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## **Rehabilitating Mythical Tradition: Saigō Nobutsuna and Japanese Myths, 1945–1963**

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### **Abstract**

Japan in the aftermath of World War II provides a unique opportunity to consider issues of innovation and tradition because of the rapid vicissitudes in attitudes towards Japanese traditions during wartime, occupation, and postwar periods. In the early 1940s, Japanese tradition was deployed to support the war effort. Then, following Japan's surrender, Japanese tradition became a scapegoat that explained why Japan had fallen into ultranationalism and militarism. Finally, Japanese tradition was rehabilitated into a repository of cultural heritage for the racially unified people of a democratic nation. This paper examines the treatment of Japanese mythical tradition from 1945–1963, with special focus on the writings of literature scholar Saigō Nobutsuna (1916–2008), and argues that Saigō's applications of myth and ritual were instrumental in creating a fantasy of antiquity for postwar Japan. Considering Saigō and the postwar Japanese case demonstrates that while innovation and tradition can work against each other, innovation can also rehabilitate, preserve, and create tradition. Furthermore, this study illustrates that the innovation process does not operate independently of socio-economic factors and that the meaning and significance of tradition must be rigorously historicized for a particular era to reveal how it was reformed, rehabilitated, desacralized, or obviated.

**Keywords:** Saigō Nobutsuna; Japanese tradition, ancient Japanese literature; postwar Japan; Japanese myth

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In the aftermath of World War II, Japanese mythical tradition went through a striking reversal of fortunes, from state orthodoxy to dangerous history to repository of popular identity, all in the space of about two decades. These quick turnarounds make the position of Japanese mythical tradition in the post-World War II period an unusual and illustrative case study for assessing innovation and tradition more broadly. Japanese mythical tradition in this period demonstrates not only the mutability of the role tradition can play in a given society, but also the means by which tradition can be rehabilitated in the face of challenges raised by the adoption of a new worldview. In the case of Japan, the recategorization of the country's oldest traditional literature from "scripture" to "myth" permitted literature to be reincorporated into the public sphere as a positive element linked to a prewritten and prehistoric cultural heritage.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Japanese mythical tradition was a matter of state. The sanctity and legitimacy of the emperor rested upon on the exegesis of several traditional Japanese texts, notably the 712 *Kojiki* (An Account of Ancient Matters) and the 720 *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan). Both texts describe the creation of the Japanese archipelago by the Shinto gods and the founding of the Japanese empire in 660 BCE, and as the two oldest Japanese books, were synonymous with Japanese mythical tradition. The canonical role of these eighth-century texts in the 1930s was clearly stated in works such as the 1937 *Kokutai no hongī* (Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan).<sup>1</sup> *Kokutai no hongī* frequently cited *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* as evidence of Japanese national supremacy and the emperor's divinity. Unorthodox interpretations of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* were punished. For example, historian Tsuda Sō-

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1 For translation and details on the role of *Kokutai no hongī*, see Hall (1949).

kichi (1873–1961) was placed under house arrest in 1942 for publishing heretical theories about *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*.<sup>2</sup> The Shinto religion, closely tied to the state during this period, used *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* as its official scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

The canonical authority of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, and of the Japanese mythical tradition for which these texts stood in, was completely overturned in August 1945, upon Japan's unconditional surrender to the Allied forces. At this inflection point, the future of the Japanese nation-state itself was uncertain, along with the fate of the ruling emperor, who was supposedly an invincible god-made-manifest. In the months that followed, Japanese mythical tradition confronted existential peril as the emperor made a public announcement renouncing his divinity, the ties between Shinto and the state were dissolved, and Supreme Commander for the Allied Forces Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964) banned *Kokutai no hongu*. Japanese intellectuals, many of whom had used their scholarship to support the war effort, quickly pivoted to malign traditions that they blamed for leading the nation first to war and then to disaster. Japanese mythical tradition went from scripture to scapegoat.

In less than a decade, the pendulum swung again, and scholars rehabilitated Japanese mythical tradition, *Kojiki*, and *Nihon shoki*. The texts were rebranded not as canon, but as myth, and they were enshrined not as the scriptural source of imperial divinity, but as the sourcebooks for a national culture. The release of what these texts could mean, first from an authoritarian state bent on enforcing a singular interpretation, then from an occupying army bent on defanging a former enemy, resulted in Japanese myths attracting a greater diversity of interpretations in the postwar era than at any point in their long history. Though the emperor was forced to renounce his divinity, the stories and texts that underpinned the imperial system became even more entwined with, and even synonymous with, a new notion of mythical tradition that pervaded postwar Japan.

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2 Tsuda's case is discussed in detail in Brownlee (1997).

3 On Shinto during this period, see Hardacre (2017), esp. pp. 403–440.

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Strictly speaking, the links between *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, Japanese tradition, and the Japanese state have always been in flux. In the ninth and tenth centuries, periodic court-sponsored readings of *Nihon shoki* positioned the text, and its support for the emperor system, as state orthodoxy. By the eleventh century, these official readings had ceased, and the emperor ruled in name only. In the twelfth century, *Nihon shoki* was cited in poetic treatises, linking the text with Japanese tradition in the dominant artistic medium of the era. In the fourteenth century, supporters of Emperor Go-Daigo (1288–1339, r. 1318–1339) rebelled against the ruling shogun and resurrected *Nihon shoki* as a guarantor of kingly authority for the emperor. Such on-again-off-again connections between these eighth-century texts, tradition, and state continue throughout the entire written history of Japan.<sup>4</sup> For the modern Meiji state, which restored the emperor to power in 1868, myth and tradition were powerful vehicles for cementing a new, centralized authority. Of course, the actual content of the texts required major reinterpretation to fit the modern era, and the traditions it enshrined were often rebuilt, if not wholly invented.<sup>5</sup> Given this long and complex history, it is not unusual that the oldest Japanese texts found a mechanism to survive after 1945: this was not the first time that these narratives had been challenged with displacement. What is striking is that they survived by forging a link between Japanese mythical tradition and the popular sphere, with *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* becoming the emblematic texts of a racially unified nation.

Several recent works have shed light on the rehabilitation of modern Japanese literature in the immediate postwar era. Ueda et al (2017) highlighted the “Literature and Politics Debates” of 1945–1952, and Ueda’s provision of multiple primary sources in English translation opened this topic up for scholars outside of Japanese studies for the first time. At these debates, literature scholars, imagined as the vanguard of artistic expression, participated in several roundtables and symposiums discussing the culpability of Japanese traditions for the war and the di-

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4 On the changes in the reception of these texts, see Felt (2023), Hardacre (2017), Breen and Teeuwen (2000), among others.

5 On the use of myth and performance by the modern Japanese state, with special attention to the invention of traditional rituals, see Ruoff (2014) and Fujitani (1996).

rections for Japanese literature going forward. Ueda et al (2018) continued this line of investigation with a collection of essays by seminal scholars in the field of modern Japanese literature about the Debates, though contents related to traditional literature fall outside the scope of Ueda's analysis. The rehabilitation of traditional literature features slightly in Sasanuma (2012), who identifies the key figure Saigō Nobutsuna (1916–2008), a leading scholar of premodern Japanese literature and Japanese myths in the postwar era, as an ideal case study. However, Sasanuma's focus is squarely on Taiwan and the legacy of Japanese colonialism; Saigō's broader intellectual shifts, which rehabilitated Japanese tradition as myth, are not addressed. Shorter studies on Saigō such as Fujii (1978), Kannotō (1982), Go (1997), Mitani (1997), and Miura (2011) have also covered components of Saigō's thought, but not his rehabilitation of traditional Japanese literature. As such, the philosophical innovations that permitted Japanese mythical tradition to reinvent itself in the postwar era and the innovations applied by Saigō have remained shrouded.

