Dear Mr. Eiichirō Ishida,

When you asked me to write a review of Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* about two months ago and I replied that I have not yet read the book, you earnestly recommended I read it anyway. At that time, I did not know whether it was the appropriate thing to say, but I said to you something to the effect that since I am now old and do not have long to live, I would like to spend the rest of my life doing what I really want to do. I do not want to read books that do not interest me. I have heard rumors about *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, but I did not feel the slightest urge to read it. But if you guarantee that this book is worth reading, I am willing to reconsider. If someone of your caliber recognizes the academic value of the book, let me at least read it. That was what I said to you. In fact it was how I sincerely felt at the time. Since I have always had great respect for your achievements as an ethnologist, I thought that there would be something of value in Benedict’s cultural anthropological research if you were recommending it. When I said this, you were somewhat

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1 This special issue was originally published in *Minzokugaku Kenkyū (Japanese Journal of Ethnology)*, Volume 14, Number 4, 1950.

2 Translator’s note: I have included words and phrases used in the English summary of this article “Some Doubts about the Scientific Value of Benedict’s Book,” *Minzokugaku Kenkyū (Japanese Journal of Ethnology)*, Volume 14, Number 4, 1950: 85 (347) where appropriate. I would like to thank Yoko Hayami and Donald Wood for checking the translation.
hesitant, but you said that you thought it was indeed worth reading. You also said that although there are considerable errors in the details, you thought the overall perspective it presents includes excellent ideas which are worthy of calling to our attention and encourage us to reflect upon ourselves. Nevertheless, when I confirmed with you again, you said that I would not have to write a review if I read the book and did not find it interesting. It was with this understanding that I promised you I would read the translation of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.

However, shortly after I began reading the book, I very much regretted doing so. Then I did not feel like picking up the book again for a long time. I think I should have had my own way after all and declined your request. The book may have many different kinds of value, but I do not think that it has any academic value. Therefore, rather than being interested in the book itself, I am much more interested to know what aspects of this book that such a respected scholar as yourself consider to be of academic value. I think I have the right to ask for such an explanation from you.

The reason why I do not want to treat this book as a scholarly work is not because it contains countless mistakes and misunderstandings in the data it presents. Of course, that in itself is sufficient to impair the book’s credibility as an academic work. But we, the Japanese, have a custom of accepting such tendencies in Japanese studies by foreigners with an attitude of tolerance. Rather, what I find more problematic is the fact that even in cases where the data is accurate, there are problems in the way they are treated. The author draws over-generalized conclusions from such data. We would easily be able to list the same number of opposing data that would make such conclusions impossible. It seems to me that the author has made hardly any effort to meticulously search for opposing data. It may have had some academic value if the author had presented studies on limited groups of Japanese people, such as *On the way of thinking of Japanese soldiers* or *On the way of thinking of Japanese prisoners of war*. But when it comes to verifying “the way of thinking of the Japanese” or “patterns of Japanese culture” based on such studies, there must be a very clear understanding of how such partial facts are related to the whole. However, the author sees the nature of the whole directly from partial facts.

It is stated at the beginning of the book that “Conventions of war which Western nations had come to accept as facts of human nature obviously did not exist for the Japanese” (J: 11; E: 1). This argument is expanded in detail in Chapter 2, where it is clearly stated that all

