

**BOOKS THAT AFFECT  
THE WAY WE TEACH**  
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Reflecting on the books that affected the way I teach was a little like remembering the entirety of one's romantic life. It was not hard to remember where and when it all began—one's early crushes and failures—but much harder to remember who was the most affecting. This exercise turned into a kind of intellectual psychotherapy: it meant remembering books I wanted to remember, but it also meant remembering difficult books, books that challenged, frustrated, or overwhelmed. And there were other books that I should have remembered but whose titles, for whatever deep and unconscious reasons, I could not.

In the end, I picked a slim volume of essays entitled *Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Period: Methods and Metaphors*, edited by Tetsuo Najita and Irwin Scheiner and published by the University of California Press in 1978. I remember it well because it contains a famous essay by Harry Harootunian, entitled "Consciousness of Archaic Form in the New Realism of Kokugaku," an essay that I read and reread but could not understand at all. This was my first encounter with what might be called "theory."

It wasn't until the mid-1980s when I began to read Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse* that I began to appreciate the important things Harootunian was saying in his article. White's work was daunting to a neophyte but not impossible, and this was encouraging. I then turned to Michelle Foucault, whose *Order of Things* gave me terrible headaches and whose *Archaeology of Knowledge* was a slow, agonizing read that consumed nearly a year's worth of weekend afternoons but taught me a lot about the relationship of knowledge and power. Jacques Derrida made my head spin. And so it went.

*Japanese Thought in the Tokugawa Period* was my initiation and the beginning of a long, demanding, but always fascinating and instructive relationship with "theory"—with structuralist and poststructuralist theory, reader response theory, speech act theory, neo-Marxism, and postmodernism. In time I learned that it was not just the Americans doing Japanese intellectual history but the best intellectual and cultural historians in the United States and Europe who were reading and beginning to use these theories in their work. I was thus reading theory to understand, and keep up with, the new work in my field and discipline. I wanted to be invited to the dance.

Of the many things I read, what affected me most was these theorists' attention to "language." For starters, most of these theorists did not take language for granted, as I had. Instead, they argued, first, that language is neither transparent nor a neutral medium but constructed, coded and full of opacities. Second, they argued that language is always historical, the language of a particular moment—something that seems so obvious but that I had managed to forget. The

historians of ideas that I read as an undergraduate had stressed ideas, not the language or rhetoric of ideas. Third, they pointed out that language is social, that it is always used by a particular group that occupies a specific space. This is as true of philosophers as it is of women, warriors, merchants, or farmers. Fourth, they taught me that language is an instrument of domination—elevating some and subordinating others, creating rulers as well as subjects—and that languages of domination also, paradoxically, enable resistance and even subversion. Finally, many of these theorists argued that meaning is not fixed or immutable. That is, the meaning of written and spoken texts, rituals, or even cultural artifacts changes, depending on who is reading them, when and where they are being read, and who or what is enforcing a particular reading. I had always assumed that this is the case with sacred and canonical texts, but the theorists I read insisted that this is true of all cultural phenomena.

My reading of theory affected the way I thought about my own work and how I read my colleagues' work. It also changed the way I teach. I should confess at the outset that no one ever taught me how to teach, and I suspect that this is true for most of us. I first taught as a graduate assistant in the traditional Asian survey at the University of Michigan, a survey that followed the lecture-and-discussion format devised at Harvard in 1904. I was put in charge of a discussion section, and I dutifully met my class six times that semester to discuss Arthur Waley's *The Way and Its Power*, Waley's abridged translation of *The Tale of Genji*, Alan Watt's *Zen*, Jacques Gernet's *Daily Life in China, on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250-1276*, Peter Duus's *Feudalism*, and Ihara Saikaku's *The Life of an Amorous Woman*.

When I arrived at Pomona College in 1983, I found that my colleagues at the Claremont Colleges who taught the Asian survey used the same model, dividing class meetings into lectures and discussions. We have retained this model, but in the version of this survey that I currently teach, there are nine discussion meetings spread out over the course of a semester. Until 1992, I simply did what I had always done: I met my class on discussion days and led a discussion of the assigned readings. Or, should I say, a few of us discussed the readings, since most of the class had not read them very carefully and a few not at all.

