

松 山 大 学 論 集  
第 32 卷 第 1 号 抜 刷  
2 0 2 0 年 4 月 発 行

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—— From English Literature Courses in Universities ——

Hideo Arai

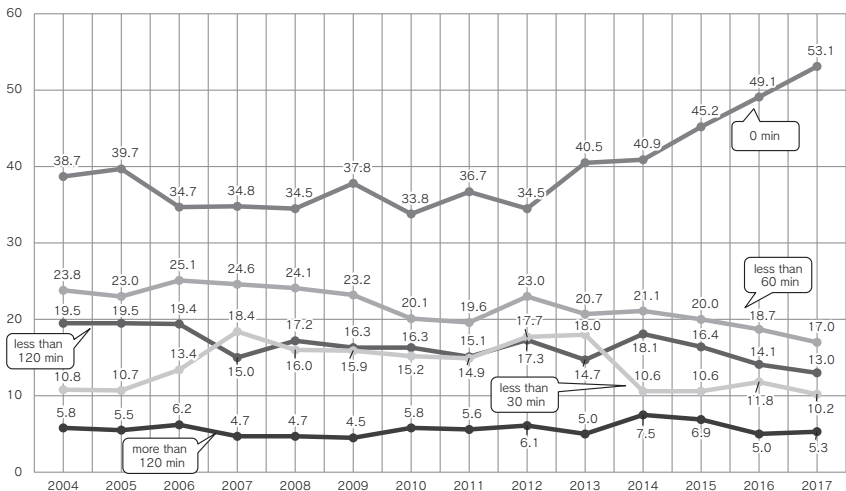
# The Role of Literature Today

— From English Literature Courses in Universities —

Hideo Arai

This paper builds on what I made a keynote speech at ‘the 34th Ehime Publishing Culture Award’ (organised by the Charitable Trust Ehime Publishing Culture Award Fund and Ehime Shimbun) held on 24 January, 2019, which awards superior publications to promote the publishing culture of Ehime. Considering the needs of general readers, as a university researcher and lecturer, I hope to inspire students from other majors – apart from literature – to pick up and read a literary book, ideally an English fiction book, by discussing the role of literature today and my perspective on teaching in a broad sense.

Please take a look at these number.



These are the results of a survey on ‘reading time’ conducted by the National Federation of University Co-operative Associations on public and private university students across Japan between October and November 2017. The results of this survey had an impact to an extent that they were reported by newspapers and television programs in February 2018. Let us analyse this graph. The average daily reading time for university students was found to be 23.6 minutes, which has continued dwindling for three years in a row. The percentage of students who responded that their daily reading time was ‘0’ was 53.1%, which increased by 4.0% from the year before and has increased by 18.6% over the last five years. Although the average reading time has decreased over the years, the increase in ‘0’ minute of reading was the most notable.

I wonder if these numbers are enough to show how much trouble I go through as a university instructor specialised in literature. Literature is an art expressed by language, and to learn literature, the actual world of books must be experienced. However, as these numbers show, today’s university students have lost interest in literature. Students who have read at least some masterpieces of world literature during high school are exceptions today, even in humanities departments. Most notably, this characteristic is ‘non-existent’ among those who are not in humanities departments. However, this is not all tragic. These students might find fresh interest in literature as long as they find connection to the lecture.

What is important in teaching such students is to avoid focusing on the expert fields. My expertise is Jane Austen (1775-1817), a female English writer who was popular in the early 19th century, and Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-), a Japanese-English writer who received a Nobel Prize in 2017. If I plan my lectures around my expert field, I would be making a big fuss by myself without capturing my students’ interest.