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3 Translator’s note: Words in bold letters indicate words in bold letters in Watsuji’s original Japanese article.
4 Translator’s note: Words in italics indicate words in parentheses [ ] in Watsuji’s original Japanese article.
5 Translator’s note: Words in double inverted commas “” indicate words in parentheses [ ] and quotations in Watsuji’s original Japanese article.
6 Translator’s note: The words in bold letters in this quotation are Watsuji’s emphases and not Benedict’s.
7 Page numbers of the Japanese translation (Kiku to Katana: Nihon Bunka no Kata. Translated by Matsuji Hasegawa. Tokyo: Kadansha Gakujutsu Bunko, 2015, orig. 1948) are indicated as (J: #). Page numbers of the English original (Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Tokyo, Rutland, Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2005, orig. 1946) are indicated as (E: #). Where there are no page numbers for the quotations in Watsuji’s original Japanese article, I have inserted them in square brackets [J: #; E: #].
sorts of actions performed by the Japanese, which violated Western wartime practices, became data for understanding the Japanese view of life and Japanese beliefs about duties of human beings in general. There would be no problem if the parts that refer to “the Japanese” were all rewritten and replaced by “a section of the military.” The book would then be discussing “patterns of Japanese military culture” and not “patterns of Japanese culture.” In fact, even “patterns of Japanese military culture” would still be too broad. It would not be accurate unless it was limited to “patterns of ultra-nationalistic military culture.” The majority of Japanese did not commit such violations. They did not even know for certain that such acts of violation were taking place. Even if they sometimes overheard rumors about the atrocities, they thought they were acts of a small number of ruffians and lawless men and did not believe that the Japanese military would openly perform such actions. As proof of this, the military also did their best to cover up facts about the Nanking Massacre and cruelty towards prisoners of war, and tried not to let the people know about them. If, as the author says, the Japanese performed such offenses indifferently, why was it necessary to cover up these facts within the country? If someone found out about these facts and criticized them just a little, he or she would be pursued by the military police as a bearer of anti-military ideas. Did not such a tight control indicate how much the military feared the people’s criticism? Of course, there was the different but equally serious problem that the majority of the Japanese could not criticize the military in fear of the military police. However, that is not to say that the majority of the Japanese approved of the violent acts or were their accomplices. When we were boys, General Nogi gave favorable treatment to General Stoessel, who had surrendered at Port Arthur. This was welcomed with a feeling of satisfaction by the Japanese as reflecting their common sense. I was a junior high school student at that time, and I along with my classmates often used to take the initiative to visit and console Russian prisoners of war. Abusing prisoners of war was not part of the moral sensibility of the Japanese in those days. Even in the war stories written much earlier in history, we see that an account of cruel treatment of surrendered men is only used as a means of setting the scene to describe a particularly brutal character. Even the Japanese military’s no-surrender policy (mukōfukushugi 無降伏主義), which the author takes up as a significant issue, is a way of thinking of the military in recent years and not a traditional Japanese way of thinking. Surrender was no doubt considered shameful, but the kind of hysterical attitude that we see lately was absent among the samurai of the past. When military songs came to be sung in the Meiji period, it was none other than the capitulator, Kumagai Naozane, who was regularly praised by soldiers as “a samurai with both wisdom and courage.” Kumagai Naozane had initially joined forces to conquer Yoritomo, but later

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8 Translator’s note: The meeting between Nogi and Stoessel is mentioned in The Chrysanthemum and the Sword [J: 377-378; E: 307-308]. Benedict says that Japan “could carefully avoid humiliating a defeated enemy when it finally capitulated” [J: 377; E: 307]. This does not contradict Watsuji’s argument that the mistreatment of prisoners of war was not part of the moral sensibility of the Japanese. He seems to ignore Benedict’s point that Japan avoided humiliating a surrendered enemy “when she did not consider that that nation had sneered at her” [J: 377; E: 307].

