

## *Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history*

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John Howard Wilson, “The Empire Strikes Back: The Critical Reception of *Gandhi* and *Mishima*”

The critical reception of films often reveals underlying attitudes about the people and events depicted, and reception study has exposed critics’ and spectators’ biases against women, African Americans, homosexuals, and other minorities. The reception of cinema’s treatment of Asians is seldom explored, however, probably because Asians remain a small minority in the United States, and because the industry has little incentive to make movies that attract Asian-American audiences. The dearth of Asian subjects is particularly noticeable in the biopic, the genre that emphasizes the hero’s drive and determination. Two biopics about Asians appeared in the early 1980s, however, and their receptions can be compared and contrasted. Produced by Columbia Pictures, directed by famed British director Richard Attenborough, and starring British-born Ben Kingsley, *Gandhi* (1982) won eight Academy Awards and grossed more than twice its budget in the United States alone. An American Zoetrope film, directed by Paul Schrader, and starring Japan-born Ken Ogata, *Mishima* (1985) won a special jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival but quickly receded. Because these films are so unusual and because reviewers often questioned historical accuracy and explored political implications, the critical reception of *Gandhi* and *Mishima* can be used to infer American attitudes toward Indians and Japanese (and Asians in general) in the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

*Gandhi* concentrates on the nonviolent revolutionary who compelled the British to quit India in 1947, only to be assassinated in the following year. Publicity linked *Gandhi* with the

righteous cause of civil rights, and critics praised the film in a number of positive reviews. Gandhi's opponents were the British, and the film could have been lauded for depicting the end of the Raj, since American and British imperialism are often at odds, or at least they used to be. Instead, American reviewers defended British imperialists, denounced *Gandhi* for dwelling on British venality, and implied that any Western empire is preferable to Asian self-determination. This reaction seems, however, inconsistent with public professions of American "values," such as freedom, democracy, and independence.

*Mishima*, by contrast, focuses on the nationalist who wanted to revive Japanese military tradition and committed suicide in 1970. Reanimating the samurai would reduce Japan's dependence on the United States, and American politicians and corporations would never willingly accept such a departure from the status quo. Conforming to the views of the political and economic establishment, critics dismissed *Mishima* as the glorification of a lunatic. Like *Gandhi*, *Mishima* is considerably better than average cinematic fare, but both films made critics uneasy. The difficulties seem to have been due to the films' representation of history, the autonomy of the subjects, and their resistance to imperialism. Judging from the reception of *Gandhi* and *Mishima*, the critics in the United States learned very little from misadventures in Vietnam in the 1960s, and they still viewed Asians as passive objects to be led by Americans (or at least Westerners). If the critics reflect the dominant political regimes, responses to *Gandhi* and *Mishima* also help to explain why, a generation later, the United States again finds itself mired in two futile wars in Asia, this time in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gandhi was a strange and challenging subject to foist upon Western audiences, and critics struggled to make sense of the subject. In general, they employed two methods. One was to comment on *Gandhi*'s representation of the historical period. The other was to speculate about

Gandhi's relevance in the United States. Historically, *Gandhi* raised numerous issues: three commonly discussed in criticism were Gandhi's advocacy of communal life, his commitment to nonviolence, and his opposition to the British Empire. All of these historical issues had political implications in the United States in the 1980s, and they continue to be relevant today.

In search of historical context, many critics seem to have referred to George Orwell's "Reflections on Gandhi" (1949), written after a Hindu activist, Nathuram Godse, assassinated Gandhi in 1948. Gandhi's "warmest admirers," Orwell noted, "exclaimed sorrowfully that he had lived just long enough to see his life work in ruins" (469). Orwell absolved Gandhi of any responsibility for violence, however: it was "not in trying to smooth down Hindu-Moslem rivalry that Gandhi had spent his life. His main political objective, the peaceful ending of British rule, had after all been attained" (469-70). Such subtlety and generosity are seldom evident in American reactions to the film; instead, writers seized on Orwell's presentation of the case against Gandhi. In connection with communal life, for instance, Orwell observed that Gandhi's "medievalist programme was obviously not viable in a backward, starving, overpopulated country" (463). "Starving" was not the most sensitive adjective to apply to India, where the British had redirected agriculture into exports, in a common imperialist practice, but *Newsweek* (Watson, Behr, and Ramanujam 67-68), *Commentary* (Grenier 69), and *New Republic* (Kedourie 11) concurred with Orwell. Most American reviewers were simply unwilling to consider any alternative to Western individualism.