In my case, I start discussing literature with a fantasy novel by J. K. Rowling

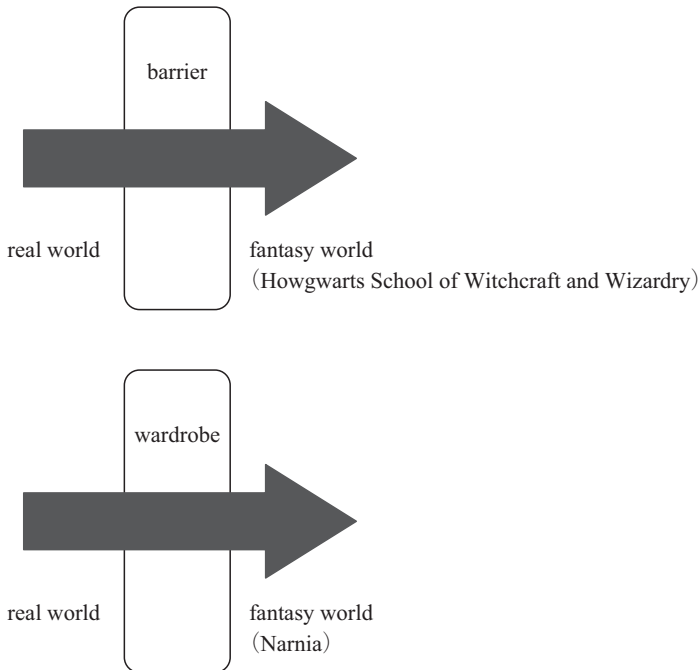
(1965-), *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), which is not within my area of expertise. Since *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is a fantasy, adults tend to dismiss it as 'a children's book'. On the contrary, this book has a superior plot structure and is packed with English culture such as literature, class, school system, religion, sports, food, and trains. It is against this backdrop that I believe this book can capture the interest of English literature beginners by inciting fresh curiosity in English literature. Therefore, this book is an appropriate educational material for introducing English literature to university students, who are technically adults.

I wonder what opinions you readers form about this fantasy novel. An American literary researcher and Yale University professor, Harold Bloom (1930-2019), has criticised the work "The Harry Potter books are, as entertainment, inoffensive. But they're not literature; they're middle-brow pot-boilers." Indeed, Bloom's criticism is understandable. However, the *Harry Potter* series is filled with twists and turns, making it unpredictable. It gives the original ecstatic feeling of fiction – as if one is reading a detective novel. It is indeed a superior literature.

Bloom's criticism rises from the fact that the Harry Potter series was written by 'cherry-picking' from various works. For example, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* can be said to have cherry-picked parts from *The Chronicles of Narnia* by Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963). *The Chronicles of Narnia* is a series of seven novels written for children, and was published from 1950 to 1956. It is a classic fantasy novel from the Third Golden Age of Children's Literature. Let us now examine specific details on how *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* cherry-picked 'best parts' from *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, characters shift from the real world to the fantasy world by running through the barrier between the 9th and 10th platforms at the King's Cross Station. Meanwhile, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*,

children could enter the fantasy world by going through a wardrobe found in the home of an old scholar living in the countryside. I wonder if readers notice the similarity of the processes through which children go from the real world to the fantasy world in these two works. For those of you who are unsure, let me provide you with a schematic diagram.



In other words, in both stories, characters must go through a device (object) in order to go from the real world to a fantasy world.

‘Cherry-picking’ by *Harry Potter* does not end here. The idea of a school of magic is found in *Tales from A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) by an American Science Fiction author, Ursula Kroeber Le Guin (1929-2018), which became famous in Japan as a film directed by Goro Miyazaki (1967-) of Studio Ghibli. The plot

of an orphan being abused by relatives and ending up in a boarding school is also seen in *David Copperfield* (1849-1850) by Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855). Moreover, the game played between houses is most likely based on *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) by Thomas Hughes (1822-1896). As shown, J. K. Rowling scattered canons of English literature and fantasy novels that are most likely to entice English readers. This could be the reason why *Harry Potter* goes beyond children's literature, reaching adult readers, and why *Harry Potter* can be considered a novel that inherited the tradition of English literature.

Jane Austen, a female English author from the early 19th century, might have had the most influence on J. K. Rowling. Jane Austen is one of the most well-known English writers, and her portrait was used for the new 10-pound bill to commemorate 200 years since her passing, which is similar to Soseki Natsume (1867-1916) being portrayed on the Japanese 1,000-yen bill and Ichiyo Higuchi (1872-1896) on today's 5,000-yen bill. Therefore, Austen is considered a national writer for English citizens. Rowling was an avid reader since a young age, and when she was around 11, she read *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) by Austen. She considered the book as a model for novels as its plot carefully considered the fine details of each sentence and small parts of the story. She was influenced by *Emma* (1814) as well, and she has read it over 20 times. In the *Harry Potter* series by Rowling, who considers herself a 'Janeite' – an obsessive fan of Jane Austen – the influence of Austen and 'imitation' beyond the framework of the work can be seen.