9 Translator’s note: I have inserted Japanese words from Watsuji’s original article in brackets for clarity.
surrendered and became Yoritomo’s vassal. The people did not attach much importance to the fact that Naozane had surrendered, so the military in the Meiji period probably did not care much about it either. The practice of the lord of a realm committing suicide or dying in his castle because he hated to surrender probably became common at the end of the Sengoku Period when all those who capitulated were killed. This was a period when battles by brute force intensified and deceitful means were used in warfare, including large numbers of people surrendering for strategic purposes. But Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Ieyasu, who prevailed over these military conflicts, knew the art of skillfully inducing powerful feudal lords to surrender. Hideyoshi was particularly adept at this. The key to his success lay in making enemies surrender by allowing them to retain an appropriate sense of honor while they still had the composure to judge their situation rationally, that is to say, before they hysterically built up shame and indignity. It is an absurdly arbitrary judgement to claim that there was no such thing as surrender among the Japanese. Of course, the Japanese hate to surrender, but surely that is the same for Westerners. The question is whether or not the no-surrender policy, which was ardently commended by a section of the military and enforced by them upon their subordinates, actually represented the Japanese view of life and Japanese beliefs. Thinking only about victory and not about defeat is an agitated mental state when charging into battle. It is a part of war psychology and cannot be called a view of life or belief about morality. If there was a samurai who held such a view of life, he would be despised as a boarish samurai (inoshishimusha 猪武者). Just because such boarish samurai have been prominent in the last ten or so years, drawing the patterns of Japanese culture from their behaviour would be as presumptuous as the arrogance of these boarish samurai.

But the problem is not confined to these wartime practices. The author uses the military ideology that has become prominent in the past ten or so years almost uncritically as the way of thinking of “Japan” or “the Japanese.” This applies to everything that she lists, such as belief and trust in hierarchy, philosophy of victory of the spirit over matter, and “Japanese ways of saying all kinds of things during the war” (J: 41; E: 26).10 Militarists who said such things and their representatives were of course “Japanese.” Thus, there were indeed some Japanese people who had such ways of thinking. However, the key question regarding this book is whether or not we can consider such people as representatives of “the Japanese,” and furthermore as representatives of the Japanese from way back in history, as the author does.

Indeed newspapers in Japan printed only such words during a particular period in history. So perhaps it could not be helped that the author felt they represented the unified thinking of the Japanese when she read these from abroad. However, these words were proclaimed not to express the Japanese way of thinking to the world, but rather to control and intimidate the people within Japan. All sorts of things were put forward as slogans to suppress the people and drag them along because the majority of the Japanese did not think in this way. That is to say, they were slogans for struggle within the country.

10 Translator’s note: The words in bold letters in this quotation are Watsuji’s emphases and not Benedict’s.
For example, let us consider the slogan, “victory of spirit over matter” [J: 36; E: 22]. The author places great importance on this and tries to point out how it expresses a characteristic feature of the Japanese. Before we decide whether or not such an attempt is appropriate, I think we should examine Japanese newspapers and magazines of ten or more years before the Manchurian Incident. We would probably not find such a slogan there. Rather, we would discover that historical materialism, which was opposite to the idea expressed in the slogan, was predominantly in fashion. Spiritualistic slogans emerged from such an environment because young officers, who had learned about direct action from the leftists, tried to seize power and place it in the hands of the military. The philosophy manifested in this slogan was born as a result of the military trying to increase armaments by force in economically poor Japan. They claimed that they would win by spiritual power even if they lacked sufficient machinery. It was not that those who asserted thus were ignorant about the necessity of machines. They were made to display false courage due to the “impossible” situation of not being able to get hold of the machinery they wanted. Therefore, the slogan was a motto for “those in a position of coercing the impossible” and became a pattern of thinking of the military, along with the out-dated custom of carrying a Japanese sword instead of a saber. Eventually, this came to be used in slogans of all sorts of propaganda coercing the impossible during the period of military dictatorship. That was why, as the author points out, the radio recommended body-warming calisthenics to people who were exhausted by shortages of food and fuel. However, we cannot but be astounded if we are told that the Japanese thought exercise would replace heating and food, just because of this.

The American’s view of bodily energy which always reckons how much strength he has to use by whether he had eight or five hours of sleep last night, whether he has eaten his regular meals, whether he has been cold, is here confronted with a calculus that does not rely on storing up energy (J: 39; E: 24-25).

The above passage would be acceptable as a parody of militarist propaganda of coercing the impossible. But, if it is seriously discussed as pertaining to a characteristic feature of the Japanese, how can we possibly bring ourselves to criticize it seriously?