The only defense of Gandhi's agenda appeared in *Christianity Today*, a religious publication that recalled the communal practices of the early Church. Moreover, given "soil abuse brought about by high-technology farming" and uncertainty about "energy sources," Gandhi's insistence upon self-sufficiency seemed prophetic (Yancey, "Learning, Two" 21). In

the thirty years between Gandhi's death and the film, these problems had proliferated: soil suffered from erosion, application of toxins, and extraction of nutrients; water was no longer available in quantities sufficient to sustain the yields of the Green Revolution; and oil was starting to run out. More than most other publications of the time, *Christianity Today* seems forward looking. From a different but also marginal point of view, *Progressive* listed lessons taught by Gandhi, including "the knowledge that diet is crucial to well-being" (Seitz 51). Today, writers from Michael Pollan to Vandana Shiva emphasize the same idea. In 1982, most American critics tried to dismiss Gandhi's communalism, though a minority perceived that the idea might prove useful. The human race may have to revert to some sort of village life, but that would mean the end of high-tech agriculture and imperialism. Under such conditions, it would be difficult to print and distribute international and perhaps even national newspapers and magazines, and in the 1980s no mainstream critic was willing to contemplate Gandhi's drastic proposals.

The second major historical issue was nonviolence. Despite Gandhi's achievements, American media had little to say for his methods. David Denby noted that nonviolence "paralyzed and confused the British by exposing their own violence" ("Stirring" 8), and John Kenneth Galbraith credited Gandhi with understanding "the strength that lay in asymmetry" (29). Overwhelmingly, however, American critics dismissed nonviolence as an historical freak. Denby claimed that nonviolence "wouldn't have worked against Stalin or Hitler" ("Birth" 167), and his example of the Nazis was repeated in *Commonweal* and *Commentary*. Historians have, however, demonstrated the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance in occupied Europe.<sup>2</sup> *New Republic* repeated the charge, adding that "passive disobedience is not a particularly virtuous or elevated political weapon" (Kedourie 10). *Commonweal* and *Commentary* made a related point:

Gandhi's "historical gift was for but one adversary, the British" (Westerbeck 21), and the British were "a moral nation" (Grenier 64). Despite the obvious weakness of their historical argument, critics tried to persuade readers that the method of nonviolence is not as comprehensive as Gandhi claimed and that it worked only because the British were decent chaps.

Because they questioned the usefulness of nonviolence, American critics denied its relevance in the worldwide ideological struggle of the 1980s. In the absence of television coverage, Pauline Kael asserted, nonviolence is only "a morally superior way of getting yourself mangled" (73). This view seems typically contemporary: nothing is "real" unless it appears on television. Ignoring morality and any prospect of gain, Kael suggested that direct action leads only to injury. *Christianity Today* expanded on this idea: "in closed societies, unarmed resistance can lead ... simply to annihilation: witness the Jews in World War II and Soviet, Polish, and Czechoslovakian dissidents today" (Yancey, "Learning, One" 13). This criticism of Gandhi echoes the views of Orwell, who wrote that nonviolence succeeds only when "the world gets a chance to hear what you are doing." Orwell found it

difficult to see how Gandhi's methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the régime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard of again. Without a free press and the right of assembly, it is impossible not merely to appeal to outside opinion, but to bring a mass movement into being, or even to make your intentions known to your enemy. (468-69)

Orwell claimed that Gandhi "did not understand the nature of totalitarianism" (468), but Orwell himself exaggerated its power. Following Orwell, critics in the 1980s overrated the importance of the press in covering popular movements. Today, the weakness of the press is increasingly obvious, as newspapers fold and magazines wither. On the other hand, mass movements flourish

on social networks. Like Gandhi himself, people are often motivated by moral and even spiritual commitments to peace and justice. Publicity can be useful, but it is not the only consideration. Film critics form a small part of the free press, and it is natural to exaggerate the importance of one's own work. Films emphasize individuality and violence, as even *Gandhi* does, and it continues to be difficult to make popular movies about nonviolent direct action.