In order to identify the process by which Japanese mythical tradition was restored and rehabilitated after 1945, this paper focuses on two key issues. First is the position of traditional literature scholars at the Literature and Politics Debates, which reveals the dire straits into which Japanese mythical tradition was forced into after the war and provides the context necessary to identify the terms in which Japanese tradition could reappear. Second is the shifting position of Saigō. Comparing Saigō's writings from the immediate postwar with those in later decades reveals that while the meaning and significance of tradition was always a major concern, Saigō's rehabilitation of Japanese mythical tradition was accompanied by a shift in philosophical perspective, from Marxism to historicized social anthropology. Notably, in his later writings, he began to categorize *Kojiki* as myth. I argue that this shift, and its consequent rehabilitation of traditional Japanese literature, resulted from both a loss of faith in the Japanese Communist Party in the 1960s and from an increasingly pronounced desire, in the global capitalistic and commodified postwar era, to return to a perceived authentic Japanese past. While academic discourse has since moved past Saigō's fantasy

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of antiquity, it was an important fixture for restoring Japanese mythical tradition and retains meaningful influence in the popular sphere.

### 1 Traditional Japanese Literature at the Turning Point

One issue that has confounded modern research on premodern literature is the purported gap that modernity creates between the two. In the aftermath of World War II, this chasm of modern sensibilities divided researchers of traditional Japanese literature, often referred to as “national literature,” and modern authors seeking new directions in literature. For example, at a roundtable held in September 1946, just over one year after Japan’s surrender, six literary critics: Usui Yoshimi, Odagiri Hideo, Kubota Shōichirō, Gomi Tomohide, Nagazumi Yasuaki, and Fukuda Tsuneari participated in a symposium on the “Various Problems for Research on Japanese Literature” (Nihon bungaku 1946). A short exchange between Odagiri and Nagazumi captures the tenor of the conversation and the perceived distance between researchers who formed the old guard of Japanese literature scholarship and those associated with modernity.

**Nagazumi:** Everything from the start today has been badmouthing scholars of national literature, on the whole, they have no establishment of subjectivity, and it is fair to say that they are not modern human beings.

**Odagiri:** I don’t know very many scholars of national literature, but when I go to one of their meetings, they’re very uptight and somehow, it’s painful for me to stay there. (laughter) They’re completely unapproachable. I can’t talk to them because we have no shared aspects of humanity. We’ve done nothing but badmouth scholars of national literature here today, but if we can’t stop badmouthing them even more, we’ll never get to connect [today’s conversation] to contemporary literature.

**Nagazumi:** We still have some time, so lay it on them! (laughter)

For Nagazumi and Odagiri, at the time both in their thirties, scholars of

national literature, that is, university professors of traditional Japanese literature, were objects of ridicule for both their conservative stuffiness and the dry, documentary-style of their research that seemed to deny a subject position for the researcher.

Some circumspection is warranted in reading this exchange as several of the keywords from this discussion like “national literature” and “subjectivity” are not commensurate with their English translation. Or more pointedly, as Naoki Sakai has argued, these concepts acquire meaning through the act of translation, broadly defined. Translation enables the formation of “national literature” and the “national subject” (Sakai, 1997). In that regard, Nagazumi and Odagiri’s exchange takes on additional gravity, because the concepts they invoke are the product of a negotiation between their visions of Japan and of the West, and their discussion, in 1946, occurs at precisely the moment when the relationship between Japan and the West was being renegotiated, or in Sakai’s terms, retranslated.

Nagazumi and Odagiri’s critique is voiced in the present tense, and their critique targets national literature scholars both during and after the surrender, because scholars of national literature had made only superficial changes in their postwar academic work. National literature scholars did couch their postwar scholarship in terms of renewal, revival, and reinvention, but a closer look at their research and perspectives reveals little change. For example, in March 1946, the periodical *Kokugo to Kokubungaku*, the leading journal for the field of traditional Japanese literature, published a special issue on “New Directions in National Literature.” Several of the most notable academics of the time, including Fujimura Tsukuru (1875–1953) and Hisamatsu Sen’ichi (1894–1976), wrote their impressions on how the field of Japanese literature would change, and would need to change, following surrender to the Allies. However, there is significant resonance when we compare the statements of senior contributors to this issue with their earlier, wartime positions.

As the most senior and highly decorated scholar featured in the issue,

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Fujimura had the honor of writing the opening essay, “Kokubun gakuto kongo no ninmu” (Mission for National Literature Students Hereafter). Fujimura’s earlier career had centered on early modern Japanese literature, and he was a key figure in canonizing the work of Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693) and connecting it to the development of Japanese fiction. Fujimura was also a founder of the journal *Kokugo to Kokubungaku*. Politically, the article is quite striking as Fujimura proclaimed that democratic systems were endemic to Japan, found in both the ancient emperor system and the Meiji (1868–1912) period. These stand in contrast to “warlike” and “militaristic” ideals, presumably referring not only to the early twentieth century but also to the long period of warrior rule in medieval and early modern Japan. By identifying examples of democratic systems in antiquity, Fujimura linked the postwar democratic state with a Japanese mythical tradition and an idealized past. He also cemented a connection between the *demos* and the state, ultimately hoping that an “independent democratic and peaceful state” would someday be achieved (Fujimura 1946). In the same vein, Fujimura suggested that one cause of Japanese defeat in World War II was the willful rejection of ideological engagement with the world. He stated in the opening of his essay that Japan “over relied on the spirit of the nation’s founding, ignored the prevailing trends in the world, and blindly proceeded down an isolationist path” (Fujimura, 1946). These “prevailing trends” referred to none other than democracy.

The claim that isolationist tendencies had doomed Japan to both imperial expansion and wartime defeat was repeated in Hisamatsu Sen’ichi’s “Kokubungaku ni tai suru hansei to jikaku” (Reflections and Realizations about National Literature), which appeared in the same issue as Fujimura 1946. Hisamatsu, while significantly younger than Fujimura, still constituted the “old guard” to scholars like Odagiri and Nagazumi. Hisamatsu finished his Ph.D. in 1934 at Tokyo Imperial University and was appointed to the faculty at the same university shortly thereafter. His research focused on Japanese poetry, especially the ancient, eighth-century poetry collection *Man’yōshū* (Collection of Myriad Poems), and over the course of his career, that study grew to cover premodern Japanese poetry as a whole. Hisamatsu also oversaw the creation of *Kokutai*



*no hongî*; presumably Hisamatsu handled the use of canonical Japanese literature in the text, that is, the incorporation of mythical tradition into fascist propaganda. Hisamatsu's support for Japanese imperial expansion and war vanished in his 1946 essay, where he repeated the same refrain as Fujimura, noting that "[National literature must], along with explaining literary qualities based on Japaneseness, that is to say, on the quality of being a national, make clear the universality and the worldly qualities of literature" (Hisamatsu 1946).<sup>6</sup> This dual thrust: a focus on the particularities of Japanese literature and a simultaneous cognizance of world literature and worldly trends, became a focal point for the old guard of Japanese literature scholars in the aftermath of World War II.<sup>7</sup>

The talk about reflections and new directions provides important context for Odagiri and Nagazumi's complaints about the state of the study of Japanese literature after surrender. Even though Fujimura, Hisamatsu, and others suggested that they were turning over a new leaf, the perception that their academic work lacked subjectivity and a modern consciousness persisted, and the criticism from their younger peers did not abate. The most straightforward reason that critique of scholarship on traditional Japanese literature continued despite the course corrections proposed by the old guard scholars was that these corrections were in fact not new or novel in the least. In June of 1942, Fujimura oversaw a special edition of *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* on "The Creation of Greater East Asia and the Ideals for a New National Literature" that had proposed none other than greater integration of Japanese national literature into a new world order (Fujimura, ed., 1942). The unique spirit of the Japanese nation that had undergirded Fujimura's application of traditional Japanese literature as wartime propaganda was the same unique spirit that he associated with peace and democratic ideals after the war ended. As Sasanuma (2012) has noted, the battlefield exhorta-

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6 Yasuda (2002) provides a biographical sketch of Hisamatsu, including his shifting positions in the aftermath of the defeat.

