Japanese Sensibility and Oriental Wisdom

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In Search of a New Lifestyle in the New Era

By

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book is dedicated to my wife Masako,
to my son Hidemasa and two daughters Hisako Tsuboi and Reiko Sano,
as well as to my six grandchildren:
Takashi and Yuko Tsuboi, Hiroshi and Takashi Nakamura, Nina and Norika Sano.

Author's Note on the Front Cover

"Ikebana" (Flower Arrangement) by Ms.Senko Ikenobo, Headmaster Designate of Ikenobo.

Brush Calligraphy meaning the Title of the Book in Japanese by Mr.Hakuju Kuiseko, Honorary Special Member, Nitten (Japan Brush Calligraphy Exhibition)

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PREFACE

Japanese sensibility is unique to Japan. It differs from other countries in the region. It is closely related to the geographical setting and historical background of the country. Let me first consider the Japanese sense of beauty. The Japanese find beauty in the inconspicuous, transient, time-worn, asymmetric or incomplete, in addition to the universal standard of beauty shared by people in general, including the Japanese.

To illustrate this, I offer two examples. One is a well-known "Haiku" (short traditional poem) by Issa Kobayashi of the Edo Period (1603-1867), which cautions, in English translation as below:

Yare-Utsuna	Don't hurt that fly
Hae-ga Te-o-Suru	he is praying to you
Ashi-o-Suru	by rubbing his hands and feet

It describes the tiny actions of a fly with a sense of humour and beauty. The other is a tea bowl used in tea ceremonies. It is often the case that a bowl which is time-worn, dark-coloured and asymmetric (or perhaps distorted in shape) is preferred to a perfectly wrought, neat and colourful one. There are many other examples of this sort explained in detail in the relevant chapters.

Along with this sense of beauty, the inherent practice of 'conjecture' ("Sassuru") and 'compassion' ("Omoi-yari") together with 'harmony and peace' ("Wa") are further cornerstones of Japanese sensibility, both of which constitute a basic component of the thinking and behaviour of the Japanese people. A feature common to the cultures of "Sassuru" and "Omoi-yari" is the assumption and consideration of thoughts and feelings from the standpoint of other people. 'Japanese hospitality' ("O-mote-nashi"), the

famous cordiality towards guests for which Japan is known by many around the world, is also based on this category of Japanese sensibility. Similarly, the culture of "Wa" has always been a guiding principle in Japan, encompassing politics, business and culture as well as daily life, since the beginning of the seventh century.

On the other hand, Oriental wisdom is not originally Japanese. It was imported to Japan, mainly from China but partly from India too, and subsequently became deeply rooted in the country. Aspects of Oriental wisdom which have taken root in Japanese society, adopted largely unchanged from how they were in China, include: (1) polytheistic thinking or the acceptance of pluralistic values; (2) the concepts of 'nothingness' ("Mu") and 'emptiness' ("Kū"); as well as (3) co-existence with and integration into Nature. Although these are not Japanese in origin, they have become an integral part of Japanese society, and as such I have long maintained that Japan is well-placed and able to take a lead in communicating them widely to the world. I hope my book goes some way towards this.

As Oriental wisdom became integrated into Japanese society, links between Japanese sensibility and Oriental wisdom have gradually been forged. I would include certain aspects of this broad category in what I consider to be the third facet of Japanese cultural tradition, namely the creative amalgamation of the two, though the degree of cultural crossover differs considerably. By way of example, I might mention: (1) strict self-observation and correction; (2) 'a way to act and behave' ("Michi" or "Dō"); and (3) an emphasis on 'relationships' ("Kankei") as seen in 'humaneness' ("Ninjō") or 'ashamedness' ("Haji") and 'worldly society' ("Seken"). More on all of these later in the book.

What I would like to stress first here is that there are so many aspects of Japanese sensibility and Oriental wisdom which deserve to be better known to the wider world. Secondly, I would go so far as to say that many of them present useful suggestions for the future needs and requirements of our global society. This has been my main motivation in deciding to write a

book entitled *Japanese Sensibility and Oriental Wisdom* in English. In fact, the book you have before you is based on the Japanese version I published in Japan in 2021 with the same title (phonetically "Nihon-no Kansei-to Toyo-no Eichi", in Japanese), but adapted for anglophone readers. The book did well in Japan, and extracts have even been used as entrance examination material at a junior high school (from the age of 12 to 15 in Japan) and a high school (from the age of 15-18). I must say with pride that it is something of a rarity for extracts from a book by a living author to be used for such a purpose.