The third historical issue was the British treatment of India, and American reviewers leapt to the defense of the British Empire. John Simon found the characterization of the British to be “colonialist clichés” (“Political” 269). Galbraith, former American ambassador to India, asserted that the British had been “better men” than the movie indicated (29). Reluctantly admitting that the British should apologize, Stanley Kauffmann saw the primarily British-produced *Gandhi* as a “possible act of contrition” (“Man” 27). *Commonweal* agreed that the film was “doing penance for British colonialism” and concluded that “*Gandhi* is the movie the British deserve about India, just as *Apocalypse Now* was the one we deserved about Vietnam” (Westerbeck 21).

Some criticism of *Gandhi* excused the British for their imperialism, but many commentators went further by attributing independence to imperialism. *Vogue* best expressed this contradiction: Gandhi's success “owed a great deal to the democratic principles of his oppressors” (Haskell 45). *Newsweek* indicated that Indian independence was no improvement over the British government (Watson, Behr, and Ramanujam 67). Galbraith defended the British, who had been “liberators” in “a land of petty, exploitative, incompetent and sometimes incoherent despots.... All things, including imperialism, are in their own time” (28). In response to the historical debates that ensued over the film, the Indian ambassador to the United States noted that Americans have many misconceptions about India, including the idea that

“independence was a gift by the British.” Diplomatically, the ambassador conceded that the British were “political realists” (Weinraub A14). However, few qualifications were posed against the praise of empire, and few Indian opinions appeared in the American press. As Shailja Sharma observed later, “the saintly figure of Gandhi ... becomes a signifier for the liberalism of Britain’s colonial policies, rather than for the strength of India’s freedom movement” (62).

A perceptive and persuasive commentator on the relationship between Gandhi and British imperialism was Salman Rushdie. A South Asian living in London, Rushdie objected to “the revisionist theory ... that we, the British, weren’t as bad as people make out” and to “the fantasy that the British Empire represented something ‘noble’ or ‘great’ about Britain” (“Outside” 101). The “recrudescence of imperialist ideology” came, Rushdie thought, from the “Falklands victory” and the “rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain” (“Outside” 92). *Gandhi*’s director, Attenborough, also noticed the “jingoistic atmosphere” (Kroll 64). In the United States, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman described a similar phenomenon, the “reconstruction of imperial ideology.”<sup>3</sup> Chomsky and Herman argued that after Vietnam, the American establishment recreated an environment conducive to foreign interventions by attacking Nicaragua, Libya, Grenada, and other defenseless countries. The media also did their part by portraying foreigners as vicious and incompetent, in need of paternal supervision by Western powers. Such attitudes are evident in the criticism surrounding *Gandhi*, a film that may have contributed to Americans’ understanding of India and Asia in general.

In their second approach to *Gandhi*, critics compared independence in India to political issues faced in the United States, especially civil rights and nuclear weapons. Columbia Pictures’ publicity associated Gandhi with “the civil-rights movement in the 60’s” (Harmete C13), and *Newsweek*, *Film Comment*, *Working Woman*, and the *New York Times* made passing

references to Martin Luther King, Jr. In the *New Yorker*, Kael noted that King managed to shame white Americans as Gandhi had shamed the British (73). As with their discussion of the British Empire, the critics emphasized the value of contrition rather than reparations or justice. Other writers minimized the chances of change: King was a “spiritual successor” of Gandhi, according to *Christianity Today*, and he “fought violence with nonviolence,” but “historically, the results have been mixed” (Yancey, “Learning, Two” 20). Yet *USA Today* asserted that *Gandhi* returned “non-violence to the world stage, after its long silence following the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King” (Hey 66).

