Regent Redux

A Life of the Statesman-Scholar Ichijō Kaneyoshi

BY STEVEN D. CARTER
ANN ARBOR: CENTER FOR JAPANESE STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, 1996
278 PAGES

In *Regent Redux*, Steven D. Carter takes us inside the life of a fifteenth-century aristocratic figure who was widely celebrated in both literary and political circles. Carter's life of Ichijō Kaneyoshi opens a fascinating window for exploring a feudal society at a time of great stress.

Carter had at his disposal a wealth of literary handbooks, treatises, travel diaries, poems, and memoranda of advice to a series of shoguns and emperors. To bear on these materials Carter brings an extraordinarily sophisticated command of the period during which the Ashikaga Shogunate was in danger of collapse. Carter pays a great deal of attention to Kaneyoshi's literary works, and provides us with translations of numerous of Kaneyoshi's poems, and also with some of Kaneyoshi's prose. Since Kaneyoshi was a dominant literary figure, Carter's attention to literary analysis provides the reader with numerous insights into his subject and into the powerful place of literature in the power politics of feudal Japan.

Kaneyoshi was so important a figure as to have been Regent, a position to which only the high-born could aspire, three times during his life. Also, he gained renown through editing official literary anthologies and through his matchless command of the "establishment" style of poetry writing. As the leader of a branch of the old Fujiwara clan, Kaneyoshi sought to preserve the family's role as keeper of the literary tradition and as principal advisors to both emperors and shoguns. Since the source of the authority of old aristocratic families, such as Kaneyoshi's, lay in tradition and ceremonial matters, their status became threatened during the Ōnin War, a period characterized by marauding feudal warlords. Carter presents a vivid portrait of Kaneyoshi's struggle to maintain his ceremonial authority and later, his financial position.

Carter's study opens the door to the people, cultural traditions, and political system of fifteenth-century Japan because his characters and analysis have the "ring of truth." For the university student studying medieval Japan, Carter's book is invaluable. However, *Regent Redux* is probably not the place to begin a study of the period. Rather, it makes a superlative supplement to a general history, and presents some real people facing real dilemmas. The novice at studying the period may not understand how a political system could have an emperor, a shogun, a regent, a principal advisor, and a collection of senior clan officials, all of political import at the same time. Also, the student of European feudalism unfamiliar with feudal Japan might not make the distinction between families of military significance and old aristocratic families who traded on their own birth and prestige as "keepers of the tradition." The Marxist might not be happy with Carter's focus on the aristocratic class in a class-dominated society; Carter is not concerned with possible exploitation of "common folk" on the estates of aristocrats, but rather with the hardships caused the latter when revenues from their estates were threatened by clan warfare. For his literary discussions Carter also assumes his readers know the *Tale of Genji* and the connection between literary and political life in medieval Japan. Carter doesn't introduce these salient features of Japanese feudalism; he assumes the readers knows these things. Rather, Carter's work provides a new layer of understanding to the person already at least partially familiar with the period.

The inquisitive high school student engaged on a project on this period of Japanese history could also make good use of *Regent Redux*. Again, however, familiarity with the basic parameters of the society would be necessary to make full sense of Carter's biography. A secondary student taking a four-week survey of Japanese history and culture, such as that experienced by ninth-graders in New York, might be served better by something more general.

Regent Redux is a superb piece of scholarship and makes fascinating reading. For the person with more than a passing interest in feudal Japan, it is indispensable. ▫

Donald Jones

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Japanese Lessons

A Year in a Japanese School through the Eyes of an American Anthropologist and Her Children

BY GAIL R. BENJAMIN
NEW YORK AND LONDON: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997
241 PAGES + APPENDIX + INDEX

This wonderful new study of Japan's elementary school system is valuable for us in three distinct ways: as required student reading, in part or in its entirety, within high school or college classes; as teachers trying to understand how Japanese culture works; and as American adults, teachers, and often parents, concerned about the American educational system. I find Benjamin's approach a welcome complement to earlier analyses.

In my own high school Japanese history classes I have typically focused on Japanese education for at least a week. Sources from which I have used selections are the following: Rohlen, *Japan's High Schools*; White, *The Educational System in Japan;* Peak*, Learning to Go to School in Japan*; and the book and accompanying film *Preschool in Three Cultures*. Benjamin's anthropological study is unique for her intensely personal tone. She is reporting on her involvement in the education of her first-and fifth-grade children in Urawa City during the years 1989–90. She attempts to adopt the

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"education mama" role and report honestly on the areas in which she experiences irritation as well as admiration. In the last few chapters of the book, Benjamin moves beyond daily routines and expectations to a controversial analysis of the applicability of the Japanese system to American education.