Although there are many places in the book where explanation is made through comparison to Western thinking, the book does not intend to offer an opinion on whether one is superior to the other. There still seem to be many things that the East should learn from the West. It is my view that such global principles as democracy, freedom and human rights be respected regardless of time and place and that each of the two, the East and the West, will co-operate and take onboard the other's good points so that the world as a whole may face various challenges confronting the present age.

It should be remembered that to this day, communication from the West to the East has been a mainstay for centuries. It is therefore hoped that the opposite direction of communication, namely from East to West, should be encouraged and promoted in view of the growing importance of the Asian region, particularly in recent years. It is thus a matter of regret that there have been very few recent publications in English on traditional Japanese culture and thinking written by the Japanese, although special mention should be made of two masterpieces: *The Book of Tea* by Tenshin Okakura[1] (1862-1913) and *Bushidō-the Soul of Japan* by Inazō Nitobe (1862-1931), both published around the end of the Meiji Period (1868-1912).

[1] All names of Japanese persons in this book are written in the order of the given name first and the family name second in English, although it is customary in Japan to write the family name first and the given name second.

Although this book might well be used as an academic text, or indeed as a reference guide, my sincere hope as the author is that readers will approach it primarily as relaxed and easy reading, and a means of arriving at a general impression of Japanese culture and thinking, especially Japanese sensibility and Oriental wisdom. The subject of the book has been at the forefront of my mind for the past sixty years and more, living in and outside of Japan. In this sense, the book may be said to be a crystallization of my thoughts and feelings for nearly two-thirds of a century. During that period, I have come across so many relevant books and so many people with whom I have had the pleasure of discussing the subject, and I have enjoyed numerous opportunities to become acquainted with lives and cultures of various parts of the world as explained in the Introductory Notes.

At the same time, I have tried to represent what at least a fairly large proportion of the Japanese actually feel and think about the subject today, though it is obviously expressed in my own words. I consider this an important point for a general introduction such as this.

In recent years in Japan, there have been frequent casualties on a large scale caused by natural disasters, including monstruous typhoons, earthquakes and tsunami. The behaviour shown by the Japanese in facing such disasters has attracted the world's attention. Moreover, Tokyo 2020, the Olympic and Paralympic Games postponed to the summer of 2021 because of Covid-19, provided another global stage for our country. And in May 2023, the world's eyes fell once again on Japan as world leaders converged on Hiroshima for the Forty-ninth G7 summit. With these and other events, interest in Japan and attention to things Japanese seem to be growing globally.

I was at the very last stage of finalizing the manuscripts for the Japanese book when the new coronavirus started to spread across the world. In the face of this global crisis and the widespread reflection that followed, it soon became apparent that a new lifestyle needed to be fashioned to meet the new situation. With this in mind, I quickly came to the view that Japanese sensibility and Oriental wisdom as addressed in this book may provide a

useful reference point for such a lifestyle reformulation and I therefore decided to add the book's subtitle, *In Search of a New Lifestyle in the New Era*.

I am convinced that the time is ripe for the world to have a better and wider understanding of Japanese sensibility and Oriental wisdom. This is a further reason for challenging myself to write this book in English.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Personal Background

I am an eighty-nine-year-old, retired diplomat. Before I proceed to the Introductory Notes, I would like to offer readers a brief introduction to my personal background.

After graduating from the University of Tokyo in 1958, I joined the Japanese Foreign Service (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), where I served for forty years, during half of which I lived outside Japan with seven overseas assignments, namely in the United Kingdom (Cambridge), Switzerland (Geneva), Thailand (Bangkok), the United States (New York), Indonesia (Jakarta), Australia (Sydney) and Belgium (Brussels). At the last count, the number of countries I have visited amounts to some one hundred and twenty.