7 As might be expected, it was precisely this period in which Comparative Literature emerged as a discipline for the first time in Japan. In October 1948, Kokugo to Kokubungaku did a special edition on "Comparative Literature." This was followed, in September 1949, in the periodical *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō*, which issued a special edition titled "World Literature and Japanese Literature." A periodical devoted to comparative literature and a scholarly association appeared shortly thereafter. Scholars of Chinese literature had an outsized influence on the nascent discipline in Japan.

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tions of national literature were simply exchanged with application of peace and democracy to the spirit of the Japanese nation. Yasuda (2002) has extensively compared Hisamatsu's pre- and postwar positions and similarly identified continuity for both the role of local customs and the character of the Japanese people. Tsuboi (2001) has proposed that for academics, shifting their output to conform from the pre-war censorship regime to the postwar GHQ press code meant replacing the national polity with national literature itself, such that their signified, Japanese tradition, could be preserved intact.

In any case, the semantic shifts and intellectual acrobatics of mainstream scholars of traditional Japanese literature did little to convince Odagiri, Nagazumi, and the other younger scholars who stepped forward after the war to condemn these superficial claims of change. As Nagazumi put it, "maybe what it means to be a scholar of national literature is that you adjust your walking pace to the circumstances," pivoting from support of the war to avoidance of responsibility for its devastation (Nihon bungaku 1946). Odagiri noted, in the same vein, that national literature scholars were "feudal" in mindset, that is to say, they strictly followed orders from above, as opposed to "modern" scholars who possessed subjectivity and could thereby "read literature as literature" (Nihon bungaku 1946).

Odagiri and his fellow postwar symposium participants were not the first to criticize national literature scholarship for lacking subjectivity, and placed awkwardly between the fierce young critics and the old guard was Saigō Nobutsuna, the most influential scholar of ancient Japanese literature in the postwar era. Saigō was educated during the war at Tokyo Imperial University, originally studying English literature. But, under the influence of Araragi-school poet Saitō Mokichi, Saigō was drawn to the eighth-century *Man'yōshū*, the oldest poetry collection in the Japanese tradition.<sup>8</sup> After the war, Saigō participated in the Literature and Politics Debates, and also continued his study of eighth-century Japanese classics, especially *Man'yōshū* and *Kojiki*, ultimately publishing over twenty books and dominating the postwar

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8 On Mokichi's adaptation of the *Man'yōshū* for modern readers, see Shinada (2014).

study of ancient Japanese literature. Saigō was the same age as Odagiri, both slightly older than Nagazumi and the other symposium members, Saigō's training at Tokyo Imperial University undoubtedly put him in contact with Hisamatsu, and when Saigō broke onto the academic scene in the early 1940s, he did so in the journal associated with that institution, *Kokugo to Kokubungaku*.

Saigō's earliest critical work addressed the early modern scholar of traditional Japanese literature Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), and there Saigō thinly hid his Marxist aspirations (Sagiō, 1943). Saigō argued that Norinaga's approach to reading and understanding ancient Japanese literature was characterized by hermeneutics and positivism, and could be labeled as “documentary” in nature. The documentary quality of Norinaga's work meant that while it was a substantial departure from the rationalist modes of interpretation common among Confucian scholars of Norinaga's era, it faced its own limitations of empiricism and personal experience. While Norinaga's scholarship had some level of “subjective, human self-awareness,” its scope was strictly personal, and could not expand or develop into a larger grasp of general human subjectivity. This limitation also meant that Norinaga was unable to produce rational explanations for phenomena occurring beyond the individual level, such as society and culture.<sup>9</sup>

Saigō's critique of Norinaga was directed not only at early modern scholarship, but at his 1943 situation as well. Saigō invoked farmers, whose lifestyle he suggested as being the closest vestige of early modern livelihood still active in Japan in the early twentieth century. Despite the increasing rationalization and efficiency of agricultural production, this lagging industry was dominated by tenant farmers obsessed with their own productive capacity, which both limited the potential agricultural output of the nation but also prevented farmers from realizing their own capacity to be civic individuals engaged in society. A more clarion, Marxist imperative for instilling class consciousness was out of the question for an academic article in 1943 Japan, but critically, Saigō

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<sup>9</sup> On Norinaga's epistemology and its limits, see Felt (2023). On Norinaga's construction of meaning for reading the Japanese classics, see Burns (2003).

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indicated that this failure to develop a self was not limited to farmers but applied to the older generation of scholars: Fujimura, Hisamatsu, and others, whose hermeneutic and documentary mode of scholarship had changed little from that of Norinaga. Saigō's claim was especially pertinent given the 1940's zeitgeist of "Overcoming Modernity;" Hisamatsu had proposed a "new kokugaku" that would use traditional Japanese literature as proof for an ideology of Japanese intellectual superiority, and Saigō's critique noted that there was little daylight between this "new kokugaku" and its early modern forebearer.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Saigō emphasized the development of the farmer into a civic individual with a social conscience. In keeping with the times, Saigō framed Japan as the leader of Asia, and so his critique was not incompatible with wartime doctrine, and he never issued a call for revolution, though he advocated that research on traditional Japanese literature should have a social consciousness.

In the immediate postwar period, Saigō added the problem of the ethnic nation to his existing critique. In Fujimura's 1946 "New Directions in National Literature," Saigō's contribution was a short essay titled "Nihonteki to iu koto ni tsuite no hansei: kokubungaku no atarashii shupatsu ni sai shite" (Reflections on What it Means to Describe Something as Japanese: A New Departure for National Literature) (Saigō, 1946b). There, Saigō claimed that the biggest issue in the study of Japanese literature was the notion of "Japaneseness:" the habit of literature scholars to assert that such-and-such a literary work expresses Japaneseness. He named several thematic motifs: *masurao* (manliness), *mono no aware* (pathos), *sabi* (loneliness, from *wabi-sabi*) and works of Japanese literature from ancient to early modern. He then suggested that if each of these works and motifs expresses "Japaneseness," then the term was essentially meaningless. Saigō also historically grounded his critique, noting that the tendency towards overly broad generalization went back to Haga Yaichi, one of the founders of modern Japanese literary study. Instead, Saigō proposed that the identification of Japaneseness needed to be historically grounded and linked to stages of societal development, again reflecting the influence of Marx. The "universality" and

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<sup>10</sup> On Overcoming modernity, see Harootunian (2002).

“world literature” conceptions that appeared in the 1946 writings of older scholars like Fujimura and Hisamatsu were absent in Saigō 1946b. Rather, Saigō suggested that within historical factors, there must be some identifiable typology that could be applied to Japanese literature that would distinguish it from Indian, Chinese, or European literature. And again, Saigō repeated the refrain that the study of Japanese literature in his era was no different from early modern scholarship. This could only be resolved by a “self-revolution” that would produce a new state of heart and mind in the Japanese people.

In 1948, Saigō republished some of his prewar criticism of early modern scholarship, but at this juncture, the problem of the ethnic nation identified in his 1946 essay did not feature prominently (Saigō, 1948).<sup>11</sup> Instead, Saigō removed references to Japan as being the leader of Asia and blamed traditional Japanese literature scholars for their responsibility in the development of ultra-nationalist sentiments. He diagnosed this condition as existing from the Meiji period, the era when Japan first modernized, and claimed that the field of traditional Japanese literature had been created to serve the state; it was not the product of scholarly investigation by civically minded individuals operating free of state interference. Echoing the critique of Odagiri and Nagazumi, Saigō explained that the study of traditional Japanese literature lacked the conception of a modern, civic self, and instead was simply a tool used by the state. Furthermore, traditional Japanese literature had functioned to hold back Japanese modernization. However, this modern self was not particular to Japan, but rather a generalized consciousness capable of recognizing the contradictions of capitalism and realizing itself as part of a social class.

