This essay on the literary history of nineteenth-century Japan is conceived from the point of view of book history. Its most immediate inspiration came from a few lines in one of Maeda Ai’s late essays, posthumously published in *Bungaku tekusuto nyûmon*. Discussing the early years of the Meiji period and the introduction of Western culture, Maeda writes: “for the ordinary Japanese, ‘the West’ was encountered not first of all at the level of ideology or institution but at the level of things.”¹ Maeda goes on to mention soap and umbrellas and handkerchiefs, but for many, their first encounter with the West was with material objects of a very different sort, with books. So I began to envision a history of Meiji literature from the perspective books as things, as “material objects [with] symbolic forms” to use D. F. McKenzie’s phrase.² There are, perhaps, two ways to make a history of the European novel in nineteenth-century Japan from this perspective. One would be to trace the history of a single book—a kind of test case: where it came from, how it got to Japan, who translated and who published it, how it was distributed, and ultimately who bought and read it. This approach would be anecdotal but would have the virtue of being meticulous and attentive to the various stages in the social life of a book, mapping out in real historical space one of the “communication circuits” that the cultural historian Robert Darnton has suggested as one type of model for book history.³ The other approach would be very different: not to look at any one book in its historical singularity, but rather to survey all the extant translations and come up with some general trends. And these materials were easy enough to come by: I started with the catalog of the Meiji Collection of the National Diet Library in Tokyo, made a few simple charts and then proceeded to work on a more elaborate and exhaustive database while working through the microfilms of that collection. While both projects were appealing in their own ways, I began to be increasingly interested in what the latter, quantitative approach

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had to offer traditional literary history, all the while realizing that, if in the end I could not tell how a single book actually got to Japan, all of the numbers and trends would be sort of hollow. Not hollow in the sense of being worthless, but certainly not representative of the materialist strain in literary history that Maeda’s work had suggested.

There is a well-known anecdote surrounding the first European novel published in Japanese, an edition of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* issued in 1857, a decade before the Meiji Restoration. *Robinson byôkôkiryaku*, as Yokoyama Yoshikiyo’s translation was titled, was a slender volume, forty-odd pages, published by an obscure and unremarkable firm, Keika sho’oku. Little is known of the circumstances surrounding the translation: how Yokoyama, a student of the minor poet and national learning scholar Inô Hidenori, obtained the Dutch edition of Defoe’s novel on which his translation was based; how that Dutch edition reached Japan and whether it had entered Japan as part of the midcentury trade in foreign books or as a personal effect. The Nagasaki customs records which may have cleared up the final point and held clues to deciphering the others are only fragmentary, and without reliable records from which to start it will probably be impossible to reconstruct the events leading up to the production of the Keika edition.

A little book, published by a little firm, translated by a minor figure, the Keika edition of Defoe’s novel has remained a minor footnote in the history of the novel in Japan: yes, it anticipated the translation industry that would come twenty or thirty years down the road, but it was an isolated incident, a historical anomaly. And it is true that viewed from the perspective of traditional literary history, the Keika edition of *Robinson Crusoe* is rather uninteresting: it spawned no imitators, for instance, creating no intertextual relations, no anxieties of influence; the novel probably had a very limited readership—while there are sixteen extant copies of the 1857 edition, no copies of the book were recorded in the holdings of the Daisô library, the largest commercial lending library of the nineteenth century, when the collections were cataloged for auction in 1899; and the “novel” was not even really understood to be a novel at all but was taken to be an autobiographical account that, the preface explains, “is always used in the rearing of Western children as a basis of instruction.” Yes, the novel was produced, but it was unique. It had no social life, and so what it can explain of literary history is quite limited.

Yokoyama’s translation then is often mentioned, but little discussed. Viewed in a different light, however, the translation is interesting indeed.
No, it cannot yield a wealth of information and data directly, but the circumstances surrounding this “unique event” can suggest very productive ways for rethinking the material history of the European novel in Japan if one is willing to believe that these circumstances were not in fact unique. It is well known that the translation is based on a nineteenth-century Dutch edition; indeed, the title page reproduces the Dutch: *Beknopte Levensgeschiedenis van Robinson Crusoe*. So the first thing that is striking about the translation is that that book which has been unanimously hailed (by scholars from Watt to McKeon) as the origin of the English novel was translated not from the English but from the Dutch; and indeed there is extant at the University of Michigan an edition of *Crusoe* published by J. Zender of Dordrecht in the 1830s bearing the exact title that appeared in the Keika edition. Zender’s edition, which is otherwise merely one of six Dutch editions published in the 1830s and ’40s, is remarkable (like the Keika edition) for its brevity: only twenty-five pages. This is in contrast to William Taylor’s 1719 edition that was 364 pages and to midnineteenth-century English editions that are often four or five hundred pages long, depending on page size and typography. So a second point emerges: whatever emending, redacting, and editing Defoe’s novel was subjected to had already been carried out in relation to the Dutch edition before the novel arrived in Japan. Indeed Crusoe’s entire diary, which was the backbone of the 1719 edition and long considered one of the most significant formal developments of the novel in terms of representing “everyday life” is already gone from the novel before it reaches Japan.4

