

Communication to the Editor

TO THE EDITOR:

In *JAS* 53.4 (November 1994), on page 1199 (a number unforgettable for me as the year of Yoritomo's death), we have once again been treated to the views of Masao Miyoshi, who seems determined to tell me and others how to go about our business. His specific call is for me "to become serious about history" (*JAS* 52.1:169), which means abandoning all my seriousness of the past twenty-five years and allowing him to become my mentor and inspiration. I am quite unwilling to do that, and I reject his arrogance, his intrusiveness, and his poor manners. I would not like to think that there is a new fundamentalism astride our profession, but it is hard not to conclude that there may be reasons for fair-minded people to be worried.

In short, then, to all who study Japan from an angle different from that of Miyoshi, do not allow yourself to be sheep-herded into an approach, however current, that does not seem right for you. Similarly, for all who encounter writing or a lecture you cannot understand or appreciate, do not draw the inference that the fault lies with you. If code or jargon are used as substitutes for clear thinking, the deficiency lies with the author or lecturer, not with you. If something makes sense only to the cognoscente, it probably does not make very good sense.

The book that has earned the wrath of Professor Miyoshi was not, let it be stated, written for him. *Antiquity and Anachronism in Japanese History* (Stanford University Press, 1992; paper 1995) was prepared as a kind of "mid-career summing up" (p. xvii), and as a celebration and a tribute to a genealogical line that goes back to Kan'ichi Asakawa and John Whitney Hall. It elaborates a type of history, but it in no way disparages any other types. Indeed, it states its openness to new ways of configuring old subjects, and is ceaselessly skeptical of received wisdom. However, it does not filter its skepticism through lenses developed by modern critical theorists, but rather through the medium of the original language. That was the choice I made as the author of this book, and I apologize to no one for such a straightforward strategy. In my opinion, we cannot hope to narrow the distance between ourselves and the medieval Japanese without listening very hard to what they were saying.

In fact, I have allowed my selection of research projects to be guided, during twenty-five years, by the inspirations I have taken from primary sources. Thus, e.g., I wrote about law and justice and about inheritance and family dynamics because the records of those centuries were literally obsessed with these subjects, and because the subjects themselves remained unstudied in the West. Though Miyoshi alleges that I have not written about medieval women, the charge is palpably absurd for the same reasons: since the documents from that era are all but saturated with female voices, I was tempted, almost inevitably, to seek to explore the social place of these provincial women. In *Antiquity and Anachronism*, I then elaborated on this subject by taking an introductory look at their personal names. On the other hand, I must acknowledge that Miyoshi was right concerning one of my omissions: I have never written anything on "the decline of Heian women's narrative energy" (Miyoshi review, p. 170), but who other than Miyoshi would have taken me to task for that one?

Thinking more broadly of his wish list, Miyoshi seems to be unaware of the variety of studies now in print or in press on his very themes, though their methodologies would likely disqualify them for his admiration. In particular, the fields of history and religion are now cooperating as never before, as scholars in the two disciplines are looking at religious life from new angles. For that matter, a conference that I organized in Oxford in September had only five of seventeen papers on (for Miyoshi) the despised general subject of medieval “institutions.” The others dealt with intellectual, cultural, and religious themes, all—let it be said—without the impedimenta of the new jargon. I hope I can promise that the book will be a model of clear thinking and clear writing.

At the same time, the studies that are now appearing are being built upon the foundations laid by our pioneers. Most of today’s authors understand indebtedness and acknowledge it. By contrast, Miyoshi seems to want us to turn our backs on our predecessors, and to have us build atop the debris of what he, as field arbiter, now rejects. Finally, he does not seem to realize the immensity of the task still before us, with a millennium of Japanese history whose contours, even in broad outline, are not always clear. The ability to distinguish between main and minor themes and subjects does not come automatically, and our numbers, compared with those of modernists, remain small. Maturity needs to be earned not merely declared.

My hope, then, is that Miyoshi’s hectoring will now end. I do not care a jot about how he spends his own research time; let him have all the influence his serious writing merits. But he must not be permitted to disparage the choices of others, especially in a part of the profession that is not his. Thus, for all who study Japan, I exhort you to persevere. And do not allow yourself to be intimidated by anyone.

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