Perhaps the reason that Saigō did not interject a discussion of the ethnic nation more directly into his rewritten critique of early modern study of Japanese mythical tradition was that the war had made the topic exceptionally thorny. For the older scholars with whom Saigō disagreed, the broad application of Japanese uniqueness to traditional literature

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<sup>11</sup> Saigō republished (Saigō, 1948) in 1965 as *Kokugaku no hihan: hōhō ni kan suru oboegaki*; this version ran through six editions, the final in 1989. On the difference between the 1965 version and the 1948 version, see Ōsumi (2013).

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was an area identified as continuity, a place whereby Japanese mythical tradition could get a new set of clothes. The locus of mythical tradition, formerly fixed around the concept of a national polity or body politic, could be broadened to include not only the state and emperor but also the people and some underlying notion of Japanese spirit. As Hisamatsu proclaimed himself in 1946, “Our country has 2,600 years of history, and a unique national polity is consistent throughout that time. We also have a unique nationality and a unique national spirit” (Hisamatsu, 1946). But for younger, Marx-influenced critics who associated the ultra-nationalism of the wartime ethos with a failure to modernize and inability to form a modern subjectivity, it was unavoidable to think that it was Japanese tradition itself that had somehow held back Japan’s developmental progress. Saigō’s suggestion that traditional literature scholarship that invoked Japaneseness needed to historically ground the term was useful for studying earlier incantations of society. However, as put forth by Saigō, it did not explain what it would mean to be Japanese going forward or address whether Japanese tradition could continue to exist without putting the state and society at risk for falling into regressive, feudal thinking once more.

The dilemma between the ethnic nation and modernity was addressed most directly by Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910–1977), a scholar of Chinese literature known especially for his translations of Lu Xun, his support of Mao Zedong and the PRC, and his criticism of the 1960 US-Japan Security treaty, which kept the US military stationed in Japan. His 1951 article “The Ideology of the Modern and the Problem of the Ethnic Nation” notes, with plentiful examples, “with the defeat, the predominant thinking has been that ethnic nationalism is an evil,” so much so that some critics even advocated abolishing the Japanese language entirely (Takeuchi, 1951, tr. Allen 2018). However, Takeuchi argues that this standpoint, while natural given the excesses of war, was fundamentally untenable. For Takeuchi, a simple, fundamental sense of ethnic nationalism was a profound feature of the human person. This fundamental ethnic nationalism was then distorted by modernity. In the case of Japan, the distortion was also warped, in that it did not produce a revolutionary consciousness. Clearly Takeuchi had the PRC in mind as an

example of a correct, contrasting ethnic nationalism, and in regard to literature, was focused on Lu Xun, the author at the center of his academic work. Takeuchi excoriates the Japanese left and the Japanese Communist Party for a double failure. Before Japanese fascism attained supremacy, Japanese communists had ignored the ethnic nation and focused on class, a move whose practical effect was the suppression of the ethnic nation. After the war, Japanese communists either shunned dealing with the ethnic nation or bluntly applied a Chinese model of the ethnic nation to Japan that did not fit. Most importantly, in Takeuchi's view, it was "impossible to have a revolution not rooted in ethnic traditions" (Takeuchi, 1951). Takeuchi distinguishes, in his semantics, between "nationalism," derived from English and written using the Japanese syllabary, and "ethnic nation," a Japanese word written using Chinese characters. Effecting a social revolution in Japan required literature that spoke to the "ethnic nation" without falling into "nationalism."

1951 also confronted Japanese academics in a very different fashion than the immediate postwar period. The American occupiers, initially hailed as liberators by imprisoned leftists, had thoroughly soured on Japanese communism following the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, and the outbreak of war in Korea. The Supreme Commander for Allied Forces coordinated with the Japanese government and Japanese corporations to purge thousands of employees suspected of harboring communist sympathies. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) split into two factions over dissenting reactions to Stalin's Cominform, which had criticized the Japanese Communist Party for pursuing a peaceful, democratic revolution under American occupation. Takeuchi's essay bolstered the claim of one JCP faction, the *Shokanha* or "Opinions" faction, because it retained an emphasis on the ethnic nation, that is, on Japanese particularity, that served as a foundation for the faction's rejection of Cominform criticism. In truth, that rejection was short-lived, but as Sasanuma (2012) has noted, in 1950–51, the *Shokanha* was invested in the notion that the ethnic nation, at the national level, existed before modernity.

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In the same issue as Takeuchi's "The Ideology of the Modern and the Problem of the Ethnic Nation," Saigō wrote a brief article on the challenges posed by the ethnic nation for literature. (Saigō, 1951a). Saigō's target was modern Japanese literature, which he claims had produced numerous excellent works but nothing truly worldly. This he attributed to a gap between the elites, who were influenced by outside ideas and cosmopolitan trends, and the people, with whom rested the characteristics of ethnic nationality. Since Lu Xun and Pushkin maintained a connection with the people, China and Russia were able to produce a national literature that overcame both feudalism and capitalism. However, in Japan, such a literature was never realized.

For the study of traditional Japanese literature, the suggestion that a more fundamental and natural sense of the ethnic nation existed before modernity created an opening for left-leaning scholars of national literature to rehabilitate both traditional literature and Japanese tradition itself. Saigō was a key figure at this junction. Already, Saigō had claimed that the problem with the ethnic nation in the study of traditional Japanese literature was that literature scholars applied the term too broadly and without proper historical context. Takeuchi's simple and fundamental "ethnic nation" could equate with Saigō's Japanese-ness if Saigō could identify, historically, when, where, and how this "ethnic nation" came into being and the manner of its historical development. Saigō's first published books had focused more narrowly on single periods in Japanese literature: his 1946 *Kizoku bungaku to shite no Man'yōshū* (*Man'yōshū* as Aristocratic Literature) overturned the hypothesis that the eight-century poetry collection *Man'yōshū* was comprised of popular literature by people of all social classes (Saigō, 1946a). Saigō's 1948 *Kokugaku no hihan* (A Critique of National Learning) was a rewrite of his prewar appraisals of early modern scholarship. But in 1951, Saigō cast a much broader net with *Nihon kodai bungaku shi* (A History of Ancient Japanese Literature, hereafter referred to as *History*). Of Saigō's early writings, this book was the most influential and popular, and it was republished in standalone form in 1963, 1996, and 2005 and as Volume Seven of Saigō's collected works in 2011. He published several other long durée studies in the 1950s, including one



co-authored with Nagazumi, but it was in *History* that Saigō first tried to rehabilitate Japanese mythical tradition.

The 1951 edition of *History* began with an introduction that built on Saigō's arguments about the role of antiquity as a repository for a primeval ethnic nation, with literature functioning as a repository of tradition. This paradigm was not unique to Japan, and Saigō noted that Goethe and Schiller both looked to antiquity in their own work to address the paradoxical atomization associated with individual existence in a civil society. In Japan, Saigō looked to early modern scholars of traditional Japanese literature, Motoori Norinaga and Kamo no Mabuchi, whose study of ancient literature was also grounded, according to Saigō, in the contradiction of individual and society. The reason that antiquity, whether in Germany or Japan, had the potential to overcome this contradiction of modernity is that the ancient period is the precise moment that ancient aristocrats, the first elites, were created out of an original classless society. Direct experience with antiquity through literature made it possible to identify the "secret of eternity," that is, the abiding characteristics of the ethnic nation. Early modern scholars, and the modern scholars whose methods Saigō criticized as identical to their early modern forebearers, were unable to fully commune with this ethnic ethos due to the contradictions of modern society. However, in the postwar era, a new socialist potential made it possible to resolve these contradictions and reintegrate the individual with their society.