As a young diplomat, I began my career in England, studying at Selwyn College, Cambridge as a postgraduate student for two years. It was my first encounter with the world outside Japan and I experienced the dynamism and powerful tradition of Western civilization.

Until that time, I had been brought up in a devout Buddhist family. When I was at junior high school (from the age of 12 to 15), I volunteered to practise Zen meditation in a Zen Temple in Kamakura, near Tokyo, during my school holidays. I also played a child's part in Noh (a traditional Japanese theatrical play) chanting with my parents, during my primary school days. Through these experiences and others, I gradually became interested in the Japanese and the Oriental cultural traditions and ways of thinking.

During my career in the Foreign Service, my contacts with various cultures in the world were expanded and enlarged. However, at the same

time, my interest in the Japanese and our Oriental cultural traditions have always remained in my mind throughout the forty years in the Foreign Office, particularly in contrast to the Western way of thinking.

After retirement from the Foreign Service, I moved to Kyoto and took up office as president of the Kyoto International Conference Centre for eleven years. My contact with and involvement in wider Japanese and Oriental cultural traditions were thus revitalised and further strengthened in the city that was the capital of Japan for a thousand years. I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to live in Kyoto after experiencing lives and cultures in various parts of the world. My commuting life between Tokyo and Kyoto continued until very recently. In parallel with my work at the Kyoto International Conference Centre, I also gave regular courses on foreign relations, comparison of different cultures in the world, etc. at five universities in Kyoto and Tokyo as a visiting professor or lecturer. As is often the case, my teaching provided excellent opportunities to consider the unique features of Japan and Japanese culture in a comparative perspective.

A Note on the Title and Contents

This book is primarily concerned with Japan, especially Japanese culture and thought. At first glance, readers might be puzzled somewhat by the inclusion of Oriental wisdom in the title. The reason is quite simply that Oriental wisdom has become such an integral part of what it means to be Japanese that it is now impossible to consider one without the other. Consequently, Part One is devoted to various aspects of Japanese sensibility, including the notions of beauty and the dominant cultures of ‘conjecture’ (“Sassuru”), ‘compassion’ (“Omoi-Yari”), and ‘harmony and peace’ (“Wa”). Part Two considers Oriental wisdom, with its insistence on pluralistic values, the concepts of ‘nothingness’ (“Mu”) and ‘emptiness (“Kū”), and our co-existence with Nature. Part Three in turn examines Japan’s current amalgamation of my two overarching themes, where Japanese sensibility and Oriental wisdom meet with surprising consequences, most

notably in personal codes of conduct and society's emphasis on 'relationships' ("Kankei").

In addition to the fundamentals of Japanese sensibility and Oriental wisdom, in Part Four I have included chapters on the daily life of the Japanese where the many unique points in our customs, particularly in terms of our dress, food, and living arrangements, differ vastly from our close neighbours in the region precisely because of our notion of sensibility.

Part Five offers a series of reflections on 'the Japanese language' ("Nihongo"), which combines the Kanji characters, i.e. Chinese characters, brought in Japan and two original phonetic alphabets, i.e. Hiragana and Katanana, in the creation of what might justifiably be considered the most sophisticated language in the world. Rich in "Yamato Kotoba" (native Japanese words, phrases and expressions), Japanese has become the language of sensibility *par excellence*.

The final section of the book, Part Six, looks towards the future. Kyoto, the former historic capital of Japan for over a thousand years and thus crucible of Japanese tradition, is seen as a special case study where Western and Eastern cultures co-exist in close proximity. As a modern, vibrant centre of academic and cultural excellence, I make the case for Kyoto as the Silicon Valley of the twenty-first century and a beacon of Japanese sensibility in the wider world. Lastly, in my closing remarks, which include global, multidisciplinary Japanese studies, collaboration and cooperation among countries in the region, a new stage in the East-West relationship, dialogue among civilisations and Pan Pacific Cooperation, I offer a series of tasks and prospects for the future, including propositions for action. By way of conclusion, I touch upon the search for a new lifestyle in this post-pandemic era together with possible vital roles for Japanese sensibility and Oriental wisdom.

In this connection, I should add that except where reference to a published version is provided, all translations of literary and philosophical texts quoted in this book are my own.

