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Nationalism and the Politics of Interpretation: Divergent Readings of *the Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in China and the United States

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Abstract: This paper examines why Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has been received so differently in China and the United States. It argues that these contrasting readings arise not simply from methodological disagreement but from distinct national narratives and intellectual traditions that shape how scholars evaluate cultural interpretation. The study first situates the book in its wartime American context, highlighting how political needs informed its analytical framework. It then shows how the work resonated with Chinese narratives of moral endurance while prompting increasing critique in the United States as postwar scholarship emphasized fieldwork, complexity, and reflexive analysis. By comparing these responses, the paper demonstrates that nationalism influences both what readers find persuasive and the standards by which they judge cultural explanations.

Keywords: Nationalism; The Chrysanthemum and the Sword; Sino-US Comparative Analysis; American Anthropology; Chinese Intellectual Traditions

1. Introduction

Historical interpretation is never a neutral act. How scholars interpret the past, including what they emphasize, question, or accept as credible, is shaped by evidence as well as the national narratives and intellectual traditions through which they themselves have been formed. Few works reveal this dynamic more clearly than Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Written in 1946 for a U.S. government seeking to understand its wartime enemy, the book became an influential portrait of Japanese culture, celebrated in its time for its clarity and coherence. Yet the text has since generated sharply divergent responses across countries. While many Chinese scholars continue to regard it as an insightful analysis of Japan's moral and social structures, American scholars have increasingly criticized it as methodologically flawed, culturally essentialist, or even complicit in wartime political needs. The existence of such opposing interpretations raises a fundamental question: why do scholars from different national contexts read the same book so differently?

This paper argues that these divergences cannot be understood simply as disagreements about evidence or methodology. Instead, they reveal how nationalism, understood here not as chauvinism but as the broader structure of meanings, education, and political experience through which nations imagine themselves, shapes the very frameworks through which scholars interpret cultural texts. Benedict's book provides an ideal case study because it sits at the intersection of anthropology, wartime politics, and the formation of national identity. As a product of the American war effort, the book reflected the political imperatives and cultural assumptions of its time [1]. As a text translated, circulated, and absorbed in China during periods when access to Japanese scholarship was limited, it came to resonate with Chinese narratives about collective endurance and spiritual strength. Thus, the divergent receptions of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* illuminate how nations form distinct interpretive habits, and how what seems intuitive or plausible in one national context may appear deeply problematic in another.

By comparing Chinese and American readings of the book, this study demonstrates that nationalism influences interpretation through three interconnected mechanisms. First, national narratives direct attention toward different themes in Benedict's text—Chinese readers are more inclined to identify with her emphasis on spiritual discipline and collective identity, while American readers focus on her claims about hierarchy and cultural essentialism. Second, distinct intellectual traditions shape how scholars

evaluate evidence and authority; for instance, American academia's strong emphasis on critical scrutiny contrasts with the historically text-centered, reception-oriented approach within much of Chinese humanities education. Finally, political relationships and historical memory provide powerful interpretive lenses: a nation's experience with Japan, whether as wartime adversary, postwar ally, or cultural counterpart, structures the emotional and analytical stakes of reading.

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that interpretations of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* are not merely scholarly disagreements but reflections of how nations perceive themselves and others. Examining these divergent readings thus offers insight into the broader question of how nationalism shapes historical understanding, revealing both the limitations of cultural analysis and the necessity of engaging multiple national perspectives to approach a more nuanced account of the past.

2. Wartime Origins: What *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* Was Intended to Do

When Ruth Benedict began writing *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in 1944, the United States had reached a decisive stage in the Pacific War. American forces had taken Saipan, the Japanese mainland was within military reach, and policymakers were preparing for an eventual occupation. At the same time, direct anthropological fieldwork in Japan was impossible, and even basic knowledge of Japanese society remained fragmentary among American officials. In this context, the Office of War Information commissioned Benedict to produce a cultural study that could help the United States anticipate Japanese responses to surrender, occupation, and reform. The book was therefore created as a strategic tool to convert scattered information into a coherent cultural portrait that could guide wartime decision-making.