Saigō's introduction also included a discussion of literary genre, which he identified as the critical feature for historically seating literary development, and explained why he applied a long *durée* analysis. Saigō posited that literature, while written by elites after these figures had arisen from an original classless society, expressed relationships of societal domination and revealed class identity through the mediation of genre. For Saigō, genre reflected the form by which an individual expresses their freedom and resists societal constraints, or even enunciates class conflict. As society developed along historically prescribed lines, literature adopts new generic, more complex forms in turn. At a given historical moment, a single dominant genre, or, because genre arises out

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of relations of domination, a single genre of domination, was the best measure of literary development. But while what Saigō called “class moments” precipitate changes in genre and literary expression, there is also an “eternal,” a characteristic that runs across multiple historical genres. To identify this eternal is to identify the ethnic characteristics of the nation, the force and energy that arose from the contradictions between individual and society, but also the source for future revolution. In the case of Japan, this ethnic consciousness derived from the resistance of ideological domination by foreign and cosmopolitan ideas, and recalls a return to a primordial, agrarian community that existed before local elites emerged to dominate it. Saigō’s target historical period for this study focused on the periods that he suggests exhibit this elite resistance, from the late seventh to late eleventh centuries CE.

The framework Saigō outlined in the introduction to *History*, which prescribed a critical role to Japanese traditional fiction, has deep resonances with 1951, the year of its publication. Still under Allied occupation, Japan signed the first US-Japan Security treaty and the San Francisco Peace Treaty in September. The treaty allowed the US to keep military bases on Japanese soil, which could be used at US discretion without consultation of their Japanese hosts. While the treaty set the terms for the end of Allied occupation of most of the archipelago, it also converted Japan into the forward station of American imperialism. The Japanese Communist Party, in disarray, still held out hope that socialist revolution could be achieved in Japan, hopes that pervaded until the October 1952 election, in which the JCP lost all 35 of its seats in parliament. Which is to say, when Saigō was writing in 1951, Japan was at a crossroads, with participation in the American capitalist system at the cost of sovereignty in one direction and socialist revolution in the other. Saigō’s *History* was intended to identify the characteristic of the Japanese ethnic nation that would enable a Lu Xun or a Pushkin to emerge, presumably in the context of a social revolution akin to those in China and Russia. Saigō cast the Liberal Party, established in 1950, as the dominant elites, and their cooperation with the American authorities and embrace of market capitalism was yet another “class moment.” However, the abiding ethos of the ethnic nation was resistance to domination by foreign ideas, and

this ethos would provide the energy for revolution.

In the body of *History*, Saigō summarized ancient Japanese literature in three genre-based sections: epic poetry, lyric poetry, and fiction. The first of these, epic poetry, originated in an “Heroic Age,” likely inspired by Hector Munro Chadwick’s 1912 *The Heroic Age*. In Japan, this age was epitomized in several eighth-century textual products, including *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. Before these texts were written, the actual heroes emerged as figures, and they were then preserved in oral tradition. For Saigō, the hero signified the formation of individuality: the hero is a distinct ego. The emergence of heroes also signaled the departure from a communal primitive society into one with a central authority that would ultimately coalesce into a state. The large tombs on the Japanese archipelago dating from the third to sixth centuries evoked this moment for Saigō. Heroes, because they emerged from the community of primeval society, encapsulated its virtues and values, and examination of these figures could reveal important features of antiquity. Unfortunately, in the case of Japan, the exploits of these heroes were never recorded in formal epic poetry. *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, Saigō noted, were produced by the imperial court, and so the heroic figures in the text were never able to create their own destinies like Achilles or Odysseus. Rather, they were always ultimately made subservient to the logic of imperial governance.

The second era, lyric poetry, reflected a historical age in which the formation of state administration and societal features encouraged a counter development of interiority. In the case of Japan, this corresponded with the end of the sixth century, when large burial mounds began to be built in several of the major polities of the archipelago. The mounds demonstrate extensive societal organization as well as rigid class differentiation, and when these polities merged and absorbed each other, they ultimately created the ancient Japanese state. Chinese poetry was the dominant genre for poetic expression among the elite of this society, and the vernacular poetry collection *Man’yōshū* demonstrated a native resistance to the colonizing and cosmopolitan influence of China. The poems in this vernacular collection and the formal qualities of their

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expression arose from popular songs. At the same time, they were composed in the repressive environment of the ancient Japanese state which fomented a spirit of individual, as opposed to class, subjectivity.

Saigō's final era of ancient literature was the age of fiction. Japan has a very long tradition of prose fiction, and the late tenth-century *Tale of Genji* is usually appraised as its zenith. Often touted as the world's first novel due to the interiority and psychological depth of its characters, *Genji*, according to Saigō, was the product of a society in which the elites, divorced from the countryside, which was the locus for their primeval ethnic nationality, were filled with romantic longing. The contradictions imposed by the early Japanese state, in which a cadre of elites extracted resources from the far-off countryside, resulted in reflection and awakening of the inner self, which was then expressed using prose. Critically, for Saigō, this expression was voiced by the women of ancient Japan. The men, steeped in Chinese learning and often writing in Chinese verse, were overly influenced by foreign culture and ideas and unable to tap into their native form of expression. Women, largely writing in vernacular Japanese, were the creative engine channeling popular legends into written form during the age of prose.

In the century after the writing of *The Tale of Genji*, the disintegration of the Japanese state and the elite strata of individuals who ruled it brought an end to the ancient period whose literature Saigō takes as his investigative target. In the following medieval period, popular literary forms supplanted elite literature, which Saigō takes as an endorsement of the enduring power that popular, and ethnic, forces bear. Medieval literature was, in Saigō's telling, evinced by the *Anthology of Tales from the Past*, a collection of Buddhist tales aimed at a popular audience, and in the *Tales of the Heike*, with which Japan at last had a true warrior epic.

Saigō's claim that ancient elites inspired by foreign and cosmopolitan ideas resulted in the inability of modern Japanese literature to achieve a self-consciousness flew in the face of intellectual historians at the time. The orthodox argument among Japanese Marxist historians in the

1950s and 1960s was that Japan had failed to affect a revolution and instead tipped into ultranationalism because of vestiges of feudalism that remained after the 1868 Meiji Restoration that began Japan's modernization process. More pointedly, intellectual energy tended to focus on why these vestiges had remained and whether the short period before the establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1603 constituted a reprieve from feudalism, a moment that a transition to capitalism could have been achieved but failed. This also provided an intellectual framework for Marxist-influenced scholars of traditional Japanese literature to criticize traditional literature's premodern, arresting characteristics. Saigō's alternative hypothesis destigmatized Japanese premodernity and created an opportunity for him to add value to traditional Japanese literature in the context of a national popular literature corpus. Of course, Saigō's call to resist foreign intellectual domination also referred to the Allied occupation and the American push to cement market capitalism in Japan.

## **2 Connecting Tradition to Myth and Ritual**

Saigō's writings in the early 1950's received a mixed reception. Scholars from the old guard expressed hope and promise in response to Saigō's research, perhaps because Saigō had found an effective way to preserve the study of traditional Japanese literature and the idea of Japanese ethnic uniqueness. Hisamatsu (1952) reviewed Saigō's 1951 *History* with praise. Hisamatsu himself was very invested in the relationship between regionalism and ethnic identity, and Saigō's focus on the connection between socio-historical factors and literature was described by Hisamatsu as both fresh and analytically sound. Hisamatsu agreed both with Saigō's partition of ancient literature into epic poetry, lyric poetry, and prose, and with Saigō's claim that dominant genres reflected particular socio-historical conditions. Strangely, Hisamatsu did not say anything about the marked Marxist influence in Saigō's approach, which evaluated literature primarily in terms of class struggle. Hisamatsu mentioned that he did not agree with all of Saigō's points, but he did not identify the actual items on which he dissented.