PART ONE

JAPANESE SENSIBILITY

CHAPTER 1

JAPANESE SENSIBILITY: THE ESSENTIALS

Definition and Uniqueness of Japanese Sensibility

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "sensibility" is defined as the 'ability to experience and understand deep feeling, especially in art and literature'. There is another similar word, "sensitivity", which according to the same dictionary means, the 'ability to understand other people's feelings'. The Japanese word "Kansei", which I used as part of my book's title in Japanese, encompasses both meanings, namely sensibility and sensitivity. In fact, I found it difficult to choose one over the other in English when deciding upon the title of this book.

Eventually, however, I opted for "sensibility" since it seems nearer to the definition of "Kansei" in my mind, although an 'understanding of other people's feelings' is undoubtedly an important element of "Kansei" for the Japanese.

A further point I wish to raise regarding the definition of Japanese sensibility is that it is related both to Japan and the Japanese. "Kansei" pertains to human beings. Therefore, when one refers to "Kansei", it usually means the sensibility of the Japanese people. However, since Japanese sensibility is deeply related to the geographical situation and natural conditions of the country, I prefer to say that Japanese sensibility signifies Japan's sensibility as a country as well as that of the Japanese people.

Japan is an Asian country. It is therefore natural that she shares many features in common with countries in the region. However, in terms of sensibility specifically, several aspects are different from those of

neighbouring countries and are essentially unique to Japan. I would like to illustrate, in the following chapters, such unique characteristics of Japanese sensibility, many of which are closely connected with the geographical situation and natural conditions in which Japan is located, as well as their historical backgrounds.

Background Elements of Japan's Uniqueness

Before addressing the uniqueness proper of Japanese sensibility, I wish to explain the geographical situation and natural conditions of the country which, in my view, constitute important elements when it comes to Japanese sensibility.

Japan faces earthquakes, typhoons, tsunami (tidal waves) and other natural disasters from time to time. In recent years there have been frequent casualties on a large scale caused by such natural disasters. By far the most serious was caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake on 11th March 2011 in Tohoku, in the Eastern part of Japan's mainland. The tsunami caused by this catastrophic earthquake, the most powerful ever recorded in Japan at 9.1 on the Richter scale, killed some 20,000 people and displaced many more. The tsunami also damaged the Fukushima-1 Nuclear Power Station located near the epicentre. Comparatively speaking, however, Japan's climate is largely mild and hospitable.

The most conspicuous climactic feature in Japan is the clear-cut existence of four seasons, namely, spring, summer, autumn and winter. The daily lives of the Japanese are closely related to the changing seasons and people are very sensitive to these transitional changes. One may say that this is one of the most representative characteristics of Japanese sensibility.

The transition of the seasons further leads to the perception and conception of transience as seen in such popular maxims as "All things are in a state of flux". Although this concept of transience and mutability has much to do with Buddhism and Oriental wisdom, the sense of transience has become a unique feature of the Japanese sense of beauty, through this

clear-cut distinction of the seasons.

Geographically speaking, the Japanese islands stretch out, long and narrow, moving diagonally from top to bottom, easterly in the north and westerly to the south. Despite the restricted land space, the country is abundant in a variety of mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes and coastlines. Although spectacular natural scenery on a large scale is not widespread, one still finds a plethora of natural beauty throughout the country. In keeping with the geographically narrow and petite, the Japanese people find beauty in the smallest or most inconspicuous of things.

The geographical situation of being surrounded by sea and the lack of border contact with other countries are another feature of Japan. Japan is often cited as an example of a country against which no war has been waged for a long period. Although there have been internal battles and skirmishes in certain periods, a tradition of "Wa" has been consistently maintained throughout history. I consider this due to the fact that Japan is densely populated in such a closed and limited land mass that people actively avoid fighting and confrontation to solve problems. In this sense, I believe, this density of population actually constitutes an important element of Japanese sensibility.

Although both Japan and the United Kingdom are island countries, Japan, on the whole, has historically tried to concentrate on domestic affairs, in contrast to the active foreign policy taken by the UK. Consequently, a condensed and homogeneous society has been formed in Japan. Under such circumstances, internal human relations, namely those of residents in the country in particular, have become an important element. This is the reason and background as to why the culture of "Sassuru" and "Omoi-yari", together with the culture of "Wa", became important and have been maintained in Japan.