For high school and introductory level college students, I recommend using chapters 3 and 9. Within chapter 3, "Day-to-Day Routines," Benjamin explores many aspects of the elementary system which will intrigue our students: large time periods within the daily schedule when students have time for free, potentially creative play; the built-in time for school cleaning; the fact that each class of students has its own homeroom where teachers come for each subject. . . "there is a sense in which the room belongs to the students. . . more than the teacher. . . children's imprint on the classroom. . . is much stronger than the teacher's" (p. 41). Extremely interesting are Benjamin's observations concerning the extent to which peers, not teachers, validate and correct students' oral work. All of these practices serve to place responsibility for responsible behavior and academic achievement on the students themselves.

Certainly of interest to American students will be the news that substitute teachers are routinely not hired unless a teacher must be absent for a month or more! When Benjamin inquires anxiously of her first grade daughter about the quality of her substitute teacher, the little girl responds, "Oh, Kuroda sensei wrote on the board what we were supposed to do, and sometimes a teacher looked in the room" (p. 48). Finally, within this chapter Benjamin focuses on the way that teachers can separate their instructional role from the impact of external cram schools and the examination system for high school and college. "Teachers teach; they do not evaluate, and they do not hold their students' fates in their hands directly" (p. 52). These facets of the Japanese elementary education system will aid students in comprehending some essential characteristics of Japanese culture (individual responsibility within the group) as well as contributing to a lively debate concerning the contrasting values of American education.

Chapter nine, "Enlisting Mothers' Efforts," focuses on the well-publicized role of the *kyōiku* mama, the "education mama." Benjamin describes with emotion her reactions to the many ways that she was expected to support her children: purchasing the minutely prescribed school clothing and academic materials as well as closely supervising homework. Particularly demanding was her role with regard to the *renrakucho,* the first grade communication booklet. This notebook includes "not only daily homework assignments and reports on classroom activities but also special announcements or reminders. . . parents are to stamp the booklet daily, and the teacher also stamps it. . . ." Benjamin recounts her attempts to keep up with all these supervisory details, sharing with the reader her irritation when the teacher's message suggested that "too many things were being forgotten; we should work hard to improve the situation" (p. 194). If American students read chapters 3 and 9, they will gain valuable insights into the ways that Japan's elementary schools stress group cooperation and emphasize family involvement in the educational process. These understandings are essential for assessing Japan's economic advances and her chances for global integration in the twenty-first century.

For adults, both parents and teachers, there is much to ponder in this study. Several significant sections describe the functioning of the *han*, a term which means a platoon or working group, usually composed of five to eight children. Teachers will form and re-form these groups several times a year, and the duties of the *han* include academic work as well as social activities such as serving lunch or cleaning. These groups are always heterogeneous "in terms of personalities, abilities, previous friendship patterns, and previous groupings" (p. 53).

While I have read many sources which emphasize group orientation within Japanese culture and show how this characteristic is essential to understanding Japan's history, Benjamin's book provides concrete data on how this tendency is created.

From their earliest education, Japanese children are socialized to accept and value the support of the group. Indeed, teachers very consciously allow the *han* to make mistakes in the performance of its tasks. The teachers seldom intrude, encouraging students to correct each other. These school observations lead Benjamin to suggest that, instead of hierarchical principles being the key to the functioning of Japanese society, the smooth functioning of "amorphous, leaderless" groups is more important.

She observes within adult society the ability of Japanese to pitch in and organize things without any apparent allotment of tasks. Within the elementary arena she observes cooking classes where teachers only loosely supervise the cooking tasks. It is up to each group of students to organize the work; they appear to complete the tasks without discussion, argument, rules, or instruction. For instance, "when it came time to stir the batter. . . the first girl counted a number of stirs and passed the bowl on to the next child, who counted the same number of stirs before passing it on. . . " (p. 73). Surely, these observations concerning group functioning are essential to comprehending both Japan's past and present: transition to the Meiji, the reconstruction of Japanese society after World War II, and adaptation to the current economic slowdown.