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A more critical appraisal appeared in a Japanese-language review by the American scholar of Japanese literature Donald Keene. In 1954, Saigō published another long *durée* history of Japanese literature with Nagazumi and Hirotsue Tamotsu. In this co-authored volume, Saigō was responsible for ancient Japanese literature, Nagazumi for medieval, and Hirotsue for early modern. Keene reviewed Saigō's contributions to the 1954 work, and he referred multiple times to Saigō's 1951 *History* in order to address shared problems across the two histories. The general thrust of Keene's review stressed "objective" readings in a traditionally modern vein. To Keene, the fact that traditional Japanese literature had been appropriated by the Japanese right during the war and, in the postwar, by the Japanese left in search of an ethnic nation, meant that an objective view of Japanese literature was called for, lest Japanese traditions be doomed to interpretations and left with no meaning of their own (Keene 1954).

Keene's critique recalled Saigō's characterization of wartime study of traditional Japanese literature as overly focused on documentary scholarship; Keene argued that an objective view was required in order to understand both the worldliness and the uniqueness of traditional Japanese literature. Keene also took Saigō to task for not clearly stating the position against which he argued, and Keene chose Saigō's use of "ethnic nation" to illustrate his objection. This phrase, Keene noted, had changed meaning between its wartime, ultranationalist meaning and Saigō's socialist meaning, and since Saigō did not identify this difference, the significance of his critique was occluded. Keene's push for objective interpretation also signaled a conviction that Saigō's readings were overdetermined by his political leanings. Though Saigō purported to discuss aesthetic factors, Keene pointed out that the word "arts" is nearly absent from the text while "ethnic nation," "contradiction," and "feudalism" appear five or six times per page. The greatest contradiction, Keene asserted, was that Saigō claimed that Sei Shōnagon's tenth-century *The Pillow Book* was "spiritually crippled" because of the author's pejorative view of commoners. Perceptively, however, Keene observed that in truth Saigō did not hate this book, but was rather letting his political convictions determine his interpretive stance. A more pos-

itive review by Okabe Masahiro followed Keene's, and Okabe similarly suggested that Saigō's reading of Sei Shōnagon was overdetermined (Okabe, 1954).

Saigō forcefully responded to Keene in the August 1954 edition of *Bungaku* in a nearly complete rejection of every aspect of Keene's critique (Saigō, 1954). Noting that his problem with Keene was "not in the details," but in his fundamental understanding of literature, Saigō deployed Keene's 1953 *Japanese Literature* to illustrate that many of Keene's critiques were hypocritical. Keene's complaint that Saigō overused the word "ethnic nation" was matched by Keene's overuse of "genius," for example. More pointedly, Saigō noted that Keene's discussion of Japanese poetry omitted all poetry written before the tenth century and identified the first anthology of court poetry, the *Collection of Poems Old and New* (Kokin wakashū, c. 905), as the beginnings of Japanese verse. To Saigō, this was a travesty, and he sarcastically savages Keene saying, "Keene's grasp of literature is aristocratic. It is petit-bourgeois. If you don't like me putting it that way, then we can say it is possessed with a quite refined and genteel quality." Perhaps more important, though Saigō does not mention it, is the fact that by starting in the tenth century, Keene's model for literature history erased the ancient period that Saigō had posited as the repository of ethnic Japanese tradition. Saigō also noted that Keene's purported apolitical and objective stance on reading literature apart from class conflict was cheap and shallow. The only favorable comment Saigō had for Keene related to Keene's suggestion that religion was not antithetical to literature, a point that Saigō had made in his coauthored 1954 work. The connection between religion and literature, in the form of myth, would reemerge in Saigō's later work. However, in 1954, Saigō was still quite clearly framing literature history within a Marxist paradigm.

The Marxist paradigm disappeared in 1963, when Saigō published a revised version of *History* that, in his words, was "not a revised version of the earlier edition, but a freshly rewritten one" and that the earlier edition should be discarded (Saigō, 1963). This newer edition was reprinted again in 1996, minus one section on the development of Jap-

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anese poetry, and this edition was far more widely circulated than the 1951 edition. A major change is that the socialist language that dominated the 1951 edition was largely removed (Sasanuma 2012). Sasanuma characterizes this act as primarily substitution, with the core material remaining unchanged, but this elides a major shift in the objective of Saigō's work. In his earlier version of *History*, Saigō was in search of the defining features of the Japanese ethnic nation, which he believed were inherited by successive genres of ancient literature. These features would provide the energy and vitality to a future socialist revolution in Japan and the creation of modern Japanese literature. They would also serve as a keystone for resistance to US capitalist imperialism. However, in Saigō's later version of *History*, while the search for the characteristics of the Japanese ethnic nation in ancient literature continued, there was no expectation that it would lead to future social, political, or artistic reforms. Rather, Saigō's objective was to use the understanding of Japanese tradition gleaned from ancient works of literature to both comprehend ancient Japanese literature as a field and to, in a spiritual sense, return to antiquity himself.

Saigō's updated formulation was based on a more critical and reflective application of his 1951 insistence that interpretations of literature, and by extension, of tradition, be historically grounded. Earlier, he had focused on the unique role of antiquity and traditional literature as a resource for apprehending an ethnic spirit that would function as the engine of a socialist revolution. In this sense, and as Keene criticized, Saigō's reading of ancient literature tended towards Marxist overdetermination: the actual contents of a particular work and the spirit of the times for a particular era were unique to Japan, but they also followed a standardized progression from feudalism to capitalism to socialism. In his 1963 *History*, Saigō abandoned this overarching framework and replaced it with one of uncertain historical progression. Both technology and literature continued to advance, Saigō argued, but whether a particular literary work would or would not be read in the future was unknowable, because the standards of reception were continually in flux. Stating that unknown historical conditions in future eras would determine how literature was interpreted was tantamount to admitting



that a revolution might simply not happen.

Saigō's 1963 model of historicity should be distinguished from his earlier 1951 work, from postmodern critique, and from Keene's "objective" scholarship. One keyword, used in both 1951 and 1963, that illustrates these differences is "eternity." In 1951, Saigō proposed identifying a "secret of eternity" through the study of traditional Japanese literature. This secret of eternity referred to the tendency of modern people to look to antiquity and ancient traditions, and Saigō noted parallels between his own work and that of Goethe and Schiller. The rationale for the desire to return was none other than the inevitable contradiction between the paradoxical atomization and inclusion in civil society of the modern individual. The gulf between antiquity and modern life could be bridged using direct experience and an application of the freedom from the paradox of modernity granted by socialism. Saigō noted that his own teacher, Mokichi, approached the world of the eighth century and his idol Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (n.d.–724 CE) through direct experience, i.e. reading Hitomaro's poetry, though Mokichi could not overcome the paradox of modernity to completely grasp the secret of eternity.

