WARREN I. COHEN

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2002

150 PAGES, ISBN 10: 0-674-00765-4, HARDBACK

REVIEWED BY JAMES M. CARTER



In this short volume, the esteemed historian of US-East Asian relations, Warren I. Cohen, offers an overview of the last one hundred years of that relationship. This collection actually consists of three lectures, the Edwin O. Reischauer Lectures, given at Harvard University's John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Research. The three lectures, or chapters, "The Struggle for Dominance in East Asia,"

"The Americanization of East Asia," and "The Asianization of America," offer a combination of conventional historical narrative and novel interpretation of the political and cultural elements of US-East Asian relations since the turn of the twentieth century.

Cohen's opening chapter on the "struggle for dominance" in the East pits a rising United States fresh from its imperial seizures in the Philippines and Hawaii against the parallel rise of the thoroughly reformed Japanese state of the late *Meiji* period. Japan quickly began spreading its influence in the region and, by the early twentieth century, manifested a desire for regional empire with a ravaged and divided China as its plum. Explicitly dismissing American "open door" imperial ambitions, Cohen argues instead that US officials cared far more for affairs in Europe than Asia during the period leading to World War II. He maintains that the United States ended what he terms a policy of "complacency" toward Asia abruptly only with the onset of World War II and the subsequent Cold War around mid-century. Once this shift in US policy occurred, however, "American leaders were determined to dominate the entire area, including Southeast Asia, militarily."<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this historic shift in policy, the United States went on to become the leading power in East Asia during most, if not all, of the Cold War. World war, civil war, revolution, the Korean War, the war in Vietnam, the destruction of Cambodia, and upheaval, dislocation, and violence from Thailand and Burma to Indonesia and the Philippines, all mark the sordid history of the twentieth century in East Asia. The United States played an active, and occasionally the lead role in making this history. While acknowledging the tragedy as well as the absurdity of the American war in Vietnam, Cohen looks back over the whole century from the vantage point of the twenty-first and boldly concludes that "most people in East Asia are far better off today than they would have been if the Americans had stayed home."<sup>2</sup> The author points to the development of political democracy in South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as his rationale. Cohen's intrepid