

Mark Twain in Japan: The Cultural Reception of an American Icon

Russell Reising

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Reising, Russell (2006) "Mark Twain in Japan: The Cultural Reception of an American Icon," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss1/17>

Review

Reising, Russell

Winter 2006

Ishihara, Tsuyoshi *Mark Twain in Japan: The Cultural Reception of an American Icon*. University of Missouri Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 826215904

American Literature in an Eastern Culture

Japanese Interpretation and Absorption of Mark Twain

Tsuyoshi Ishihara's study of the Japanese reception of Mark Twain may not be of much interest to those with a narrow focus on the American Civil War. On the other hand, it is of immense interest to those interested in how Japanese intellectuals, translators, and animators have responded to and, in the most interesting cases, significantly altered the works of Mark Twain in order to accommodate the author's novels to the prevailing military, political, and cultural climate in Japan. Ishihara's analysis and his excellent 20 page annotated bibliography should be of great interest to anybody attracted to international literary relations and the problems of cultural translation.

As it turns out, Mark Twain's writings, and, for that matter, the works of almost any pre-20th century American author, have been buffeted by the winds of cultural and political change in Japan since the late 19th century. For example, *The Prince and the Pauper*, dealing as it does with royalty and a medieval Europe that the Japanese knew from reading Shakespeare and Hans Christian Anderson, was popular in imperial Japan at the turn of the century. The more contemporary, democratic, and distinctly American adventures of Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn, on the other hand, proved free wheeling for Japanese readers. Moreover, during World War II, Mark Twain, like many American writers were virtually taboo. Ishihara recounts the wonderful story of Kenzaburo Oe's mother sneaking him a two-volume edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Ishihara reveals remarkable ways in which Japanese translators and adaptors (many adaptations depart wildly from the original texts, whereas translations tend to be truer to the originals) altered Mark Twain's works, almost all having to do with the prevailing political climate in Japan at the time. For example, nearly all Japanese versions of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* either choose not to or fail to render Mark Twain's vernacular genius, largely due to the fact that most translations targeted a juvenile audience whose grammar needed refining. Treatments of Jim vary with Japanese hostility or friendliness to people of color. In postwar Japan, passages dealing with Huck's laziness, smoking, and juvenile delinquency were censored, again so as not to tempt Japanese youths into the pleasures of life on the Mississippi.

Most interestingly, Ishihara reveals how Japanese reactions to their own conduct during World War II affected the ways they translated and read Mark Twain. The earlier preference for *The Prince and the Pauper* and all its medieval authoritarianism disappeared as Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn became ideal models of democratic youth following their anti-authoritarian dreams for adventure and freedom. In one 1948 translation, Huck Finn responds to the Grangerford/Shepherdson feud by stressing the foolishness and dangers of any craving for revenge, ostensibly in an attempt to quell any such feelings postwar Japanese may have experience during the American occupation. On the other hand, Mark Twain's humor proved to be an irresistible breath of fresh air to an educational system that had habitually been univocally serious, and many passages from *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* graced Japanese textbooks.

Not surprisingly, Japanese manga and anime, their preeminent animated literary and film genres, have altered Mark Twain's work for contemporary Japanese readers, most significantly turning Huck Finn into a righteous anti-racist and rendering Jim with new dignity and humanity. Ishihara also documents some of the truly bizarre versions of Mark Twain and his works in Japanese popular culture, including a Tom Sawyer ranch at a small Japanese theme park and a noodle company that regards Tom Sawyer as the character that symbolizes Nissin Foods' pioneering spirit of enterprise.

Throughout his study, Professor Ishihara treads lightly when actually suggesting interpretations of Mark Twain's works. He notes the complexities of Huck Finn's racial thinking, of Pap Finn's abusive alcoholism, and of Mark Twain's thinking about social and political buffoonery. His discussions of the

finer points of Japanese adaptations and translations could have carried more weight had he actually ventured into those muddy analytical waters. That being said, however, **Mark Twain in Japan: The Cultural Reception of an American Icon** is a well researched, engagingly written, and important study of the ways the Japanese literary and educational establishment has negotiated the complicated works of Mark Twain. One wonders of a study of the American educational system and its frequent banning of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* could get as careful and sensitive a treatment.

Russell Reising is Professor of American literature and culture at University of Toledo. He has written widely on American literature and pop culture, and has both taught and published on the Japanese novelists Kobo Abe and Haruki Murakami. Reising's first book, The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature (Routledge, 1986), has been translated into Japanese. Reising lived and traveled widely in Japan in the 1970s.