The other connection between Gandhi and the United States was the issue of nuclear arms. This association may also be traced back to Orwell, who wrote that it is “doubtful whether civilisation can stand another major war,” but it is “at least thinkable that the way out lies through nonviolence” (469). More likely, publicity triggered this linkage. Columbia Pictures emphasized Gandhi’s relevance to the “antinuclear movement” (Harmete C13), and *Vogue* (Haskell 45), *McCall’s* (Merkin 64), and *USA Today* (Hey 66) followed suit. *Progressive* took a broader view: not only “nuclear proliferation” and “arms stockpiling,” but also “bloody wars ... and rising tensions between the haves and have-nots” made the early 1980s “a good time to reconsider Gandhi’s principles,” which seemed “more urgent and useful than they were in his lifetime” (Seitz 51). When the United States dropped atomic bombs on Japan, *Christianity Today* noted, Gandhi realized that “the world must look to the East for solutions.” Gandhi anticipated “a global cataclysm brought on by decadence, materialism, and armed conflict” (Yancey, “Learning, One” 12). *Progressive* also expressed concern about India’s nuclear weaponry (Pinsky 20). A few reviewers connected Gandhi with antinuclear activism, but they did not explore the arguments.

In one other way, Gandhi seemed an anomaly to critics in the United States. Gandhi's emphasis on simplicity had been converted into a multimillion-dollar motion picture, an irony noted by *Commonweal* (Strenski 341), *New Republic* (Kedourie 11), *Newsweek* (Watson, Behr, and Ramanujam 67), and *Vogue* (Haskell 45). Since the project was inherently hypocritical, the critics suggested, it need not be taken too seriously.<sup>4</sup> Indian filmmakers also disliked *Gandhi*'s abundant budget, paid for partly by their government (Goodman 30-31). With a fraction of the money lavished on Attenborough's biopic, Indian directors could have produced a series of sparse films focusing on the spiritual discipline of Gandhi. These would have been ignored in the West, however, since Columbia Pictures had easy access to the US market whereas foreign films did not.

A more transcendent *Gandhi* might have been more like Schrader's biopic *Mishima*, released a few years later. Schrader avoids watching his own films, but five years after release he could "still watch the end of *Mishima*." In *Schrader on Schrader*, the director claimed that *Mishima* "becomes one with his three creations" (182), three of his fictional characters portrayed in the film. The conclusion is transcendent and, in Schrader's judgment, "terrific" (*Schrader* 182). As a low-budget film, *Mishima*'s production company could not afford much publicity to explain its relevance, and the film's reception can be divided between scholarship and the popular press.<sup>5</sup> Specialized film journals showed considerable interest in *Mishima* prior to release in September 1985: *Sight and Sound* noted that the rough cuts "looked magnificent" (Rayns 260), and extensive features appeared in *American Film* (Scott 36-41) and *Stills* (Thompson). When the biopic was released, *Film Comment* published an essay entitled "Mad 'Mishima,'" suggesting that both the protagonist and the project itself were deranged. Insanity is fairly common in film representations and filmmaking, but reviewers repeatedly claimed that

Mishima's madness (if that is what it was) made him unworthy of a biopic. Frank Segers dismissed Mishima as a "political kook" whose "death remains an embarrassment to the Japanese" (50). Though he mentioned the prize at Cannes, Segers emphasized that *Mishima* was "respectfully but not enthusiastically received" in France, and the Japanese distributor was reported to have put *Mishima* "on the shelf" (56). Critics' attitudes toward the film had started to shift, and the popular press attacked *Mishima* with vigor.

In the *New York Times* for Sunday, 15 September 1985, Michiko Kakutani published a long article on *Mishima*, based on interviews with director and co-writer Schrader and his brother Leonard, a co-writer. Five days later, Vincent Canby counterattacked in the same newspaper: *Mishima* was "crazy" and "doomed" ("Film"). In *National Review* for 1 November, Simon's review was entitled "Mishmashima." Either Simon copied Canby or the two used a common source. Canby concluded that "'Mishima' is a beautifully photographed (by John Bailey) curio ... with a [sic] intrusive score by Philip Glass, which was most welcome" ("Film"). Simon claimed, "John Bailey's cinematography is, as always, opulent, but so arid and dismal is the film that even Philip Glass's obtrusive and inappropriate, mindlessly nonmusical music is at least a welcome diversion" (70). Jon Lewis suggested that the film industry crushed *Mishima* because American Zoetrope produced it (93).<sup>6</sup>

Though clearly interested in *Mishima*, *Newsweek* grew increasingly hostile. In June 1985, the magazine noted that the film had been "banned" from the Tokyo International Film Festival ("A Film" 89). In his review in September, David Ansen judged *Mishima* "wildly uneven," though he conceded that the film has "a kind of perverse integrity," a "mixture of the art house and the hothouse" (68), as if it were pornography. In December, *Newsweek* shifted from film to man to explain the lack of success. According to Tracy Dahlby, "many" Japanese

regarded Mishima's suicide as "a national disgrace," but then "most Japanese either don't want to be reminded about Mishima's suicide or simply don't care." Since Mishima's death, "prosperity has made Japan less volatile," and "few young people lament the loss of their samurai souls" (44).