For example, Argus Filch, the caretaker of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft attended by Harry Potter, owned a cunning cat named Mrs. Norris. She was a scrawny grey cat, spying the hallways of Hogwarts with yellow eyes that glowed like a lamp. The second she spotted a student breaking a rule, she tattled on them to

Filch. The name of this cat was taken from Mrs. Norris in the novel *Mansfield Park* (1814) by Jane Austen. Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park* symbolises an old irony of meddling, hypocrisy, and greed, generally making the protagonist's life difficult; Mrs. Norris plays a similar role. In addition, when Harry Potter's guardian and principal of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft, Albus Dumbledore, made his first appearance in Chapter 1 of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, his eyes were described as 'light, bright and sparkling'. This description was straight from 'light, and bright, and sparkling', which Jane Austen used to mock *Pride and Prejudice* in a letter dated February 4, 1813, written to her sister Cassandra.

His blue eyes were light, blight and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice. This man's name was Albus Dumbledore. (the underlined content is by the author. Rowling, 12)

The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling; – it wants shade; – it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter – of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense – about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte – on anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile. (the underlined content is by the author. Austen, 138)

I believe now you can see that J. K. Rowling was strongly influenced by the works of Jane Austen, the canonical works of English novels, and her works 'imitate' the works of Jane Austen.

The word 'imitate' has such diverse nuances. According to *Kojien*, 'imitate'

means “copying existing things instead of creating, and acting in the similar or the same way as others”. Imitating others is viewed as a contradictory attitude towards creativity in the literary context and education. However, findings from literary theory and developmental psychology have presented a positive meaning of imitations in literary imagination and growth of children. Let us now look at some examples of ‘imitation’ in English literature. The father of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), was the first to write a novel in vernacular English instead of the mainstream Latin or French. While staying in Italy, Chaucer read poetry works by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) and Francesco Petrarca (1304-74), and there are several areas in his work *Troilus and Criseyde* where imitation of their works can be seen. This work was later recreated as *Troilus and Cressida* by William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and is performed on stage today.

In modern literary theory, such ‘imitation’ is referred to as ‘intertextuality’, where new works are created by reorganising various existing works into a new form. In other words, to J. K. Rowling, the novels by Jane Austen were worth ‘imitating’.

Jane Austen combined psychological inquiry and social description, and completed the basic pattern of English fiction that examines the morality of ‘life’ through the daily lives of three to four rural families. She built the foundation of modern novels. Jane Austen’s style was received, inherited, and betrayed by female English writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865), Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot (1819-1880), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and Margaret Drabble (1939-). Novels by Jane Austen can be considered as the canonical works of English novels. In order to paint a clear picture of how Jane Austen is superior, let me refer to the beginning of her masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice*, although it may be a little long. It begins with a conversation between the parents of the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet.



“My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady to him one day, “have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last ?”

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

“But it is,” returned she ; “for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.”

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

“Do you not want to know who has taken it ?” cried his wife impatiently.

“*You* want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”

This was invitation enough.

“Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England ; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately ; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.”

“What is his name ?”

“Bingley.”

“Is he married or single ?”

“Oh ! Single, my dear, to be sure ! A single man of large fortune ; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls !”

“How so ? How can it affect them ?”

“My dear Mr. Bennet,” replied his wife, “how can you be so tiresome ! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them.” (5-6)

Mrs. Bennet asks her husband to visit Mr. Bingley as soon as he moves in so as not to miss an opportunity, but Mr. Bennet does not seem to be interested.

“But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account, for in general, you know, they visit no newcomers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for *us* to visit him if you do not.”

“You are over-scrupulous, surely. I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you ; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls ; though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy.”

“I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others ; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving *her* the preference.”

“They have none of them much to recommend them,” replied he ; “they are all silly and ignorant like other girls ; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters.”

“Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way ? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion for my poor nerves.”  
(6-7)

Subsequently, Mr. Bennet responds that he understands his wife’s sensitive nerves after many years of marriage. Nevertheless, Mrs. Bennet does not accept that as sympathy and keeps nagging her husband.

How about this ? Is it not possible to understand quite a bit of the story by simply reading this conversation at the start of the book ? Would we find a better beginning in any of the other literature around the world ? There is no sign of thoughtfulness, and there is no unique technique employed in the writing style, but the way she uses her words and the joy we feel from reading her words creates something like the ultimate unique experience of literature. Instead of the

storyteller providing details, the conversation between the characters is directly presented in the early stage. The conversation contains considerable information, including the personality of Mrs. Bennet and their relationship, quickly sweeping readers into the lively day to day lives of the story.