In the spring of 1992, I tried a new approach, one inspired by the "theory" I had been reading. For each discussion, I decided to have my students write a two-page paper on the assigned readings and to collect these at the end of the hour. Exactly one week before the discussion meeting, I hand out the study question they are to answer in that paper. Most important of all, I decided to use these study questions to introduce different ways to read the primary source material which I assigned for the discussion meetings.

I began with a straightforward and somewhat traditional assignment. For our discussion of the Upanishads, I asked: "Who created the Upanishads, and why do you think they created them?" I was hoping that my students would see that the authors were probably not Brahmans or that if they were, they were disgruntled Brahmans who were not

pleased with Vedic religion as it had existed for some time. Most did.

For the second discussion, on classical Taoism, I wanted my students to learn to contextualize texts, and so I asked the following question: "What features of the Taoist texts that you read for today identify them as historical artifacts? That is, what ideas, themes, vocabularies, characters, and historical referents found in these texts confirm that they were written in what we now call 'China' in the Eastern Chou/Zhou period?" The papers suggested that the students were natural contextualizers.

I turned to language in the third discussion, which focused on the first Korean histories—the *Samguk yusa* and *Samguk sagi*. The readings I chose were the surviving versions of the Korean foundation myths, myths filled with shamanistic elements but also Confucian and Buddhist ideas. I asked my students to identify at least two distinct conceptual languages present in the texts. My goal was to show them that texts are always composite, consisting of several different languages coexisting in tension with one other, providing complex and unstable meanings. A much harder assignment, this study question baffled some students but excited most of the class.

In succeeding discussion meetings, I focused on the relationship of culture and power. I asked my students to write about "power relationships" in the great eleventh-century Japanese prose work, *The Tale of Genji*. In another, I asked my students to think about continuities in Buddhism as it moved from India to China, Korea, and Japan. Specifically, I asked them to pick any core Buddhist idea, practice, or institution and to discuss two different ways in which it had been read or misread in India, China, Korea, or Japan; and then to explain the divergent readings. I wanted my students to think about "tradition" and to recognize a tradition's capacity for change.

In the next assignment, a discussion of warrior house codes in medieval Japan, I asked, "Do the readings in

*Ideals of the Samurai* reveal a core of shared teachings, concepts, practices and institutions that might be called a 'warrior tradition'?" And I added, "If you think that these teachings, concepts, practices, and institutions comprise a warrior tradition, what explains the existence of such a tradition? Or if you don't believe they comprise a warrior tradition, why don't they?" After a paper on Buddhist tradition, my students got the point, and the best of them saw the relationship between feudalism and the absence of a single, coherent warrior tradition.

I then did a similar thing with the Chinese literati culture in the Sung/Song dynasty. Assigning a collection of Neo-Confucian philosophical writing and literati poetry and painting texts, I asked whether these texts revealed a common literati culture, and if they did, what generated it? If not, why not? Most students immediately recognized the thematic affinities of the philosophical, poetic, and painting texts, and many saw these affinities as a product of the writers' class origins, the civil service examination system and the Sung/Song state's authorization of a distinctive literati culture.

For the last assignment, I asked my students to look for evidence of resistance and subversion in a collection of medieval Indian vernacular tales, *The Tales of Ancient India*. By this time, they were well practiced and had an understanding of power. They had a field day.

Class discussions improved dramatically after I began to use these study questions. Typically, anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of the class speaks up, and it is my sense that even those who do not contribute to the discussion are following what is being said and learn from it. Their papers confirm this. Of course, this system of study questions and short papers also means nine more sets of papers to grade. In a class of twenty or thirty, this is not very onerous, but in a class of sixty or seventy or more, it creates an extra burden.

And this is how a slim volume of theoretically informed essays led me to change the way I teach Asian history and also the way I think about history in general.



Coe College Freeman Student Fellow Jennifer Lawrence and Faculty Mentor Elizabeth Galbraith at the home of Fr. Jacob Alackal of the Syro Malabar Christian Church, Punnathura, Kottayam, India