

## **Periods of Transition: Literature as a Political Intervention in Meiji Japan**

### **Objective**

One way that literature and literary studies have been interpreted is as products of dominant cultural movements of a specific time and place in history. However, literature produced during periods of transition, especially during the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century, have shown that literature has played a significant role in not only the production and dissemination of particular forms of culture, but as alternative and/or resistant forms of these cultures as well. Literature appears to have a particularly effective resistant influence during periods when defining social and political structures are undergoing change. Part of the purpose of this project is to examine how literature can be, or not be, political, and how it interacts with specific political agendas and power structures. I will be researching a variety of methodologies that propose a model for articulating literature and politics, and bringing it to bear on literature in the Meiji era of Japan.

### **Literary Background**

In a previous research project, I examined the ways in which a literary text functioned as a political critique through the author's use of narrative and language to engage in dialogue with specific ideologies of that particular culture and history. I looked at the historical background of this particular text, as well as at the author's life and interaction with particular political ideologies and intellectual movements of the time period. As a result of that research, I became interested in how literature functions as a subsidiary of both political activities and ideology, and in what ways literature can both extend and resist the dominant political concepts within a particular time and place. Particularly in periods of transition, such as the Meiji era in Japan, literature appears to become the site of intellectual debate, where contestation of form and content parallel the turmoil and uncertainty of state and society. As I completed my research on the political implications of a Meiji period literary text, I was very much interested in how the term "political" was defined for literature, and in what ways literature was transformed, evolved, or was interpreted as such.

### **Periods of Transition: Meiji Japan**

I have referred to the phrase "periods of transition" in this proposal which I use to refer to periods of rapid social, economic, and political change within a specific time period and place. Of particular interest to this research project is the Meiji period of Japan, which existed from 1868 to 1912 and was characterized by rapid Westernization and industrialization. At that time, many intellectuals were sent abroad to the great European capitals of the time, in order to bring back Western technology and learning to be integrated and used at home. Literature during the Meiji period was consequently redefined and revised, taking on a much different style and position than literary texts had previously occupied in Japanese society. I argue that the social and political changes occurring in the Meiji period were paralleled by similar transformations on the literary level, and that a kind of cultural colonialism—with European standards being imposed as the national Japanese form—occurred despite actual political independence of the

Japanese government from Western states. Thus literature of the Meiji period was necessarily impacted by and had an impact on the political state of the nation, and it is specifically this relationship I am interested in researching and understanding.

### **Course of Study**

The focus of this project is to examine the relationship between ideology and literature, and politics and literature. For this purpose, I will be reading texts involving general theories of the relationship of literature to ideology and literature to politics that have been published by Clifford Geertz, Gayatri Spivak, Fredric Jameson, Pierre Macherey, Raymond Williams, and Edward Said. These studies specifically address what it might have meant to claim that literature is “political” and can help define certain concepts that are as of yet unclear to me.

From a general study of theory of literature, I will move to a more focused look at not just the relationship of literature to ideology and literature to politics, but at the more specific issue nation formation and its relation to literary form. I believe that a closer look at post-colonial studies, indicated in my bibliography by the works of David Lloyd, Homi K. Bhabha, and Edward Said, can be useful in a general understanding of this moment of nation-building that may or may not be applicable to my intended analysis of nation formation and literature during the Meiji era.

Though Bhabha, Lloyd, and Said will be useful in understanding how nation-building and literature production interrelate with one another in general. In the third phase of my project, I want to take this understanding and apply it specifically to Meiji Japan. Here I will read works by Harold Harootunian, Naoki Sakai, Karatani Kojin, and Masao Miyoshi in order to place myself within this specific discourse, and see what kind of approaches have been applied already in analyzing this specific period of transition. Sakai specifically addresses the relationship between subjectivity and nationalism in Japan, which may prove useful in understanding how Meiji preoccupation with subjectivity was a direct result or concurrent event of Meiji ideology.

As I have worked on the Meiji writer Natsume Soseki previously, I would like to build on certain issues that I have encountered in his works, specifically his position within Meiji politics and Meiji ideology, and analyze how his writing worked to support or resist existing political relationships. Though I wrote on his short story *Ten Nights of Dreams* previously, I propose to look at some of his longer works, especially his *Philosophical Foundations of Literature* and his *My Individualism*, which appear to allude to Western philosophy and social theory as the basis for many of his concepts. I think it would be an extremely engaging study to trace a historical bibliography of Soseki and reception to his work, to see how treatment of his writing has evolved through both theoretical developments in literature and concepts regarding cultural studies and literature. My own work on Soseki will thus find a place in the history of approaches to his texts.

Though a great deal of the work I intend to read for this project involves Western scholars, or at least scholars educated in the Western tradition, the question that is raised both in this project and my last one, is one that is as relevant to our time as it was for the

Meiji period. As I have mentioned earlier, Meiji intellectuals sought Western learning as a means to further their own production of knowledge and intellectual study, which in fact was a result of Meiji ideology of “Eastern Soul, Western Knowledge.” In my previous project I had used European theorists, Althusser, Iser, and Derrida in interpreting a work by the Meiji author, Natsume Soseki, but how applicable or even functional is this kind of method? Am I not perpetuating the same kind of ideological Westernization of the Meiji era in using Western methods on Japanese literature? I hope to answer this question (if only in part), to determine whether the methodology of the authors I intend to read can provide a valid and innovative way to look at Japanese literature; or, if finding these methods insufficient or unsatisfactory, I can propose a different methodology that can address this kind of East-West disparity without necessarily replicating Meiji ideological trends. My project will then prepare me for applying for post-graduate scholarships and Ph.D. programs of giving me the opportunity to explore trends across several disciplines (literary theory, post-colonial theory, Japanese literature) and propose directions for my own future work.

### **Projected Timeline**

#### Spring Quarter

- Meet regularly with faculty mentor and assemble research materials.
- Establish a reading schedule with my faculty mentor to determine which texts should be read and in what order.
- Begin preliminary reading and study of texts.
- End of Quarter: Begin reading schedule and start writing summary logs and research review papers for my mentor.

#### Summer Timeline (over 12 weeks)

- Early Summer Session: Meet weekly or bi-weekly, depending on advisor availability to continue to turn in reading logs and review reading assignments.
- Early Summer Session: Begin to construct a rough draft of research project, and what specific topics will be addressed.
- Mid Summer Session: Begin to write paper, still under guidance of weekly or bi-weekly meetings.
- End of Summer Session: Complete draft of paper, send out for editing, complete final revisions.

#### Spring

- Present research paper at Research Symposium.

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