Other slogans, such as “bringing all eight corners of the world under one roof” (hakkōichi 八絃一宇) and “taking one’s proper station” (各得其所) [J: 60; E: 43] are also treated with

11 Translator’s note: Watsuji is referring here to Benedict’s description of “body-warming calisthenics which would not only be a substitute for heating facilities and bedding, but, better still, would substitute for food no longer available to keep up people’s normal strength” [J: 39; E: 24].
12 Translator’s note: The words in bold letters in this quotation are Watsuji’s emphases and not Benedict’s.
13 Translator’s note: The term hakkōichi 八絃一宇 appears in a dispersed form in Hasegawa’s translation 大義ヲ八絃ニ 宣揚シ坤奧ヲ一宇タラシムルハ実ニ皇祖皇宗ノ大訓ニシテ [J: 61, translator’s emphasis]. Benedict mentions it as a part of the Imperial Rescript on signing the Tripartite Pact between Japan, Germany and Italy in 1940: “To enhance our great righteousness in all the earth and to make of the world one household is the great injunction bequeathed by our Imperial Ancestors” [E: 44].
great importance by the author. It is indeed true that the war leaders used to wave about these slogans. However, the majority of the Japanese did not know these old sayings. They were merely understood as words that represented the power of the military. I have heard that a headmaster of a certain school was harassed by some right wingers because he pronounced the term as “hachigenichiu.” It was not only this headmaster who did not know the correct pronunciation. Only a handful of Japanese probably knew such a difficult word as “kō” (紘). Of course, I also did not know the term. But because it was waved around so much, I wondered what it was, and took a look at a commentary on Nihonshoki. There I found that it had absolutely nothing to do with foreign countries and was just used to mean making all of Japan happy like one family. Thus the term was originally completely unrelated to occupying other countries. Even if the eight corners were to be extended beyond Japan, it would refer to the brotherhood of man (shikaidōhōshugi 四海同胞主義) [J: 27; E: 14], and not to invading foreign land. Of course, there are cases where aggressors invade foreign countries while advocating universal brotherhood. But, just because some invaders have used the slogan, we cannot say the brotherhood of man means belligerent invasion so it must be stopped. The phrase “taking one’s proper station” (各得其所) most likely comes from the passage 雅頌各得其所 from The Analects of Confucius, so I think it means that each being brings to bear its true significance or natural value. Taking one’s proper station is also about the guarantee of individual human rights and freedom. Attaching the meaning of invasion to this phrase, just because some aggressors have used it as a slogan, is outright distortion. Still more, to claim that this slogan represents hierarchy, which is at the core of patterns of Japanese culture, is a completely arbitrary assertion.

However, we could say that since it was military leaders who waved these slogans around, it would not be a mistake to point out that these slogans indicated their way of thinking. But again this brings us back to the question of whether these leaders were appropriate representatives for conveying Japanese culture.

The Japanese knew very well that these slogans were a product of military academies and right wing groups, so they could see that these ruffians were not their representatives. Why then could they not suppress this small number of ruffians? Why did they watch such people make the Diet powerless and seize the news media in front of their very eyes without any resistance? Not only did they not put up any resistance, but they even eventually adopted an attitude of accepting the situation, even though they thought it was unreasonable. What made them take such a deliberate stance? Here I think there was a different problem which the author has not dealt with. I also think that this problem is more important than those taken up by the author.

14 Translator’s note: 各得其所 is the classical Chinese rendering of the title of Chapter 3 各々其ノ所ヲ得 [J: 60; E: 43].
15 Translator’s note: The phrase comes from Book 9 Passage 15 of The Analects: 子曰 吾自衛反魯 然後樂正 雅頌各得其所 (translator’s emphasis). “The Master said: ‘It was only after I had returned from Wei to Lu that music was rectified, with the yo and the song each getting their places’” (Confucius: The Analects. Translated by Raymond Dawson. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 32-33).
There is a very old saying, “Where might is master, justice is servant” (muri ga tōreba dāri hikkomu 無理が通れば道理ひっ込む). So why does justice become servant in the case of Japan? Of course, there are a small number of hard-headed people in Japan, who can boast that justice will never become servant. But the majority of Japanese keep silent and let might become master. We can see this happening very often today even inside trains. Ninety nine people keep silent while one person is committing an illegal act, even though they think it loathsome. If someone happens to condemn the act because he is unable to remain indifferent, many people sympathize, but they themselves do not stand up and criticize. This tendency is not limited to the period of military dictatorship. When I was reading The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, I saw the following article in a newspaper.