What the Keika edition suggests, if it is to become part of a larger history of translation, is that during its life, a text is often subjected to various forms of mediation—linguistic, textual, contextual—that are not immediately apparent from looking only at the two bookends of that social life—the original and the final product. The extent to which the history of the life of books as things is available to later historians of course varies, but it is clear that in the end it will be much more rewarding not simply to turn back to the original edition to see what relation the translation or reproduction bears in terms of a normative fidelity, but archaeologically to trace the mediated and complex middle passage of a book as best we can. It is true, we have not achieved the harmonious circuit from author through publisher and bookseller to the reading public and back again to the author that Robert Darnton suggests is the goal of this sort of book history, but in the process we

have discovered some valuable clues to the history of the European novel in nineteenth-century Japan and perhaps as significantly found that there are other circuits and networks that books travel that often take them far afield, and that books participate in a social life that is far more complex and mediated than literary history often admits.

But this is just one example, and it is an example, I admitted at the beginning, that is generally considered anomalous. Anomalous first because the translation was so early, because it had so little afterlife, because the history of translated literature would really start from scratch two decades after this one-shot historical dead end. This is of course true, but if we take the lessons that Yokoyama’s translation teaches and use them to interrogate more closely that later history, then the anomaly begins to seem somewhat overstated.

Just two more anecdotes, then, before getting to the numbers. I would like to consider six books published between the 1880s and the first decade of the twentieth century. Only six books out of some seven hundred translated during the Meiji period: not an overwhelming number by any stretch of the imagination, but enough perhaps to extend the range of questions we might ask. Rarely do Meiji translations explain the history of their own production; but on occasion, something of that history emerges. Two translations of novels by William Le Queux, the master of the Edwardian spy novel, were published in Tokyo in 1908, and each reveals something of how the translator ended up with the novel and how he came to translate it. Ike Setsurai, the translator of Le Queux’s England’s Peril, mentions in his preface that he encountered the book first during a trip to French Indochina. He was onboard a ship named the Hanoi traveling from Hong Kong to Haiphong when he happened to glance through several European novels in his cabin. Le Queux’s novel piqued his interest and appealed to his sense of adventure, so Setsurai translated it himself after his return and sent a copy of another of Le Queux’s novels, Confessions of a Ladies Man, to his friend and protégé, Ikuta Kizan, who in turn translated it. Late in 1908, these two spy novels joined an ever growing group of detective fictions and sentimental and adventure novels flooding the Meiji literary market and like so many others would have seeped seamlessly into the great mass of translated literature had they not revealed in their prefaces something of how they came to be translated.

The other four books all appeared at the end of the 1880s from the publisher Hi’edó. Like the Le Queux translations, these novels are unremarkable save that each mentions in its preface that it was obtained by an F. Yano from an acquaintance in Singapore, a Mr. Joseph Clark. F. Yano turns out to
be Yano Fumio, better known by his pen name Yano Ryûkei, a pioneer of political fiction in the 1870s and a prominent journalist. Joseph Clark of Singapore remains a bit of a mystery and is probably bound to remain one. Indeed, each time one tries to chart the history of a translated book one runs up against a sort of “Joseph Clark,” an enigma that will not yield to historical scrutiny. But if we accept these limitations and instead focus on what we can learn about the social life of these texts, we can begin to piece together a partial but richly suggestive history. When we map, in real historical space, the geography that emerges from the prefaces and introductions to these novels, something of that history begins to emerge. Hong Kong, Singapore, French Indochina, or, in the case of Robinson Crusoe, the Dutch East Indies: we are no longer dealing with Japan and the West but a complex and meandering history marked by the great ports-of-call of the colonial world. Partha Chatterjee once likened European “reason” to a parasite that has “traveled the world piggyback, carried across oceans and continents by colonial powers eager to find new grounds for trade, extraction and the productive expansion of capital.” Well, the European novel seems to have traveled in much the same way. Edward Said’s work has long suggested the importance of the “imaginary geography” of imperialism to the history of the European novel; here we come up against the real historical geography of the European novel in the nineteenth century, and not surprisingly it too bears an intimate relation to the geography of imperial expansion and power. This history is of course effaced once the novel appears in translation, and all of the mediation and complexity disappear behind the relationship that the translation bears to the original work. But if we want to situate the history of translation historically, then we must think in ways that are not bounded by dualisms such as Japan and the West, original and reproduction.