Others piled on. In October 1985, the *New York Review of Books* denounced *Mishima* as a product of "extreme pretentiousness," centered on a "pompous bore." Evidently it was not enough to insult the film, so Ian Buruma attacked Paul Schrader, one of the "bookish intellectuals, burdened with inhibitions" and thus attracted to the "idea of actually acting out one's fantasies instead of putting them on paper or on the screen" (15). Also in October, Kauffmann dismissed *Mishima* as "overweeningly egotistical, pretentious, and ultimately silly" ("Structures" 24). Critics often complain that movies are too juvenile,<sup>7</sup> but if a film with depth and style is ideologically unacceptable, it is pretentious. Henry Scott Stokes quoted a Japanese film executive, who judged *Mishima* "unsuitable for Japanese minds" (61). Scott Stokes also contended that the Schraders had appropriated material from his biography of Mishima, as reported in the *New York Times* in March (Maslin C8). The mainstream media critics discredited *Mishima* in multiple ways.

*Mishima* earned only \$450,000 at the box office and was soon pulled from American theaters. Critics had done their work, but the worst was yet to come. In January 1986, *America* renewed Buruma's assault: "With that sense of perverse guilt and assumption of moral inferiority that vexes so many American intellectuals ... the Schraders take [Mishima's] aspiration for a samurai restoration seriously, as though a return to the past would save Asia's soul after a near fatal contamination from the West" (Blake 11). (Mishima did respect the samurai, but he hoped for a coup d'etat and restoration of the Emperor.)<sup>8</sup> Characterizing Schrader as an intellectual is

strange, since he is much better known as a screenwriter and director. Too much intellect is, apparently, a disadvantage in filmmaking, since it makes movies difficult to interpret.<sup>9</sup> Also in January, in *Art in America* Gary Indiana claimed that Schrader had “hagiographic intentions” and that *Mishima* resembled “highly stylized propaganda.” Indiana belittled Mishima as “a boorish right-wing crackpot whose unquenchable narcissism demands progressively grander manifestations.” His suicide was “supposed to fuse art and action in a moment of terrible beauty; in actual fact, it was an absurd mess” (40-43).

This vituperation against an obscure film is the more surprising because the excellence of *Mishima* has been obvious to scholars. At the time, *Film Quarterly* published an extensive interview with Schrader (Jaehne), later Lewis believed that *Mishima* deserved to do better at the box office (93), and *Biography* published an appreciation (Wilson ). Schrader countered the mainstream critical response: “Popular criticism in this country ... is becoming extremely conservative, or just lazy” (Jaehne 12). Attenborough and Rushdie had noticed the same conservatism in the British reception of *Gandhi*. Despite the fulminations of critics in the 1980s, *Mishima* was released on VHS in 1991, on DVD in 2001, and on a two-disc set of the director’s cut in 2008. Schrader’s reputation as a writer and director has generated interest in all his work, and *Mishima* has managed to reach an audience beyond those who read film journals and other cinephiles.

Thirty years on, it is easy to recognize the prejudices of a previous generation of critics. It is more disturbing, however, to contemplate the persistence of the same views. Gandhi lived the simple life that critics rejected; today, many in the United States refuse to reduce consumption of carbon as temperatures increase at alarming rates. Reviewers expressed ambivalence about Gandhi’s nonviolence; American military action kills thousands across Asia,