Around five o’clock in the afternoon on the twenty-fourth, when a suburban train of southwestern Tokyo arrived at S station, five to six men suddenly got on to the train and shouted with tremendous vigor, ‘The reactionary government makes slanderous reports on the Shimoyama Incident (Shimoyama jiken 下山事件) and the Mitaka Incident (Mitaka jiken 三鷹事件), so here is a newspaper to correct them. Please buy and read the paper for the people. Find out the truth for yourself.’ They almost forced the passengers to buy the newspapers.

Their fervor left the passengers shocked for a while. Some people reluctantly gave money. Then a young train conductor firmly said, ‘Please stop. Sale of newspapers is strictly banned inside the train.’ But the men surrounded the conductor threateningly and said, ‘Why? What’s the problem? We are fighting for the people.’ One of the men even shouted, ‘You are also a worker. We are fighting the reactionary government for workers all over the world. Don’t you understand? It’s outrageous to ban this.’ The conductor said unflinchingly, ‘The content of the newspaper makes no difference. I forbid the unpermitted forced sales inside the train.’ He argued courageously and refused to back down.

When the train arrived at Y station, the men got off the train making a lot of noise. The conductor grabbed hold of one of them and said, ‘Please come to the station master’s office.’ The men again resisted a great deal, but eventually they were surrounded by a large number of station staff, so they gave their full names and ran away in disgrace.

This was the first time I saw such an aspect of ‘violence.’ I was impressed by how the young conductor bravely insisted on what was right without submitting to this violence. I admired his sense of responsibility to his duty and the courage he showed in spite of the dangers.

What is striking about this article is the fact that the conductor, who was only doing what was right and proper, was regarded as an extraordinarily brave man, and that the people who sympathized with his attitude did not support him and try to help him carry out the proper conduct. It is not that the majority of people do not know about justice. It is just that they step back and do not come forward when might is master. This trait has not changed at
all even today, when the effects of the slogans mentioned by the author have completely died out.

I presume that the same trait existed among the military personnel. Army men I have met belonged to a very limited circle, but most of them were rational thinkers. Neither did they believe that the spirit won over matter nor were they possessed like mad men. They were also not the kind of men who tried to “make might master.” We do not really know the whereabouts of people who created the military ideology. Indeed, I think that ruffians were only very few. But “might became master” probably because many people took the same attitude as the train passengers that I have mentioned.

Due to this trait, the way of thinking of a small number of narrow-minded people came to be represented as the Japanese way of thinking and took shape as the actions of the Japanese state. This meant that there was a dictatorship of a minority who had seized military power politically. It did not mean that the Japanese way of thinking or Japanese patterns of culture were sufficiently represented in such narrow-minded thinking. The fact that such dictatorship was possible is a problem related to patterns of Japanese culture. But the important point here is that such dictatorship is also possible under a completely different kind of philosophy and view of life.

The above flaws in analysis are further exacerbated in the part where the author takes up the issue of hierarchy in the various historical periods of Japan.

As you know, Japan preserves different kinds of features from the past without destroying them. We see not only feudal elements, but also ancient elements around us today. I analyzed this a long time ago as the multistrata structure of Japanese culture (nihonbunka no jūsōset 日本文化の重層性).16 I also recall that a German scholar focused on this point and described Japan as a nation of coexistence (heizai no kuni 並在の国). However, for us this is not simply a matter of coexistence. The new and the old layers are clearly distinguished. Thus we almost automatically differentiate between elements that are antiquated and non-functional and those that are new and functional, and treat them accordingly. When two or three such antiquated elements are taken up, generalized and presented as patterns of life of the Japanese today, I really cannot bring myself to take the argument seriously. If the author had put forward titles such as Customs of Japan in the feudal period or Relics of feudal customs in contemporary Japan and had focused her research on those areas, her work may have claimed to have some academic value.