Writing in the nineteen twenties and pondering the question of “why Italian books are not read...why they are considered ‘boring’ and foreign books ‘interesting,’” Antonio Gramsci suggested that Italian literature was “subject to a foreign hegemony.” And, as Franco Moretti’s recent work on literary markets in nineteenth-century Europe has argued, Italy was not alone—most

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5 Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 168.
of southern, central and eastern Europe were under a sort of foreign literary hegemony, an almost total dominance by English and French novels: “in the crucial century between 1750 and 1850 the consequence of centralization [of the literary market] is that in most European countries the majority of novels are, quite simply, foreign books. Hungarian, Italian, Danish, Greek readers familiarize themselves with the new form through French and English novels: and so inevitably, French and English novels become models to be imitated.” It does not take a great leap of imagination to add to Hungary, Italy, and Denmark, India, China, and Japan, extending Moretti’s argument beyond Europe.

Indeed, perhaps the most striking feature of nineteenth-century literary history and particularly of what Michael Valdez Moses has called “the global history of the novel” is a sort of great “centralization” across much of the globe. This is where quantitative methods become important. By treating books as things, quantitative data allows access to a comparative dimension of literary history that is difficult when anecdote remains the primary mode of investigation. There is no doubt that numbers flatten out the peculiarities and individuality of their objects, but this is also part of their value, they “simplify the better to come to grips with their subject” and so make accessible—through patterns and series—solutions to problems that are virtually inaccessible through the methods of traditional literary history.

Figure 1, the “rise of the novel,” is based on the index to the Meiji period collection of the National Diet Library in Tokyo, and it charts the number of titles published over time for three categories: reprints of early modern (Edo) fiction, literary translations, and modern novels written in Japanese. Not many surprises perhaps. After a slow start, the Japanese novel takes off, and reprints of the previous dominant form—early modern fiction—sharply drop after an initial period of dominance. But where are foreign books in all of this? This is where it gets interesting, because foreign literature never achieves—numerically at least—the sort of hegemonic position described by Gramsci. A few points: the last time there are more foreign novels published in Japan than Japanese novels is 1885; the first time there are more foreign

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novels than reprints of early modern fiction is 1893; and the largest portion of the total number of titles that translations make is 36 percent in 1904—not insignificant, to be sure, but far from hegemonic. So the first thing that numbers tell us is that the tremendous stress laid on the importance of translated novels in literary histories of modern Japan is overstated. This is perhaps not surprising when we recall how in his pioneering work on the history of mentalities in Meiji Japan, Irokawa Daikichi argued that because most cultural and intellectual history has been written “with intellectuals at the center,” “to say that modern Japan suffered to an abnormal degree from an inferiority complex or anxiety about the West does not imply that those feelings were shared by the entire nation.”

What Irokawa’s work has shown is that this stress on inferiority and “anxiety” has tended to misunderstand and misrepresent the cultural history of Meiji Japan.

Figure 2, “the novels of industrial capitalism,” is based on Takuma Izuko’s chronology of translations in the Meiji bon’yaku bungakushū and breaks down the translated novels by country of origin, contrasting those from England and France—the “core” in Moretti’s formulation—with those of the rest of the world, the semiperipheral and peripheral countries.

What is so suggestive about this graph is not that British and French imports so totally dominate the early years of the Meiji period—this we might have

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expected—but that they do not in the later years. To be sure, only once do these peripheral and semiperipheral imports attain an absolute majority—1902—but the total dominance, the “hegemony,” of the British and French ends in the late 1880s. Pierre Bourdieu writes of the emergence of a “dualist” structure in the literary market of late nineteenth-century France;13 well, something similar seems to happen in the Meiji translation market. What I mean will become clear if we turn to figure 3—keeping the first two figures in mind. This graph plots the first 240 titles from the national diet library index. Here, the translations are broken down by genre and price rather than by country, but a very similar pattern emerges: uniformity in the first half of the Meiji period and diversity in the second. Taken together, the second and third graphs are quite striking: through the late 1880s, the market for translations is dominated almost entirely by British and French novels; after 1890 or so there are considerably more imports from Russia, Scandinavia, central and southern Europe and also proportionately more poetry, drama, and essays. And when we turn back to the first graph, we see that this great mass of translations form a sort of basso continuo beneath Japanese novels, mimicking the larger swings of these domestic products but—numerically—never challenging for hegemony. The graph seems to suggest that once the Japanese

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novel attains dominance circa 1890, translated literature becomes a sort of niche market catering to various curiosities and tastes but no longer wooing the hearts of the mass of the reading public. In this context we can see the rise of Shirakaba after 1910. A dualist structure indeed.

