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"The Chrysanthemum and the Sword": the past meets future of Japanese Studies

"The Chrysanthemum and the Sword" has enjoyed continuous popularity ever since it was published over 60 years ago. It has been translated into several languages demonstrating that the ideas in the book resonate with a wide readership. Ruth Benedict penned her classic study of Japan, "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword" during the last months of the Second World War and in the immediate period after the war. As a book that portrays the Japanese in comparison with other cultures, it offers readers not only a nuanced view of the Japanese but also allows for nuanced readings. As a result, the book has enjoyed continued longevity and continues to sell well, especially in Japan. More recently, a Japanese 'boom' in China has cultivated interest in 'things Japanese,' including works by Murakami Haruki and Nitobe's "Bushido". However, "Chrysanthemum" has stood out as a best seller as an academic publication, garnering sales of over 70,000 in 2005.

As a classic in Japanese Studies, "Chrysanthemum" can provide hints for the future of the field. Its longevity alone invites discussion about how the field has evolved. Recently a new crop of scholars from other fields have evaluated various points found in "Chrysanthemum". Moreover, the popularity it is enjoying in China, presently, points to its transnational appeal. However, a recent Chinese translation (one of several) appears with the addition of visual materials which favour images of the militaristic past of the Japanese. Timeless though it may be, "Chrysanthemum" still continues to evolve and play a role in Japanese Studies. Reasons for its longevity will be discussed and the book, in its newest 'visual' form will be introduced to encourage discussion about its latest transformation and the message conveyed.