In 1963, Saigō instead wrote that the secret of eternity was no secret at all, but rather an illusory trap. Because the standards of reception were continually in flux, the notion of a shared continuity across eras was untenable. The desire to return to an idyllic past, which Saigō noted was not unique to Japan, should itself be the object of study. The true question was not how to return to antiquity or the secret of eternity, but why individuals in a particular moment of modernity paradoxically wished to recall antiquity. Saigō did not attempt to answer this question, but he noted that this approach would be apt for understanding Goethe, Schiller, and even Mokichi, who had a particular vision of antiquity and of Hitomaro. The intense historicization of Saigō's 1963 treatment gestured towards postmodern literary approaches and new historicism. However, Saigō still imagined societal and technological progress; he did not propose the death of meta-narratives. Saigō also criticized the idea that eternal notions of any kind existed within the literary work

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itself, a rejection of precisely the sort of objectivity sought by Keene, who proposed that Japanese traditional literature was meaningful as world literature because it addressed eternal and abiding features of the human condition such as love and sacrifice. Saigō's critique on this point also applies to New Criticism. In Saigō's view, theorizing some form of eternity based on the literary work led to metaphysics and away from the work itself, which exists not in a hermetically sealed past, but in-between past and present. Literature history, for Saigō, was a story of historical human engagement, and this story persisted into his own present as well. The other-worldliness of antiquity, while not possible to experience directly, was approachable in imagination as a conversation between past and present.

Saigō also introduced a new concept, myth, in his 1963 *History*. Saigō suggested that myth was founded on the belief, for ancient man, that nature was conquered using magic. The discussion of myth replaces a long commentary on the origins and role of genre in the 1951 *History*, where Saigō identified genre as a product of the historical circumstances and system of domination in place in a given historical period. The word "myth" does not appear in his 1951 writing at all. In 1963, Saigō instead argued that myth and its associated beliefs with regards to magic, ritual, and nature provided the foundation for literary genres. When this foundation crumbled, then the associated genres disappeared as well. Identifying genre as a product of historical circumstances was held in common between the 1951 and 1963 version of *History*, but the Marxist language of social class and domination was replaced by the English social anthropological model of myth as an alternative to science and a mode of conquering nature. While not explicitly identified by Saigō, given his background in English literature and the popularity in early twentieth-century Japan of James G. Frazer (1854–1951), there is ample reason to suggest that Saigō was drawing directly on Frazer, Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), and others in his vision of myth. More importantly, the pronounced role of participant observation in English social anthropology was a natural fit for Saigō's longstanding interest in direct experience as a bridge or vehicle to antiquity. Saigō imagined himself as an ancient person and attempted to read the Japanese classics

from the perspective of their own historical times.

Saigō's application of social anthropology, which was introduced to Japan prior to World War II, also bears traces of influence from postwar structuralist anthropology, although not enough to seriously consider Saigō as a structuralist. As Hirafuji (2004) has shown, the influence of Levi-Strauss in Japan for Japanese mythology was minimal. This is itself striking considering Levi-Strauss included Japanese myths in his analysis, a distinction that sets Levi-Strauss apart from other major European postwar scholars of mythology. Saigō's work in the 1970's incorporated analysis of logical structures, noted in Go (1997). However, Saigō made no attempt to abstract the interrelations or structures that he identified in ancient Japan to constant or universal laws. Rather, these structures were historically particular to ancient Japan and marks of a unique Japanese antiquity. Furthermore, while the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss often stressed continuity, co-existence, or persistence of structures, Saigō focused rather on the changes in structure, especially political structure, and identified corresponding changes in linguistic and literate expression.

Saigō's 1963 discussion of myth centered on a new section containing an extensive discussion of masks and coming-of-age ceremonies. Placed at the beginning of the first chapter, this addition essentially constitutes a new beginning for traditional Japanese literature. In his 1951 *History*, the first chapter, on the Heroic Age, briefly touched on "primitive society," the wellspring of Heroic Age literature. But in 1963, discussion of masks and ritual ceremonies constituted a more intensive focus on the historical particularities of primitive society and what Saigō called "primitive literature," referring to oral tradition. In the Japanese case, Saigō linked the global prevalence of masks and coming-of-age ceremonies to the utopian land of Tokoyo, an other world that appears in numerous Japanese myths, to the courtship of the creator gods Izanagi and Izanami, and to other Japanese mythical narratives. He also suggested connections with the material culture of the Jōmon (10,000 BCE–300 BCE) period of Japanese history, connecting archeological discovery, mythical narrative, and anthropological observation of world

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cultures. Most importantly, Saigō argued that some relics of coming-of-age ceremonies continued to be relevant in Japanese tradition. This resembled the “ethnic energy” discussed in his work from the 1950’s, but instead of being an a priori object whose existence was determined by a Marxist framework, in 1963, Saigō inveighed empirical evidence to support his claims.

The ultimate purpose of Saigō’s extended discussion of masks and coming-of-age ceremonies was to demonstrate a new thesis that ritual was the origin of science and art, including myth, epic poetry, and lyric poetry. Though no specific figure is cited, Saigō referred generally to the “findings of anthropologists,” and his discussion of magic, nature, religion, ritual, science, and art has undeniable influences from English social anthropology. In Saigō’s own reading, magic was related to systems of exchange and the creation of a community, and it was connected to mankind’s productive engagement with nature, not its desire to conquer it or allay its fears about it. Primitive communities applied magic, as ritual, to impose their desires onto the natural world. This imposition, rooted in ritual, provided the socio-historical context that gave birth to myths, epic poetry, and lyric poetry. The respective differences between world cultures were derived from the particulars of that socio-historical context.

The role of myth in Saigō’s new formulation was as a three-part bridge, connecting the oral traditions of the primitive period, the ancient period in which these myths were recorded as literature, and the modern period of his own time. The interpretation of ancient literature, written in the eighth century, was guided by the purported desire of its author’s memories of the past and their desire to return to it. Similarly, the genres of ancient literature developed by progressively shedding elements of antiquity, creating a legacy of what was lost. Saigō attempted, using imagination, to understand ancient literature by placing himself in the subject position of its authors, informed by their socio-historical contexts. However, this is also a doubling of Saigō’s own longing. As he himself noted in 1951, from Schiller to Goethe, a desire to return to antiquity pervaded the modern consciousness. The premodern author

longing for antiquity was a double for Saigō, and the longing for antiquity, in the form of rituals that bound the ancient community, was a projection of Saigō's own longing for a Japanese tradition that could unite the ethnic Japanese.

Saigō's final chapter, on fiction, was rewritten in the 1963 version of *History* to establish the development of genre as a particular response to the loss of tradition. Saigō devoted an entire new chapter to this period, focused on women's society, which identified the socio-historic factors that led to the development of fiction writing by many prominent female authors of the period. Unlike the primitive era, in the ancient period, women were pushed out of positions of social control. However, in Japan, Saigō noted, this process was not as total as in other societies, and women played prominent roles in government and the literary arts through the eighth century. By the late tenth century, the apex of women's writing in ancient Japan, women had been totally removed from the political scene, and instead, occupied salons, where they produced works like *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book* that expressed romantic longing for a lost cultural heritage linking them to the land and agricultural production.

Saigō's new chapter adding historical context to women's writing complemented a revised treatment of *The Pillow Book*. As noted above, and as pointed out by Keene, in his writings from the early 1950s, Saigō completely rejected *The Pillow Book* as the product of an out-of-touch aristocrat with no connection to the ethnic spirit of the age. Its author, Sei Shōnagon, was characterized as mean and spiteful, and the only value of *The Pillow Book* was as a demonstration of the degeneracy of the age (Saigō, 1951). In his 1963 history, the harsh words for Sei Shōnagon were considerably lightened. For example, when Sei Shōnagon deprecated a gentleman, Taira no Narimasa, for having too small a gate for the empress' carriage to pass through, in 1951, Saigō read this as "saying this minor matter was vexing, Sei Shōnagon roundly belittles and mocks Narimasa" (Saigō, 1951). In 1963, he revised the line to, "Sei Shōnagon teases Narimasa, but in doing so her dignity is vividly captured" (Saigō, 1963).