Two significant trends emerge when we consider translated works quantitatively: the first is that these translations are part of a much larger market; the second is that in the late Meiji period we seem not to be dealing with a single market but with two markets, or a fractured market. Certainly, it will be objected, hegemony is not something easily quantified: does it take 75 percent, 60 percent, or a simple absolute majority? And then again, sheer quantity does not speak to the quality of the encounter. Numbers are blind to the depth and strength of hegemony. Even Irokawa, who is suspicious of an overemphasis on elites and intellectuals, persists in describing Japan’s encounter with the West as “traumatic and disruptive to a degree that is rarely found in the history of cultural intercourse.”14 Surely, these numbers do not tell the whole story, or worse yet they conceal something very important.

Rather than attempt to mitigate what the numbers suggested with any number of anecdotal accounts of the “trauma” of the encounter between

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14 Irokawa, The Culture of the Meiji Period, 51.
Japan and the West, we might gain a greater purchase on this encounter, so long misunderstood, if we are willing to take the numbers seriously and not attempt to explain them away or make excuses. Because, for all the limitations of quantitative history, its great strength, as François Furet has argued, is in the revision of “traditional general periodizations” and the “calling in question the old postulate that all elements of a society follow a homogeneous and identical evolution.” And this is really what the numbers suggest: “a plurality of social times.” And so we need not get rid of the trauma and all of the anxiety and inferiority that accompany it but simply displace it a bit and specify its parameters. The sort of cultural anxiety of which the Shirakaba writers are such a wonderful example did exist; but as Irokawa suggests the history of anxiety is a history of elites and intellectuals. The great mass of detective novels and tear-jerkers translated over the Meiji period betray no hint of unease, and it is difficult to imagine the Meiji reader as overcome by trauma and self-doubt while consuming William Le Queux, Edmond de Amicis, and Jules Verne. No, for most, the West was not first encountered at the level of ideology or institution but at the level of the pot-boiler.

Toward the beginning of Capital, in the section on “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret,” Marx notes that political economists “are fond of Robinson Crusoe stories.” So it seems fitting to bring this Robinson Crusoe story to conclusion by thinking about what the political economist might have to teach us about literary history, that is to say by thinking about books as commodities participating in a literary market. Here, material history meets historical materialism in an effort not just to trace the social life of things but also to understand their logic and historical significance. First two brief passages from Capital: “The commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing,” Marx writes, “which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference.”

18 Ibid., 125.
And, a little further on, he describes commodities as “social hieroglyphics,” as “sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social.” It is probably not necessary for our purposes to dwell at length on Marx’s language, but the rich suggestiveness of his idiom is no doubt apparent. Because at the same time Marx stresses the physical dimensions of the commodity—its thingness—he also locates this physical thing within a web of social interaction, indeed of social meaning.

For Marx, of course, Crusoe’s island is a preeminent example of a non-commodity economy, a form of production with no social dimension. But the history of Robinson Crusoe as a novel suggests that despite this stance at the narrative or discursive level, historically the book itself was participating in an ever expanding web of commodity production and distribution—both as part of “the global history of the novel” and eventually as part of a dynamic literary market domestic to Japan. In The Modern Prince, Gramsci writes that “in historical reality” the hegemonic relation of forces tends to be mixed “horizontally and vertically so to speak—according to economic and social activities (horizontally) and according to territory (vertically), combining and splitting up differently.” Gramsci’s language is almost an exact model in theory of what is empirically suggested by the anecdotal and quantitative evidence of the literary market of nineteenth-century Japan—a highly complex system with both such horizontal and vertical dimensions. Literary history has to account for both of these historical dimensions although I have been suggesting from the beginning that they are in many ways very different projects. On the one hand, the literary historian would have to track down the “Joseph Clarks” of literary history and begin to map out a history of the European book trade in Asia of which Japan was a part. On the other hand, we would have to recognize that even by the time of the translation of Robinson Crusoe in 1857 there was already a complex literary market operative in Japan that, most scholars agree, was firmly established by the eighteenth century. What treating books as commodities allows us to do is to think at once along these two axes—the vertical and the horizontal—and so to begin to discover both the significance of the international book trade for the history of Japanese literature but also the significance of the Japanese book trade for the histories of other literatures. Because books are things but also more than things, they are commodities of the imagination.

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19 Ibid., 167 and 165.
That so often the consumption of these commodities was shared by readers in Europe and India, China and Japan should give us pause and lead us away from the binary and traumatic models of the cultural intercourse of nation-centered literary history and toward a more integrated and comparative history of the European novel in nineteenth-century Asia.