



Evaluating Evidence: A Positivist Approach to Reading Sources on Modern Japan

George Akita

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Evaluating Evidence is based on the grueling lessons learned by a senior scholar during three decades of tutoring by, and collaboration with, Japanese historians. George Akita persisted in the difficult task of reading documentary sources in Japanese, most written in calligraphic style (*sôsho*), out of the conviction of their centrality to the historian's craft and his commitment to a positivist methodology to research and scholarship. He argues forcefully in this volume for an inductive process in which the scholar seeks out facts on a subject and, through observation and examination of an extensive body of data, is able to discern patterns until it is possible to formulate certain propositions.

In his introduction, Akita relates how and why he decided to adopt a positivist approach and explains what he means by the term as it applies to humanistic studies. He enumerates the difficulties linked with reading primary sources in Japanese by looking at a variety of unpublished and published materials and identifying a major problem in reading published primary sources: the intervention of editors and compilers. He illustrates the pitfalls of such intervention by comparing the recently published seventeen-volume diary of Prime Minister Hara Takashi (1856–1921), a photo reproduction of the diary in Hara's own hand, and an earlier published version. Using documents related to Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922), a figure of central importance in Japan's post-Restoration political history, he demonstrates the use of published and transcribed primary sources to sustain, question, or strengthen some of the themes and approaches adopted by non-Japanese scholars working on modern Japanese history. He ends his inquiry with two "case studies," examining closely the methods of the highly acclaimed American historians John W. Dower and Herbert P. Bix.

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