

Communication to the Editor

TO THE EDITOR:

The review by Masao Miyoshi of Jeffrey Mass's *Antiquity and Anachronism in Japanese History*, which appeared in the February 1993 issue of *The Journal of Asian Studies* (pp. 169–71), is unwarrantedly harsh. It turns into vices what are ordinarily and properly acknowledged to be scholarly virtues. For instance, Professor Mass's work over the last two decades on the Kamakura *bakufu* is depicted not as a fruitful exercise that gave birth to a number of major books, and still less as evidence of Mass's dedication to a painstaking scholarly examination of the body of *bakufu* documents, but is dismissed as a "preoccupation." Even the lack of interruption in Mass's work on that topic over the years is intimated as being somehow a character flaw, as is, of all things, Mass's liking for clarity.

Undoubtedly the vast majority of people in Japan Studies feel that Jeffrey Mass has nothing to apologize for and much—probably more than anyone else currently active in the field of medieval Japanese history—to be proud of. During the past two decades, most people in that field first learned about the Kamakura period and the *bakufu* documentary corpus through Mass's publications; many of us still, and always will, feel indebted to Mass, and look forward to many more productive years on his part.

All reviewers stand in danger of criticizing a book for not being a different book, for failing to address what the reviewer deems it ought to address. Professor Miyoshi's review lists a number of topics—including intellectual history, religious development, women's life, gendered history, and everyday life—that it asserts Professor Mass's book ought to have dealt with. No doubt most readers share the view that there are still huge gaps in the fabric of scholarship on early and medieval Japanese history, and the frustration that those gaps are so many and so wide. Still, Mass neither caused those gaps nor does he pretend to close all of them, and it is unjust to blame him for their existence and persistence. It is a compliment to Mass, an acknowledgment of his stature in the field, that its problems are laid at his feet.

Professor Miyoshi's main criticism has to do with what he calls a "chronometric construct," which he considers characterizes Professor Mass's work overall. I take it that this means that Mass (like many historians) subscribes to a theory of causality according to which events come about subsequent to and consequent upon sets of preceding events, and that he believes that it very much matters, for a "better" understanding of what went on in medieval Japan, that we know the chronological history of the documentary record. That kind of inquiry cannot simply be dismissed as simplistic and unimportant, for if historians do not know the sequences of events they cannot explain anything at all and are left with mere trans-historical description. Miyoshi implies that "Buddhist epistemology . . . disturb[s] this chronometric construct" (p. 170), but the fact is that even the Buddhist tradition in Japan, its complex theology of time notwithstanding, was highly "chronologicistic"; that is, Buddhist ecclesiastics were very much concerned with getting the time-line straight, for theological (when the age of *mappō* began, etc.), institutional (which abbot succeeded which in the various lineages, etc.), economic (whether or not last year's *nengu* was

paid, etc.), and myriad other reasons. Indeed, it is well known that many "chronometrically constructed" texts (biographies, diaries, military chronicles, histories, etc.) were produced by Buddhist monks.

Professor Miyoshi calls upon Professor Mass to consider the applicability of his work to broader historical issues and to ponder the meaning of his undertaking. Again, it is an indirect compliment to Mass, an acknowledgment of his great store of knowledge about the Kamakura period, that still more could be asked of him. And yet there is something disturbingly "thought-controlish" about that call, as Miyoshi goes so far as to assert that Mass's "indifference" to critical theory is "hard to accept." In effect, Miyoshi's review prohibits Mass from doing a certain kind of institutional history, which is demeaned as "institutionism."

Historians are quite properly being called upon to be more self-conscious of, to reflect more upon, the nature of their endeavor. No doubt this is important, fruitful, and even necessary, but it need not be the only subject of historians' discourse: occasionally historians should write history. What many if not most readers of Professor Mass's works want to know about is not so much Mass himself and what he thinks he is up to, but what (he thinks) the Kamakura *bakufu* was up to. Whereas it is true that Mass and the Kamakura shoguns are all tied up together in a Heisenbergian indeterminacy tag-team match, this is not to say that on reading Mass one meets a "Massian" shogun, a hybrid of shogunal prime matter and "Massian" substantial form. One wonders whether we in the Humanities have not gotten a bit carried away solipsistically with our own presence and importance.