Soseki Natsume raved about this beginning. In *Bungaku-Ron* (1907), which summarises his research in England and the lecture from ‘Outline of English Literature’ conducted at the English Department of Tokyo Imperial University, Soseki discussed *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) by Jane Austen, praising that ‘Jane Austen is the authority on realism’. Subsequently, Soseki referred to the full text of this conversation from the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* introduced above, and praised its significance.

Jane Austen is the leading authority in the world of realism. Her ability to score points while putting the most commonplace situations to paper far outstrips that of her male rivals. Take this on my authority. Anyone who is unable to appreciate Austen will be unable to understand the beauty of realism. (107)

They say there needs to be blood on the floor to grab peoples interest, that one needs to call down thunder and lightning to create the drama, that it requires one to grind the bones and gouge out the eyeballs to make people cry. That’s fine to say, but to mistake this for depth is to miss the point. There is no great trick to impressing the majority of people by placing a marvel before their eyes. But because the attraction is on the surface and lacks implicit meaning, one has to say this is shallow. Infinite sadness can be hidden behind a single smile. For those who can’t recognize sadness without tears, this smile has no significance. Rather, I would say it is precisely such

instances that possess real depth of feeling. People who know Austen's profundity understand something of the depth latent in the quiescent methods of realism. (the underlined content is by the author 111-112)

Soseki pointed out 'the depth behind simple and ordinary reality', as depicted by the creative philosophy of Austen. One of the characteristics of Austen's novels is 'restraint'. Austen wrote "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on . . ." in a letter dated 9 September, 1814, written to her niece Anna Austen Lefroy (1793-1872), an aspiring writer. In other words, she believed that humans can be sufficiently depicted by using a limited amount of familiar materials, and her creative philosophy followed through. Austen also wrote "How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour?" about her own works in a letter dated 16 and 17 December, 1816, written to her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh (1775-1817), who was also a writer. The letter describes her unique artistic philosophy in which all efforts are focused on describing very fine details as if creating a miniature painting.

What Soseki aimed in Japanese literature during the late 19th century (i. e. the Golden Age of Naturalism) was the 'Yoyuha Sketch', which opposes naturalism novels characterised by urgency. Soseki submitted a commentary titled 'sketch' to *Yomiuri Shimbum* on 20 January, 1907, to discuss the subject of beauty and the attitude of the creator towards the subject of description.

There are many differences between the sketch and ordinary writing. However, the most important point that is yet to be discussed is the *mental state of the writer*. Since all the other points begin with this one source, if efforts are made on the source, solutions will appear on their own as they go through

various refinements . . . . In other words, this is an attitude of adults observing children – an attitude of parents towards children . . . . Children cry often. Parents who cry every time their child cries are mad. Parents and children are at different positions. If they are placed on the same ground and affected by similar emotions, then the parents will cry each time their child cries. An average writer acts this way . . . . Writers who follow the sketch style do not cry while describing others as they cry. (the italicised content is by Soseki while the underlined one is by the author 153)

Let us focus on the fact that Soseki denies the perspective of ‘standing on the same ground’. Such perspective leads to the so-called subjective attitude of ordinary writers who get involved, i. e. ‘controlled by similar emotions’ and ‘parents cry each time a child cries’. Soseki’s perspective of ‘adults observing children’ does not place adults ‘on the same ground’ as ‘children’. Adults can leave the ‘ground where children stand’ and objectively observe the dimension of the ‘children’ (i. e. the world of the subjects of description) from a different dimension. The sketch philosophy of Soseki is consistent with the creative attitude depicted in *Pride and Prejudice*, which exhibits the impact that Austen had on Soseki. An assessment of Austen by Soseki led to the translation of *Pride and Prejudice* by his apprentice, Toyochiro Nogami (1883-1950). His wife, Yaeko Nogami (1885-1985), published *Machiko* (1931) based on *Pride and Prejudice*, leading to the creation of the adapted novel *Niji no Hana* (1937).

I have mentioned many authors and introduced how these authors had reorganised masterpieces by previous authors, or ‘canons’, to create new literary masterpieces. I hope you understand that these authors I have introduced directly interacted with and inquired about canons that they later elevated to their own work. I use the literary works called canons to teach English literature students what it

means to be a talented human, how to live life, construe ideas, and experience what art is all about. We begin by questioning the root of it, understanding ourselves, empathising with others, and moving towards the motivation to continue the pursuit of what is most superior in this world.

