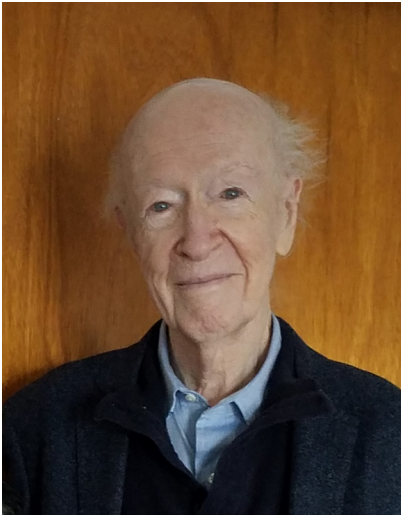


# HOWARD SCOTT HIBBETT

## 1920–2019

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 fifteen 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, DC, 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 1947 with a concentration in the Department of Far Eastern Languages (now the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations). He stayed on in the department for his PhD, which he received in 1950. His adviser, the great Russian Japanologist Serge Elisséeff, was the founding director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute and a founding coeditor of the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*.

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 Elisséeff in 1954 aptly—but incompletely—described him as “a modest, unassuming, slightly reticent young man, who is completely dedicated to scholarship.”

Hibbett joined the Harvard faculty in 1958 and remained 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 coeditor of the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* from 1984 to 1987, then sole editor through 2000. Joanna Handlin-Smith, who worked with Hibbett before taking over as editor herself, recalls his love of language and his wit, which showed through in his correspondence with *HJAS* authors.

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'ichirō, 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 Kurosawa

Akira's masterpiece *Ikiru*, thus showing how integral film was in Japan's literary as well as visual culture.

On March 1, 2019, at the age of ninety-eight, Hibbett attended a talk on campus by a former student. A warm reunion dinner with several other former students capped the evening. Hibbett passed away two weeks later.

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