Since Benedict couldn't conduct in-person field research in Japan, she had to rely on three types of materials for her study: interviews with American Japanese, translated literary and historical documents, and wartime media such as promotional films and documentaries [2]. She was aware these sources had apparent limitations in perspective. Nevertheless, the urgency of the war pushed her to stitch these scattered pieces into a cultural framework capable of explaining Japan's behavioral patterns. To do this, she identified several core traits that seemed to recur in Japanese society, such as a high regard for honor, strict adherence to obligations, obedience to hierarchical order, and a noticeable duality in behavior [2]. This framework provided a narrative tool for American officials to interpret Japanese army actions during that time, offering a cohesive cultural background for phenomena previously seen as "difficult to understand" or "extreme," like refusal to surrender and kamikaze attacks [3]. More crucially, these discussions addressed the two main issues the U.S. focused on during the war and the early occupation: whether to retain the imperial system after Japan's defeat and how to prevent large-scale resistance during the occupation. Benedict argued that Japanese social organization was rooted in a hierarchical obligation system rather than individual guilt, with the emperor holding a special symbolic significance. This suggested that maintaining the imperial system could help uphold post-war order. For the U.S. government, eager for a practical explanatory framework, this viewpoint offered strong policy appeal. Consequently, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* served far more than a cultural study; it helped the U.S. understand its wartime enemy and provided a theoretical basis for occupation policies. This plain political utility greatly contributed to American officials' acceptance of Benedict's ideas, making her cultural analysis a key reference in handling Japanese issues after the war.

From this perspective, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has never been a neutral ethnography. It was created during wartime, when people urgently needed a framework for quickly understanding Japanese society [2]. American political goals heavily shaped this need and were inherently one-sided. Benedict's constructed cultural portrait reflected the limited data available and the urgent policy requirements of that time [4]. After the war, this framework continued to spread through translation and dissemination within the international academic community, and its underlying political assumptions were incorporated into broader discussions. Understanding this historical background is essential because the strategic motives embedded in the text later influence the national narratives of China and the United

States, ultimately leading to different interpretations of the book among readers from both countries. This is the central issue that this article seeks to expose.

3. Chinese Reception: Nationalism as Resonance

The reception of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in China relies less on a careful examination of Benedict's research methods and more on how her depiction of Japan resonates with China's deep-seated stories about national identity, historical experiences, and collective resilience. Although it was introduced in China at different times and under various political circumstances, the Chinese academic community has consistently viewed it as an insightful piece in Japanese cultural studies. This pattern of reception is not based solely on academic agreement; instead, it originates in the core structure of Chinese nationalism and in storytelling traditions shaped by modern education and the country's historical memory, which help readers recognize interpretive frameworks more aligned with their own cultural understanding [5]. A central reason for Benedict's appeal is the resonance between her interpretation of Japanese "spiritual strength" and China's own narratives of nation-building. Since the early twentieth century, Chinese historiography and public education have emphasized a pattern of national endurance grounded in moral determination rather than material advantage [6]. The War of Resistance against Japan and the Korean War were repeatedly framed as moments in which Chinese victory emerged from collective faith, discipline, and sacrifice despite severe shortages in weapons and technology. Thus, Benedict's argument that Japan's wartime behavior was rooted in a powerful moral and spiritual code appeared familiar [7]. Her analysis of "spirit over material," which many American scholars later criticized as overly schematic, echoed themes that Chinese readers already regarded as historically meaningful. This reflects the emotionally charged "ethno-symbolic" pattern that Anthony Smith identifies as central to how nations interpret themselves and others. In this sense, Benedict's interpretation aligned with a narrative logic that Chinese readers had been trained to recognize, making the book's claims seem intuitively plausible.

Access to information also played an essential role in shaping Chinese responses. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, China had limited channels for specialist research on Japan, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Academic exchange was constrained, foreign-language training was uneven, and scholarly debates within Japanese studies often circulated slowly or selectively. In such an environment, the state played a disproportionately large role in determining which texts entered public discourse. This dynamic can be analyzed by a pattern Ernest Gellner identified in many modern nation-states. When institutions centralize cultural production, certain narratives acquire the status of orthodoxy simply because they face little competition. Benedict's text, translated early and widely available, became a convenient and authoritative entry point for understanding Japan. Even as field-based and archival research expanded in the West, Chinese readers often encountered *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* without parallel access to the critical literature that challenged its assumptions. This asymmetry reinforced the book's authority—not because its arguments had been systematically tested in China, but because alternative interpretive frameworks circulated less widely.

Educational traditions further strengthened this pattern. Chinese humanities education has historically emphasized close reading, synthesis, and interpretive acceptance of canonical texts. Students are trained to enter the world that a text constructs before critiquing its premises, and authority is often attributed to the narrative's internal coherence rather than to methodological transparency. When readers approach Benedict's work through this interpretive style, they are inclined to evaluate the persuasiveness of her cultural portrait rather than the constraints of her wartime sources [8]. Instead of asking whether her categories oversimplify Japanese society, many Chinese scholars have focused on how effectively her framework illuminates Japanese behavior during periods of conflict. In this environment, Benedict's clear explanatory structure, built around the concepts of obligation, hierarchy, duality, and honor, gains legitimacy because it provides a stable lens through which to understand a complex cultural system.