I was born in a small village in the Chūgoku region in the year of the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution and grew up there. I felt that the Meiji Restoration—and even more the Edo period—was something far back in the past. Even the promulgation of the constitution for me was old history that belonged to the previous generation. I am now sixty years old and in my experience of the past half century, I have only very rarely come across what the

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author calls “Japan’s confidence in hierarchy” [J: 60; E: 43]. My grandfather, who was born in the first year of Tenpō (Tenpō gannen 天保元年, 1830), had that kind of confidence. But my father and his generation were not content with “position befitting oneself in the hierarchy.” Even if they were forced by circumstances to remain where they were, they tried at least once or twice to escape their condition. When it came to my generation, it was natural for all young people, be they from villages or rural towns, to aim and take action to rise above their situation and climb up to as high a status as possible. Hardly anyone was content with inheriting their parents’ jobs and remaining in the same position as them. The youth no longer had a placid attitude, such as what you would often find in a place like France. The Japanese translation of Theodore Roosevelt’s The Strenuous Life was in fashion. Junior high school students grabbed hold of and avidly read the abridged version of the English original. The magazine Success (Seikō 『成功』) sold in considerable numbers even in rural towns. The youth all tried pursuing new paths that their parents had not. If people who had grown up in such an environment were told almost half a century later that “The Japanese, more than any other sovereign nation, have been conditioned to a world where the smallest details of conduct are mapped and status is assigned”¹⁷ [J: 91; E: 70] they would surely not nod in agreement.

The author also devotes considerable attention to the Japanese family “ie,” and argues that the parents and the elderly ordered the children in each and every matter with absolute authority. But we have not had such an experience. From what I have seen and heard, most of the young men at that time chose their careers and wives of their own will. It was by no means uncommon that they went against their parents’ wishes when they did so. This sometimes led to fierce fighting between parents and children, but it was usually resolved without much trouble as the parents often conceded. Of course, I am aware that there were many old-fashioned families like those referred to by the author, which belonged to different circles from mine. But such families were branded as “old-fashioned” even back in the Meiji period.

The author mentions the mother-in-law’s ill-treatment of the daughter-in-law as a marked phenomenon. Such ill-treatment drew great attention of the general public due to the publication and subsequent dramatization of the novel A Little Cuckoo (Fujoki/Hototogisu 『不如帰』) when I was a small boy before I began to read novels. I am not sure whether it was the result of this that mothers of my parents’ generation seemed to have resolved not to mistreat their daughters-in-law. The mothers of people whom I have met showed very modest behavior toward their sons’ wives. Consequently, it was not uncommon that the mothers were abused by the daughters-in-law instead. Today, the daughters-in-law, who abused their mothers-in-law, have become mothers and must contend with their daughters-in-law. Most mothers of this generation no longer think about forcing the “family tradition” (kafū 家風) on the daughters-in-law or ordering them around. Parents desire that their children have happy homes, and the children try to ensure that their parents have a

¹⁷ Translator’s note: The words in bold letters in this quotation are Watsuji’s emphases and not Benedict’s.
contented old age. We seldom come across people who are resigned to sacrificing themselves for the sake of the “ie.” Of course, “old-fashioned” families remain here and there even today. But having lived in Japan for the past sixty years, I am astonished to be told that such families represent Japanese families of today.

I think what you particularly wanted me to review was the author’s analysis of duty (giri 義理) and human feelings (ninjō 人情). But I think that section is especially of bad quality and is very confusing due to the flaws I have already mentioned. Please save me from the trouble of pointing out the faults in detail. I would rather ask you as an ethnologist to kindly inform me which part of this book is of any academic value. This is my repeated request to you. (August 1949)