and most of the media and the public accept it almost without question. Gandhi resisted the British Empire, but Great Britain still sends troops to support Western ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. A biopic about Gandhi was supposed to deter India from making more bombs, and Attenborough believed that it was “the right time to make the film” (Goodman 30-31); today, the United States supplies India with uranium but threatens to bomb Iran if they continue to process the same material. Mishima protested against Westernization; the Japanese government secretly allowed American nuclear vessels to dock in a country that was officially nuclear-free,<sup>10</sup> and Okinawans protest against American bases on an island conquered in the Second World War. *Gandhi* and *Mishima* presented unusual views of history and politics, and American critics resisted the shift in perspective. *Mishima* never approached the popularity of *Gandhi*, and it aroused more ire because the style was more challenging and the rebellion had taken place within the empire. India had been British territory, and relations with the United States began to improve only after *Gandhi*'s release.<sup>11</sup> Now the government of the United States openly courts India and tries to placate Pakistan, in an arrangement that seems unlikely to succeed.<sup>12</sup> China and Russia are too strong to attack, but the Pentagon seems to regard the rest of Asia, from Syria to Taiwan, as vast proving grounds for the latest inventions of the military-industrial complex. This attitude can be traced back to the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, and it continued to develop in the postwar Middle East, Korea, and Vietnam.

In *The Princess Bride* (1987), Wallace Shawn says that the most famous of all the “classic blunders” is to become “involved in a land war in Asia.” That line was supposed to be funny, since the prospect of another Asian war seemed remote and even ludicrous. A generation later, however, the government of the United States continues to prosecute two land wars in Asia. Filmmakers and others have shown that Asians have traditions, ideas, and agency, but

somehow the ruling class continues to ignore these simple lessons. As Orwell observed, the actions of governments “do not square with the professed aims of political parties” (136), and the gap between professed and actual aims is increasingly obvious. Political parties claim to advance freedom and democracy, but the highest priorities usually turn out to be profit and exploitation. Political aims also fail to square with aesthetic impulses, and the reception of *Gandhi* and *Mishima* reflects this contest in American culture. Criticism is not policy, but reviews in both cases dismissed the filmmakers’ sympathy with Asian subjects. The evidence suggests that reviewers defended American political and economic interests in Asia by criticizing *Gandhi* and *Mishima*. Further studies in reception might clarify not only the correspondence between American media and American foreign policy, but also the engagement of film and film criticism in the interpretation of history and the explanation of policy.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have drawn on all the reviews of *Gandhi* and *Mishima* published in national magazines in the United States. For newspapers, I have relied on the *New York Times*. In this essay, I have concentrated on critics' reaction to the films' representation of history and politics, and I have passed over most of the aesthetic commentary.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Ackerman and Kruegler.

<sup>3</sup> See Chomsky and Herman.

<sup>4</sup> This criticism is simplistic, however. In *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972), Paul Schrader had outlined an alternative approach, but no one noted its relevance to *Gandhi*. Schrader suggests that there are "abundant" and even "overabundant" means of conveying spiritual experiences through film, as in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and, presumably, *Gandhi*. The alternative is the "sparse" means in films by Yasujiro Ozu and Robert Bresson. A sparse film might capture Gandhi's spirituality and avoid any hypocrisy, but then the critics and the public would have been less interested and would have longed for greater spectacle. The critical apparatus is ingenious in defense of the status quo: ostensibly based on aesthetics, it can discredit any film for missing the mark in one direction or the other and steer audiences toward the safe and non-ideological, the usual pabulum from Hollywood.

<sup>5</sup> For *Mishima*, I have focused on reviews in national magazines and the *New York Times*. Because *Mishima* received little coverage in the mainstream press, I have also considered several articles that appeared in art and film journals. Again, I am interested in critical responses to historical representation and political issues rather than aesthetic evaluations.

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<sup>6</sup> American Zoetrope is Francis Ford Coppola's independent studio, founded in 1969 and still producing highly regarded films at a modest but steady rate.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Bosker.

<sup>8</sup> See Nathan 260-61.

<sup>9</sup> See Hofstader and Claussen.

<sup>10</sup> See Fackler. This fact had been known for years in the United States; the news was that Japanese government had finally admitted it.

<sup>11</sup> See Hardgrave and Kochanek, 513. For more detail, particularly on the military, see Limaye.

<sup>12</sup> For various views of the difficulties, see Bahree; Zakaria; Ganguly and Howenstein; and Wirsing.

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