Given space limitations, Professor Miyoshi could not elaborate on his views, but his remarks provide the occasion to comment briefly on the doing of history and the place of Professor Mass's scholarly *opus* in that enterprise.

These days the Humanities and Social Sciences are infected by a rather virulent strain of "fashion" virus that causes people to believe that the only acceptable form of inquiry is one that conforms to the latest methodological (largely European, and mainly French) fashions. There is no doubt that various critical theorists and assorted "posties" (post-modernists, post-structuralists, etc.), as their critics pejoratively categorize them, have made great contributions to the Humanities and Social Sciences. And yet, there are good reasons to resist the ascendant fashion in the name of (out of fear of identifying oneself with the dinosaurs, one is almost afraid to say the word) "realism," whatever version of that philosophical position one may wish to adopt. Put excessively simply, realism is now largely out of fashion, and assorted versions of philosophical idealism are "in." The inclination of the academy is to celebrate "ideas" and to debase and slough off institutions as comparatively unimportant. In the field of Religions Studies, for instance, there persists—indeed, given the present enamorment with the "Idea," there may be a revival of—the old and properly rejected notion that what religion is really about is beliefs (rituals and institutions being merely "vanities"). "Institutionism," whatever that may mean exactly, falls more in the "realism" camp, for which reason it is deemed to fail to be an "idea-l" academic enterprise.

Everything, it is fashionable to claim, is a mental construct. There are no "mistakes" in the record, just different ways of constructing things, different "discourses"; there is no truth, only local knowledges, and thus no lies—and, correlatively, no justice (who would dare risk casting her/himself as an imperialistic moralizer by passing judgment on the present "discourse" in what used to be Yugoslavia?). Signs are taken to symbolize only other signs in an infinitely regressive tunnel of mirrors in which no-"thing" is reflected. One is caused to recall the wondrous

descriptions of the emperor's clothes. "Institutionists," in their favor, might be able to give a satisfying account of where, so to speak, the mirrors come from, for fashion, too, has its institutional history; its originary locus cannot be located, as idealists might be compelled to argue, in the Cartesian ephemerality of "mind."

The fashionable approaches are more often than not characterized by relativism and obscurantism. Regarding the first of those two characteristics, it is most ironic that many relativists are absolute in their relativism. There is no truth, and that's the truth of it. Thus we are trapped in a sort of metaphysical Alice's Wonderland where those who hold that the real and the true either do not exist or are not knowable, nevertheless, and sardonically, are so certain about their way of doing history that they reject those ways that do not conform to the regnant fashion.

Perhaps what is needed in the field of Japanese history is a dialectical approach that would integrate more closely the important, indeed necessary, contribution of those who do the hard work of disclosing to us the jots and tittles of ancient documents and determining their chronological sequence, with the most fashionable interpretive strategies. (This is not to imply that the former scholars employ no interpretive strategy in their reading of documents.) And yet it might not be possible to work out a comfortable and fruitful amalgamation of the "realist" and the "idealist" approaches, for they may well be twains that can never completely meet. One would then have to make the hard philosophical choice of which camp to live in. Were this choice forced upon us (as, indeed, it now is), I expect Professor Mass would find that he has lots of company in his "realist" camp.

There is something unsettling about universalizing the *au courant* European fashions as being somehow more applicable to the "Japanese" (and all other peoples) than other approaches. This may be—as Professor Miyoshi himself demonstrates when he challenges the chronological historical marker "modern," (for good reason, given that notion's imperialistic origin and implications)—nothing more than the latest phase of "Western" cultural and intellectual imperialism.

NEIL McMULLIN
University of Toronto