In general, these factors show that Chinese support for *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is based on both agreement with Benedict's conclusions and stronger narrative and

institutional connections. Her account of Japan aligns with Chinese historical memory, filling gaps caused by limited access to alternative research, and it fits comfortably within an educational culture that values coherent interpretive frameworks. As a result, the book has continued to occupy a prominent place in Chinese discussions of Japanese national character, even as American scholarship has turned sharply critical. This divergence underscores the significant impact of national identity and narrative traditions on the intellectual reception of cultural texts. This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced when examining the contrasting American response.

4. American Reception: From Wartime Acceptance to Postwar Critique

The American reception of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has undergone a dramatic shift over the past eight decades, reflecting broader changes in American nationalism, academic culture, and the political relationship between the United States and Japan. When the book first appeared in 1946, it met an audience eager for a coherent explanation of Japanese wartime behavior. The United States was preparing for a full-scale occupation, and policymakers needed an interpretive framework that could make sense of practices that seemed inscrutable or extreme, from kamikaze attacks to unwavering loyalty to the emperor. Benedict's portrait offered precisely this kind of clarity. Her emphasis on obligation, hierarchy, and moral discipline helped American officials understand Japan in terms that could guide immediate political decisions, including whether to preserve the imperial institution and how to structure the occupation. In this context, her analysis was welcomed less as an anthropological study than as a practical cultural map. Wartime nationalism, with its demand for actionable knowledge about the enemy, created a receptive environment in which Benedict's framework appeared not only persuasive but indispensable [9].

As the geopolitical landscape shifted from conflict to alliance, however, American scholars began to reassess the work. The postwar era saw the rise of area studies programs, extensive fieldwork in Japan, and the development of linguistic and archival methods that far exceeded the wartime constraints under which Benedict worked [10]. These new forms of knowledge complicated her unified depiction of Japanese culture. Practices she described as timeless or essential appeared far more diverse when examined across different regions, classes, and historical periods. At the same time, the intellectual climate of the United States was changing. Scholars grew increasingly wary of cultural generalizations. At the same time, a broader critical turn in the humanities encouraged readers to reflect on how Western representations of non-Western societies often reproduced existing power structures. These concerns, which were later articulated most clearly by Edward Said, made Benedict's portrayal of Japan appear more like a product of American wartime assumptions than an objective cultural analysis. Through this lens, Benedict's portrait of Japan seemed uncomfortably aligned with the American wartime imagination that had shaped it. For critics such as John Lie, the book revealed more about American anxieties during the 1940s than about Japan [11].

The broader epistemological traditions of American academia reinforced this shift in evaluation. Critical inquiry has long been central to the American conception of scholarship, which encourages students to interrogate assumptions, question authoritative narratives, and demand transparent evidence [12]. As the social sciences moved toward systematic fieldwork and methodological rigor, Benedict's reliance on interviews with Japanese Americans, translated literature, and wartime propaganda became increasingly challenging to defend. The interpretive clarity that had once made the helpful book now appeared to rest on overly simplistic analyses. In a scholarly culture that treats critique as a basic intellectual obligation, many American scholars read Benedict's categories of obligation and hierarchy as simplifying labels rather than as practical analytical tools. They argued that these concepts reduced the complexity of Japanese society to a set of fixed cultural traits [13].

These developments explain why *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a work once embraced by American policymakers and academics, later became a focal point for methodological and political criticism. The early acceptance of Benedict's framework reflected the urgency of wartime nationalism and the demand for coherent explanations of an unfamiliar enemy. In contrast, the subsequent

rejection emerged from a postwar context defined by new research practices, changing political alliances, and a growing commitment to critical self-reflection. The American case thus illustrates how nationalism shapes not only the production of cultural knowledge but also its evaluation. The very conditions that made the book authoritative in 1946 later provided the grounds for its dismissal. This dynamic becomes even clearer when considered alongside the contrasting Chinese reception, where different narrative habits and institutional environments sustained the book's authority long after American scholars turned away from it.

5. Comparative Analysis: How Nationalism Shapes Interpretation

The divergent Chinese and American readings of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* reveal that nationalism shapes interpretation not through overt ideology but through quieter, deeper mechanisms that structure what readers notice, how they evaluate evidence, and what they consider plausible. Although the two national contexts produced opposite assessments of Benedict's work, these assessments emerged from parallel processes. In each case, nationalism operated as a set of narrative habits, institutional conditions, and epistemological expectations that shaped how Japan's cultural portrait was received.