What does this analysis of Japan's elementary education system mean, if anything, for the United States? Based on the convincingly superior achievement of Japanese children documented yet again within this book, Benjamin suggests that American education should seriously consider the following reforms:

- Move firmly toward a national curriculum where an external examination system discriminates between strong and weak students

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- Teach elementary students with equal standard expectations; eliminate homogeneous grouping
- Increase class size and institute an emphasis on heterogeneous grouping where students must accept greater responsibility for their learning and social behavior.

You are probably saying, "What about American diversity. . . the sanctity of our Federal system which protects our fifty state education systems. . . our emphasis on the importance of individual differences. . . the value of teacher-student interaction? Surely, none of these reforms is appropriate for the United States?" The beauty of Benjamin's book lies not only with its insights concerning the functioning of Japanese culture. This study also compels the reader to seriously consider basic reforms of the American elementary educational system. n

Diana Wood

DIANA WOOD is currently the Associate Director of Asian Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. In addition to University responsibilities, her job includes K-12 outreach within the Pittsburgh region. Prior to this academic year, she taught at Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, where her courses included Japanese, Chinese, and Indian History as well as International Relations, Comparative Governments, and aspects of World History.

An Empire of Schools

Japan's Universities and the Molding of a National Power Elite

BY ROBERT CUTTS
NEW YORK: M. E. SHARPE, 1997
XV + 268 PAGES.

Education is the highest priority in all societies. It may be necessary to maintain a cutting edge in technology or to acquire the skills necessary to move out of the "third world." Students, educators, and parents are all concerned about the quality of the education provided and the opportunities that access to education brings. The American school system is regularly studied and numerous authors debate its strengths and weaknesses, citing ways to improve the level of learning and seeking models for building new programs. In this search for better education, the Japanese educational system has been touted as one of the most successful systems in the world, and it is even suggested as a model for other systems. In order to learn from the Japanese, it is necessary to understand how and why this system works, who benefits from it, and what its goals are.

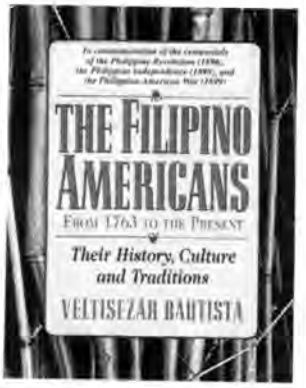
Robert Cutts's book is an in-depth look at the development and function of the modern Japanese system from its source in the policies of the Meiji period to its role in modern Japanese society. He focuses on the apex of that system: Tōdai-Tokyo University. What does it mean to be a graduate of Tokyo University? What does it take to enter

A salute to the centennial of Philippine-American Relations (1898-1998)!

The Filipino Americans
From 1763 to the Present:
Their History, Culture, and Traditions

By Veltisezar Bautista

1998. 256 pages, 8-1/2 x 11, 176 b&w photographs, for all ages, hardcover, $24.95, ISBN 0-931613-14-0



A Review by Jim Zwick, Syracuse University, New York:

Written and published in commemoration of the centennials of 1896-1899, this oversized, thoroughly illustrated book designed for a general audience will serve both as a good introduction to its subject and as a volume you'll want to keep on a table for repeated browsing.

It covers much more than you would expect from a history of Filipino Americans. After an introductory overview, there are five historical chapters on the Spanish colonization, the Revolution, the Philippine-American War, the U.S. colonial rule, and the World War II Japanese occupation. These chapters dealing with controversial subjects that are too often glossed over in other studies provide a substantial historical grounding for understanding some of the issues confronting Filipino Americans today.

Bautista continues with discussions of the Manilamen who landed in what is now Louisiana during the Manila Galleon trade with Mexico, a useful summary of later waves of immigration, and chapters devoted to Filipino experiences in Hawaii, the Mainland U.S., and Alaska. The three closing chapters assess changes in the Filipino American experience over time, describing enduring cultural traits and interactions, and provide biographical sketches of numerous "notable Filipino Americans."

Where's what they say about *The Filipino Americans:*

"This is a great book (a must reading for all Fil-Ams). It looks like a time capsule with details."—Nestor Palugod Enriquez, Jersey City, New Jersey

"I admire the exhaustive and authoritative historical contents, the substance, style and layout of The Filipino Americans. It's fluid, easy to read, and above all very informative."—Philip Chua, M.D., cardiac surgeon, Munster, Indiana, and former president, Association of Philippine Physicians in America.

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