It is true that Japanese sensibility is unique to Japan since it has developed through a close connection with her geographical situation as well as social and historical backgrounds. Now, however, as international relations become ever closer and thus international society becomes more congenial,

increasing attention will be paid to Japanese sensibility, which has been brought about by her condensed and congenial social environment. People in the world will become more interested in the Japanese case as a precedent. I am sure that the time will come where the culture of “Sassuru” and “Omoi-yari”, as well as the culture of “Wa”, will attract global attention.

CHAPTER 2

JAPANESE SENSE OF BEAUTY

Universal Standard of Beauty

There is no doubt that the Alps, the Mississippi River and the Niagara Falls delight our human sensibility. It is quite understandable that people find beauty in the grand and spectacular. This also holds true for things that are particularly well-shaped or colourful, too. Mount Fuji, for instance, may be considered as an example of the well-shaped beauty motif and a seven-coloured rainbow following rainfall fits the conventional mould for beauty in vivid colour. This sense of beauty is not only confined to the visual either, but is also applied to other senses, such as a harmonious tune in music. In this sense, it is possible to point to a universal standard of beauty applicable to people in general, irrespective of their background.

At the same time, it is true that in recent years, in particular, there seem to be new standards of beauty as seen in abstract paintings and the avant-garde arts. Turning once more to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, beauty is defined as 'the quality of being pleasing to the senses and to the mind.' In this sense, then, the object embodying beauty may differ from one individual to another, from one ethnic group to another or from one period to another.

Nevertheless, I maintain that the beauty of the grand-spectacular, of well-balanced and colourful scenes, respectively, appeals to and is shared by a great majority of people as a universal standard of beauty. The Japanese are of course no exception in following this universal standard of beauty. At the same time, however, the Japanese also find beauty in something quite different from this universal standard of beauty and this is one of the

characteristics of the Japanese sense of beauty which is closely related to Japanese sensibility.

Unique Features of the Japanese Sense of Beauty

In addition to the universal standard of beauty, the Japanese also find beauty in something inconspicuous and not immediately stunning to the senses, such as rippling waves on a lake, the murmuring sound of a small stream and a white trickle of a waterfall. Or they may find beauty in a single flower on a stem in a nearby field that is likely to be overlooked. Further still, and perhaps surprisingly for Westerners, they also find beauty in things that are time-worn or incomplete, such as imperfect cups used during a tea ceremony. They may even find beauty in something asymmetric or unbalanced.

Seasonal transitions, transient phenomena, lingering sounds and warm, abiding feelings or memories as well as delicate intervals in time and space may often arouse their sense of beauty. For many centuries, traditional markers of beauty for the Japanese have included the transient and pensive beauty (“Mono-no-Aware”, the solitary and the simple (“Wabi”), the aged and the weathered (“Sabi”) and the stylish (“Iki”), all representing the Japanese sense of beauty; these do not necessarily fall into a universal, standardised category of beauty. (These subjects will be addressed in Chapter 5 more in detail.)

In this sense, it is true to say that the Japanese sense of beauty is unique and has many interesting features. I would now like to spend some time exploring them in the following three chapters.

CHAPTER 3

A SENSE OF TRANSITION AND INTERVALS

Seasonal Transition and Transience

Perhaps the facet of the Japanese sense of beauty most deserving attention is our sensibility to transition. A typical example of transition might be 'the four seasons'. Not many countries in the world have four clearly distinct seasons–spring, summer, autumn and winter, and in this respect, Japan may be said to be a very fortunate country.

The four seasons and their transitions are closely intertwined with the daily life of the Japanese people, in terms of dress, cuisine and living arrangements, as well as in art and literature. Particularly in "Waka" (literally–Japanese poem) or "Tanka" (literally–short poem) and in "Haiku" ("Hai" means 'wondering', and "Ku" means 'poem'), seasonal transition is a popular and favourite theme. Haiku is the shortest form of poetry in the world with only seventeen syllables (with a rhythm of 5, 7, 5 syllables) and custom dictates that the poem must include a "Kigo" (a word describing the season) within this short phrase. This is a unique feature in the world of poetry.