One mechanism through which nationalism influenced interpretation is the selective attention readers brought to the text. Chinese readers, shaped by narratives of collective endurance and moral determination, gravitated toward Benedict's emphasis on spiritual force and group cohesion. These elements echoed familiar national stories, making her account appear recognizably patterned rather than overly schematic. By contrast, American readers focused on the book's essentialist depictions of hierarchy and obligation. These themes resonated with long-standing American concerns about authoritarianism and cultural difference. Yet, they also generated skepticism in a society that places substantial value on egalitarian ideals. In both contexts, readers emphasized the passages that aligned most closely with the symbolic vocabulary of their own national narratives.

A second mechanism lies in interpretive frameworks, the conceptual structures through which readers make sense of Benedict's claims. Chinese interpretations tended to treat her categories as functional explanations rather than as hypotheses requiring verification, reflecting an educational tradition that privileges narrative coherence. The American academic tradition, shaped by a strong culture of critique, approached the same categories with greater suspicion, viewing them as potential simplifications or projections. These differing interpretive styles meant that the same textual features produced trust in one context and doubt in the other.

A third mechanism involves the norms by which scholarly authority is judged. In China, where long-standing constraints on academic exchange limited access to alternative interpretations of Japan, Benedict's work circulated with little competition and thus gained durability. Its clear analytic structure functioned as a stable point of reference in a field where comprehensive, critically informed accounts were relatively scarce for much of the twentieth century. In the United States, however, the growth of area studies programs and the rise of fieldwork-based research created a scholarly environment that placed increasing value on methodological transparency. Benedict's research strongly relies on wartime sources. This was acceptable in the 1940s. However, it came to be seen as insufficient in a postwar context where first-hand evidence and empirical rigor became markers of credibility. Therefore, what counted as authoritative scholarship shifted as the institutional norms of American academia evolved.

These mechanisms, namely selective attention, interpretive frameworks, and shifting standards of scholarly authority, illustrate how nationalism shapes not just the content of historical interpretation but the conditions under which interpretations appear convincing or flawed. Chinese and American readers did not simply disagree about Benedict's conclusions; they brought different narrative expectations, intellectual traditions, and institutional experiences to the act of reading. As a result, the same text elicited different forms of recognition and skepticism, resulting in sharply contrasting evaluations of its value. The comparison makes clear that debates over *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* are not only about Japan or about Benedict's methods. They reveal the extent to which the interpretation of cultural texts is mediated by the national contexts through which

readers imagine history, identity, and the meaning of understanding another society.

6. Conclusion

The divergent Chinese and American readings of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* demonstrate that nationalism shapes historical interpretation not simply through overt political commitments but through the deeper structures that organize how readers perceive credibility, coherence, and cultural meaning. Benedict's wartime portrait of Japan circulated across two national environments that differed sharply in their historical memory, educational traditions, and access to competing scholarly frameworks. In China, the book's emphasis on spiritual discipline and collective endurance aligned with long-standing national narratives and symbolic codes, enabling it to serve as a plausible, and even authoritative, account of Japanese society. In the United States, the exact text moved from being a strategic interpretive tool during the war to a subject of methodological and political critique once new research practices, postwar alliances, and a culture of reflexive scholarship took hold. These contrasting receptions reveal how nationalism guides not only what is emphasized or questioned within a text, but the very standards by which interpretation is judged.

The comparative analysis offered in this paper suggests that explanations of cultural difference cannot be understood apart from the national contexts in which readers are situated. Interpretive habits, institutional environments, and narrative expectations form the conditions under which a work like *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* becomes convincing, debatable, or obsolete. Recognizing these mechanisms encourages a more reflexive approach to cultural analysis. This approach acknowledges that scholarship is shaped by the same historical forces it seeks to describe and understand. It also highlights the value of viewing cultural texts through multiple national perspectives, since no single vantage point can fully capture the complexity of another society or the assumptions embedded within one's own.

Future research could build on these findings by examining how nationalism influences interpretations of other cross-cultural works, particularly through large-scale surveys or comparative content analysis. Such approaches would enable scholars to examine interpretive patterns with greater empirical detail, thereby clarifying the relationship between historical cognition and national identity in various educational and political contexts. For now, the case of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* serves as a reminder that the past is never read in a vacuum. The narratives through which nations imagine themselves are shaped by memory, pedagogy, and political experience. Such narratives continue to shape how scholars understand the histories of others and, inevitably, their own.

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