

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 3, 2019,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Howard Scott
Hibbett was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

HOWARD SCOTT HIBBETT

BORN: July 27, 1920

DIED: March 13, 2019

Howard Hibbett was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1920. After graduating from Culver Military Academy in Indiana, he enrolled in Harvard College in September 1940. The outbreak of the Pacific War interrupted his studies. As a sophomore, in the winter semester of 1942 he was among the sixty students who immediately enrolled in Harvard's intensive Japanese class, taught by Edwin Reischauer. Hibbett was one of 15 students to complete the class. For the remainder of the war, armed with a Japanese dictionary and a pad of paper, he served in the Army in Washington, D.C., as a translator of intercepted Japanese military communications. Like several others of his generation, this experience launched him on a career as a pioneer in the study and teaching of Japanese literature in the Anglophone world.

Hibbett returned to Harvard in 1946, graduating *summa cum laude* in January of 1947 with a concentration in the Department of Far Eastern Languages (since 1972, the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations). In 1949, while pursuing his Ph.D. in that department, he was elected to Harvard's still-young Society of Fellows. Advised by the founding director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, the great Russian Japanologist Serge Elisseeff, Hibbett received the Ph.D. in 1950.

After a year of study in Japan (his first visit to the country he had been studying in various ways for eight years), Hibbett served as instructor, then assistant professor, at the University of California, Los Angeles. A recommendation letter written by Elisseeff in 1954 aptly—but incompletely—described him as “a modest, unassuming, slightly reticent young man, who is completely dedicated to scholarship.”

Hibbett returned to Harvard as a tenured Associate Professor of Japanese in 1958 and remained on the faculty until his retirement in 1991. He helped make Harvard a leader in Japanese and East Asian studies as chair of the Far Eastern Languages Department (1965–1970) and director of the Edwin O. Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies (1985–1988). He served as co-editor of the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* from 1984 to 1987, then sole editor through 2000. He tirelessly attended conferences, taking copious notes and soliciting

manuscripts of promising work. Once asked by a colleague if the notes were useful, he smiled and confessed he filed them away and never looked at them again.

Hibbett was one of the great Anglophone translators of Japanese literature. His lifelong interest in fiction tracing the intricacies of psychosexual involvements is copiously documented in his renderings of the novels and short stories of Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, whose plots range from the medieval to the modern. The tone of these masterly translations evokes the period and personality of each typically first-person narrator in a most convincing manner, as can be seen in the content of *Seven Japanese Tales*, *Diary of a Mad Old Man*, *The Key*, and *Quicksand*, among other texts.

While his work was anchored in—and did much to build appreciation of—the modern classics of Japanese literature of the mid-twentieth century, Hibbett was also a pioneer in expanding the field backward and forward in time. *The Floating World in Japanese Fiction*, published in 1959, showed future generations—both his own graduate students and wider audiences—that the dauntingly intricate popular prose literature of the Edo period could be made accessible to a non-expert and non-Japanese audience. As compiler of the important 1977 anthology *Contemporary Japanese Literature*, he showed Anglophone readers that the vitality and variety of Japanese fiction and poetry extended beyond a handful of well-translated big names—Tanizaki, Mishima, and Kawabata. One bold move in this collection was the decision to include the screenplay, and some still pictures, of Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece *Ikiru*, thus showing how integral film was in Japan's literary as well as visual culture.

Many American college students, including authors of this minute, first learned Hibbett's name as co-author of what we called “Hibbett and Itasaka,” a textbook officially titled *Modern Japanese: A Basic Reader* (1965). Today it is hardly the fashion for an elementary textbook to give priority to reading over conversation. But the textbook's well-chosen excerpts gave beginners the chance to read for themselves the prose of Natsume Sōseki or Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and appreciate their expressive and rich language.

Serge Elisseeff's recommendation letter of 1954 was notably incomplete for failing to mention Hibbett's deep interest in the history of humor and his own humorous touch. He first wrote on Japan's parodic literary tradition of the Edo era in 1959. In his later years, when many people become more serious, Hibbett sustained his delight in a joke or witty story, and his last book, published in 2002 when he was 81, returned to the topic of Japanese humor. In a take-off from Ruth Benedict's classic, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, he titled it *The Chrysanthemum and the Fish*. One of Hibbett's colleagues recalled being startled, one quiet January afternoon, at a strange chortling sound coming from down the hall. What could it be? she wondered. And then she realized that, of course, it was just Howard Hibbett, proofing his humor book and enjoying some good laughs.

Hibbett's twin passions outside of his academic pursuits were gardening—especially tending to Japanese moss and grasses in his yard in Arlington—and music, both classical and, especially, jazz. From early in his life, he often visited clubs in Harlem and elsewhere featuring the great musicians of the time. A shy man, he played the piano for himself and his family, improvising beautifully in the style of Bill Evans.

On March 1, 2019, at the age of 98, Hibbett attended a talk on campus by a former student on the place of translation in the literature of the noted writer Tawada Yoko. A warm reunion dinner with several other former students capped the evening. Hibbett passed away two weeks later. He is survived by his second wife, Akiko; his children, Mariko, Reiko, and David; four grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

Respectfully submitted,

Edwin Cranston
Stephen Owen
Susan Pharr
Andrew Gordon, Chair