Japan's four seasons are described by such evocative expressions as "Ka-Chō-Fu-Getsu" (literally–flowers, birds, wind and the moon) or "Setsu-Getsu-Ka" literally–snow, the moon and flowers). In more concrete terms, seasonal creatures and natural phenomena often come to symbolise the seasons: e.g. the Japanese nightingale (February), cherry-blossom (mid-March to mid-April), spring rain (latter part of March to first half of May), the rainy season or 'plum rain' (mid-June to mid-July), cicadas (July to September), autumnal wind (September) and falling leaves (October to

December). Westerners probably experience something similar in relation to autumn when they observe the famous painting *The Angelus* by French painter Jean-François Millet, for example, or listen to the French chanson *Les Feuilles mortes,* which is a personal favourite of mine.

More specifically, expressions of the season are, in many cases, linked particularly to the notion of transience and transition between the seasons. This may be called a unique feature of Japanese sensibility. Phrases capturing fleeting transience such as 'all things are in a state of flux' (万物流転 "Banbutsu ruten"), or 'all things must pass' (諸行無常 "Shogyō-mujō"), and 'the prosperous must decay' (盛者必衰 "Seija-hissui") are never far from the lips of the Japanese.

Transition is not only confined to the seasons. The waxing and waning of the moon or the transition from full moon to half-moon, to crescent moon is another important example. There are daily transitions as well, of course, such as those of the moon at dawn and dusk. It is interesting to note that in Japanese art and literature, for instance, the moon is a much more frequent motif than the sun. There are other transitions too such as the ebb and flow of the tide. These examples certainly form part of the Japanese people's sense of beauty.

Interestingly, the main theme of the influential poem "I-ro-ha" poem, created by somebody unknown about a thousand years ago, is precisely transition. A perfect pangram, meaning it features all 47 letters of the Japanese phonetic alphabet, "Hiragana" (ひらがな), using each letter only once, it is easy to see why the poem has long been used as a teaching aid. For centuries, Japanese children first learned to write using this poem, together with the 'Kana' alphabets which has been another teaching material since the eleventh century.

I-ro-ha-ni-ho-he-to（いろはにほへと）	chi-ri-nu-ru-o（ちりぬるを）
wa-ka-yo-ta-re-so （わかよたれそ）	tsu-ne-na-ra-mu（つねならむ）
u-i-no-o-ku-ya-ma（うゐのおくやま）	ke-fu-ko-e-te（けふこえて）
asa-ki-yu-me-mi-shi（あさきゆめみし）	e-hi-mo-se-su（ゑひもせす）

This poem describes the difficulty of escaping from the constant transition and transience of the present world in which one lives.

Let me introduce an English translation of the "I-ro-ha" poem, by Ryuichi Abe, Reischauer Institute Professor of Japanese Religions at Harvard University:

Although its scent still lingers on
the form of a flower has scattered away
For whom will the glory
of this world remain unchanged?
Arriving today at the yonder side
of the deep mountains of evanescent existence
We shall never allow ourselves to drift away
intoxicated, in the world of shallow dreams.[2]

Symptom, Air and Taste of Wind

Another example of Japanese sensibility related to transition is 'symptom' ("Ke-hai" 気配). The "Ke" (気 also pronounced "Ki") in "Ke-hai" means the movement of primordial energy considered to be the origin of the universe in ancient Chinese philosophy. In Japan, the "Ki"（気）element is contained in such words as "K ū -ki" (空気 air), "Hon-ki" (本氣 seriousness), "Gen-ki" (元気 health and vitality), "Nin-ki" (人気 popularity), "Kei-ki" (景気 business activities), and many others, in each case denoting something abstract, invisible and indefinable. Since time immemorial, the Japanese have attached special significance to sensing or grasping hold of this symptom.

Recently in Japan, the expression "KY", itself an abbreviation of "**K**ū-ki" (air)-ga-"**Y**omenai" ('unable to read'), has become a fashionable term among young people to describe somebody who is somewhat tone deaf in a social sense. The word "KY" now appears in the dictionary of new words

[2] Ryuichi Abe, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 398.