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Saigō also adds considerable discussion of how Sei Shōnagon regarded nature. In 1951, these passages demonstrated the limits of her life experience, but in 1963, Saigō suggested that they reflected an ethnic tradition associated with polytheistic and agrarian communities like that of ancient Japan. Those societies performed rituals in response to natural phenomena that continued in later eras and influenced the direction and content of literature, even at the highest echelons of the court. In other words, Saigō's much more charitable reading of Sei Shōnagon was possible only through his abandonment of Marxist readings that simply castigated feudal elites and his invocation of myth and ritual as keys to ethnic tradition.

Saigō's conviction that ancient literature was a product of the engagement of past and present is clearly demonstrated when he notes that at the time it was produced, fiction was not regarded as a high genre. Rather, in his own contemporary era, the modern period, fiction rose to prominence as the most sophisticated of genres, and so women's literature from the ancient period attracted high praise and scholarly attention. However, in its own time, it was a reaction to the end and ultimate loss of antiquity. In this sense, Saigō appears to find a resonance between his own work and the writings of female authors around the turn of the first millennium.

### 3 Conclusion

Saigō's 1963 *History* was a major milestone for the academic study of Japanese literature, but it was far more important for the popular arena, where it provided a new and rehabilitated notion of Japanese mythical tradition for public consumption. The academic, but accessible, tone of the revised *History* made the book a long seller, and it was republished again, with revisions, in 1996, then reprinted in 2005 and 2011. In the academic arena, Saigō's work influenced a generation of scholars who came of age during the so-called "high-growth era," a period of unprecedented economic expansion in Japan. Ultimately, the academic field moved away from *longue durée* studies such as *History* to more special-

ized examinations of discrete texts. Ironically, this move towards documentary study, from around the 1980s, revived precisely the kind of apolitical study of traditional Japanese literature that Saigō himself had railed against in the 1950s. But even though academic studies moved away from Saigō's expansive style in the treatment of the textual object, at their core, these studies shared Saigō's fundamental assumption that such a thing as "Japanese tradition" existed in Japanese antiquity and was discoverable in ancient literature. In this sense, Saigō's *History* had a profound impact on the field of premodern Japanese literature in the last half of the twentieth century. Perhaps more significantly, in the popular arena, the influence of Saigō's work has continued unabated from 1963, most notably with the republication of his selected works in nine volumes from 2010–2013.

One possible reason behind Saigō's shift between 1951 and 1963 was the political alignment with the United States that Japan adopted in the early 1950s and cemented in 1960. In 1951, the position that Japan would occupy in the new post-WWII order was in flux. In the 1949 general election, the Japanese Communist Party picked up 31 seats to increase its share of the lower house to 35 seats, almost 10%. In the 1952 election, in the wake of the party split, JCP lost all 35 seats. The ratification of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952, and perhaps more significantly, the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960, despite heavy protests, put the writing on the wall for socialist revolution and firmly fixed Japan within a US-led capitalist world order. In response to, or at least within this context, Saigō transformed the notion of the ethnic nation from the energy pulsing through the proletariat into the imaginative fantasy of a bygone world. Put differently, tradition changed from an impulse to advance modernity into an escape from modernity.

Saigō's conversion of Japanese mythical tradition into an escape and alternative to modernity and to modern life under market capitalism suited Japan's own revised image of itself as a racially homogenous ethno-state. Before Japanese surrender, Japan was the center of a far-reaching empire. As Oguma (1995) has demonstrated, the prevailing academic opinion was that the Japanese were a mixed-race nation, and this

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perception was a smooth fit for a political state that sought to increasingly bring new nations within its political and economic hegemony. Notably, the pre-surrender perception of the Japanese as a mixed-race nation was also rooted in narratives from traditional Japanese literature, especially *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*. Stories of various ethnic groups being conquered by legendary warrior-kings paralleled Japan's own imperial expansion. When Saigō wrote his 1951 *History*, Asia was the center of cold war conflict, with the 1949 revolution in China and the 1950–1953 Korean War. By 1963, the situation had stabilized and, much as Japan changed the word for World War II from “Asian War” to “Pacific War,” the nation's focus was directed east to its new largest trading partner, the US, and away from Asia. Saigō's discovery of an ethnic Japanese tradition that resisted imported ideologies from China in the ancient period provided the basis for a new Japanese tradition wholly divorced from the Asian continent. It also provided a space for imaginative escape from US domination.

Saigō's rehabilitated Japanese mythical tradition correlated with the commodification of Japanese mythical tradition in a fashion that was unthinkable prior to 1945. During the era of the Japanese empire, the Japanese state mandated a singular, orthodox interpretation of Japanese mythical tradition, and especially Japanese myths, because they related directly to the legitimacy of the ruling emperor. Alternative interpretations were treated as criminal offenses. After the Japanese surrender, as discussed in the first section of this article, there was considerable ambivalence among younger scholars about whether Japanese traditional literature was worth studying at all. Saigō's conversion of antiquity into a source of ethnic particularity fueled by imagination made Japanese mythical tradition malleable and adaptable, and these same characteristics suited the commodification of Japanese mythical tradition. Of course, this applies to Saigō's own written work, which graced both academic journals and publishers as well as the more popularly-targeted pocket library format. The ethnic particularity given in Saigō's portrayal of antiquity formed a natural pair with the best-selling idea of Japaneseness given in the Japanese publication of Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* and the genre of “theories of Japanese-



ness” (Jp. *nihonjin-ron*) that followed in its wake. Adaptations of Japanese traditional narratives for television, in popular fiction, in comics, and in other media flourished in the high-growth era. While Saigō’s legitimation of Japanese mythical tradition as a space of imaginative play and self-doubling was only one piece of this larger commodification phenomenon, the popularity of Saigō’s work suggest that amenability to commodification is an important factor in the persistence and rehabilitation of tradition, at least in capitalist societies.

Finally, the doubling used by Saigō continues to play a major role in Japanese perceptions of the past today. Saigō’s own work continued to play on the imaginative features of his antiquity, such as *Ancient People and Dreams* (Saigō, 1972) and *Shadow of the Classics* (Saigō, 1979). His extensive work on the *Kojiki* in the 1970s and 1980s, which culminated in a four-volume commentary that is still an authoritative secondary source for *Kojiki* study, was also centered on his self-projection into the past. As he wrote in his *World of the Kojiki* (Saigō, 1967), “what I wanted to do was to live in the world of the *Kojiki*, to inhabit the text.” Although this theoretical model is no longer in favor in the academy, the idea of participant observation in antiquity is a critical component of making tradition into shared cultural heritage. Popular adaptations, museum exhibits, and even state intervention all play indispensable roles in sustaining this doubling. For example, the entire capital of Saigō’s ancient world, the city of Nara, is now a UNESCO world heritage site, geographically seating over 1,500 acres of Japanese tradition where visitors are encouraged to literally return to antiquity.

While innovation and tradition can work against each other, Saigō and the postwar Japanese case show rather how innovation could rehabilitate, preserve, and create tradition. One clear conclusion is that this process does not operate independently of politico-historical factors. Saigō abandoned using tradition as an engine for socialist revolution when it became clear that a revolution was never going to happen. Similarly, the escapism venue that Japanese mythical tradition became in Saigō’s thought was connected to his dislike of American imperialism. At the same time, the escapist role assumed by mythical tradition ironically

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became commodified itself, a move that depended on the same adaptable vision of antiquity in Saigō's later work. In this sense, one aspect of a successful innovation is its future adaptability by others, whether by design or by accident. This unpredictable quality recalls Saigō's observation about literature reception in his 1963 *History*: we don't know how future generations will appraise tradition, and we must instead study why works from the past have been read the way that they have in particular historical moments. Applying this observation to the question of innovation versus tradition suggests that any answer will need to historicize the meaning and significance of tradition to identify and appreciate how tradition can be reformed, rehabilitated, desacralized, or obviated.

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