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the 19th-century English critic and professor of poetry at Oxford University with a strong influence as an intellectual of the time, repeatedly argues about the significance of ‘culture’ to the 19th century people in his work *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). He defines a true cultured person as “. . . to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional exclusive ; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the *best* knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light” (42) and insists that it is the most important essence of being cultured. This opinion on the essence and attributes of being cultured is repeated in many different ways by Arnold in his work. For example, it is important to note that the idea of “Culture, which is the study of perfection, leads us, as we in the following pages have shown, to conceive of true human perfection as a *harmonious* perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a *general* perfection, developing all parts of our society” (xiv) indicates that Arnold did not simply view culture from the dimension of an individual mind, but he instead observed it through a wide connection with the society. The true value of culture for Arnold was to spread it through the society, which he believed would lead to culture becoming moral and complete. Therefore, he continued to argue that “to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere . . .” (41) should never be stopped.

To Arnold, ‘criticism’ meant to compare a piece of work with the most superior work. The author he considered the most superior was Shakespeare. However, this idea of Arnold is now dismissed as old-fashioned. Especially

with the popularity of post-modernism experienced since the 1980s, critics such as Arnold were called 'liberal humanists' and grouped as critics of the past generation. This is because post-modernism defines 'superior' as a creation of the ideology of the era and society, and the act of comparing superiority in itself is artificial. Thus, classic masterpieces known as 'canons' were placed in the same level as other lesser works, thus losing their privileged status. This is the typical perspective of postmodernism.

Words such as 'individualism', 'identity', and 'pursuit of self', which were criticised as 'Meism' even in the USA, are followed by 'my castle', 'being detail-oriented', 'my style', 'individuality', and 'my boom'. These words are still new in Japan, capturing the interests of students. The 'sickness' of modern Japan may rise from young Japanese leading ephemeral lives as narcissists who mainly care about themselves as they pursue their own profits and pleasure. However, it is not limited to the modern day where young people only base their decisions on the immediate pleasure and live individualistic lives. Plato, a philosopher from the ancient Greece, criticised the foolishness of people who do not learn to live based on reason in his book *The Republic*.

He also lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastic, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him; and if he ever admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it's money-makers, in that one. And there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed he follows it throughout. (239-40)

In other words, if humans remain as they were at birth, then they will pursue pleasure and desire for their own profit – ‘self-preservation’ according to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who is English philosopher. Therefore, it is important for humans to continuously ‘foster personality’ from those who are superior.

I believe that the essential nature of a university is not limited to acquiring academic success. In other words, the role of a university is not limited to acquiring massive knowledge, qualifications, and good jobs. John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was a 19th century theologian and leader of the Oxford Movement. Following the catholic conversion, he was appointed the president to establish a new catholic university in Ireland by bishops, and published *The Idea of a University* (1852 and 1858) at the time. In his book, Newman stated that universities are places where ladies and gentlemen are nurtured. According to Newman, ladies and gentlemen mean ‘people who do not cause any pain to others’. I agree with his opinion, but at the same time, universities are where ‘people find out their ignorance’ and where ‘people become aware of their own immaturity’. Humans can only grow once they become aware of their ignorance and immaturity.

I am repeating myself, but the world’s best literary works called canons make readers question what truly talented people are, how to live life, how to construe ideas, and experience art from the root. They make readers become more aware of their own ignorance and immaturity, give humility to readers so they are able to empathise with others, and open up a path towards growth as ladies and gentlemen. In modern Japan, humans prioritise their own profits and tend to be most interested in their own existence. This social state of Japan influenced ‘the National Commission on Educational Reform’, installed by the Obuchi Cabinet, to propose enhanced moral education in 2000 to the Mori Cabinet following the regime change. Subsequently, the Abe Cabinet established ‘the Education Rebuilding Implementation Council’ to emphasise the importance of moral



education, and through the revision of the government curriculum guidelines in March 2015, ‘morality’ was defined as a ‘special academic subject’. Whether one agrees with teaching morality or not, there is no room to argue that we are in a situation where fostering sociability and normative consciousness, the ability to know what is right or wrong, and compassion and kindness to vulnerable individuals is desired. Given such a situation, the role of literature in shaping our society is massive. I conclude by saying that literature will improve the modern ‘sickness’ of Japan and play a role in fostering survival skills in each person, and such a role will continue to become more important.

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This paper is the result of the 2018 Special Research Grant from Matsuyama University.