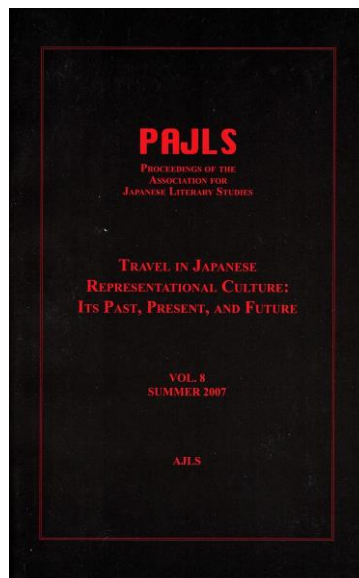


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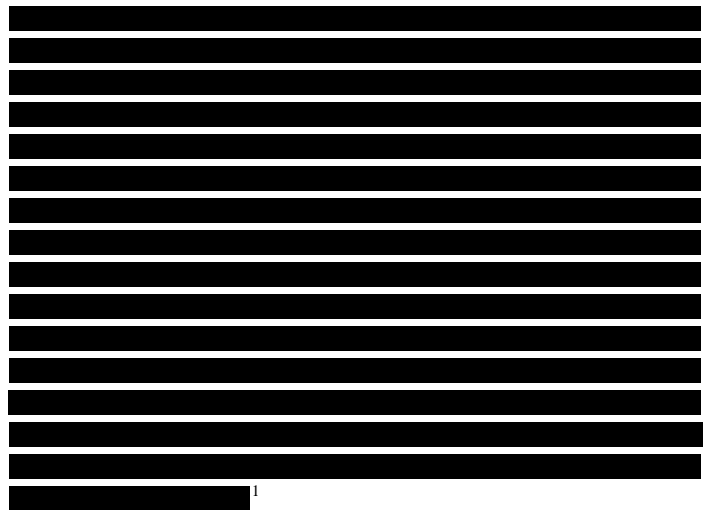
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**TALES OF TRAVELING TONGUES: PARIS AS CAPITAL OF THE
AGE OF DIASPORA IN HORIE TOSHIYUKI'S "OPARABAN"**

Atsuko Sakaki
University of Toronto



Though it was my first walk around there, somehow I was struck by the false impression that I had lived there a long time. Often, I would remember in the late afternoon that I had not had any side dish for supper. Inexplicably agitated, I once ended up buying a kilogram each of tomatoes, potatoes and French beans as soon as I caught sight of a branch of *Félix Potin*. Then I could not have been more dismayed by how thoughtless I had been to charge myself with a three-kilogram burden in the midst of a leisurely walk. Still, I could not discard my groceries, so I would carry the rustling shopping bags up a long slope around Belleville. I would sit down on the bench that turned up at the top of the slope, and then, somehow feeling melancholic all of a sudden and not knowing what else to do, I would bite into a tomato. If it were not a tomato, it might be a banana, an apple, or even cherries, depending on the season. If I were a poet, then I would have only ventured to bite a lemon that would emit a fragrance in the color

¹ Horie, "Sakamichi no musō" (Meditations on the Slope), *Kōgai e*, 150.

of topaz. I would not have bought things to eat that interfered with my random walk, and would have kept my load to a minimum so that I could stay more alert to the color of the city and the facial expressions of the people I passed by. (My translation; emphasis added.)

In the above quotation from “Sakamichi no musō” (Meditations on the Slope), Horie Toshiyuki (b. 1964), an Akutagawa Prize winning novelist and scholar and translator of contemporary French literature, quotes from Takamura Kōtarō (1883–1956). Takamura was a poet and a sculptor who stayed in Paris (1908–09) to study in and be inspired by the City of Light—then considered by many if not most of the Japanese youths of artistic ambition to be the centre of the world and thus the prime destination for their formative journey.² Horie’s narrator’s³ comparison of himself with this high-modern aficionado of French culture reveals the changed significance of Paris as a topos. Alluding to Takamura’s famous line, トバアズいろの香気が立つ or “[as Chieko bites the lemon] a fragrance in the colour of topaz rises”⁴ in “Remon aika レモン哀歌” (1939; trans., “Lemon Elegy”), Horie recalls the high-literary image of the fruit, offered to the dying woman, the wife of the poem’s speaker. The fruit’s major sensual effect, which he believes has brought her back to sanity for the last moment of her life, are fragrance and color (and that of a gemstone, no less) associated by way of synesthesia. This highbrow, ethereal and symbolical discursive formation makes a stark contrast with Horie’s narrator’s action, that is, of biting a vegetable (tomato) or a more mundane eating fruit (banana or cherry) that he bought in a supermarket for supper. The circumstances in which the biting takes place are also drastically

² See Imahashi for the lineage of writers and artists who shared the penchant for Paris.

³ I need to insist on the separate persona of the narrator in this story, beyond the general call of narratology, as the author Horie declares the fictivity of the “I” in the narratives collected in the volume in the postscript to the paperback edition of *Kōgai e* (190).

⁴ Hiroaki Sato translates the line as: “A fragrance rose the color of topaz” (Sato, 119). Incidentally, the line is given in present tense in the original, even though the scene is clearly reminisced after the death of the woman who bites the lemon, creating the effect of timelessness, which is appropriate for the speaker’s desire to immortalize her. I would suggest that this manipulation of tense should be distinguished from that of Horie, who does not identify a specific—special—moment that should be commemorated but implies that similar incidents happened many times over the course of seasonal changes, which enhances the mundane nature of the quasi-routine of everyday life experience.

different, one involving the setting of a deathbed (“the sad, white, light deathbed”⁵), the fated, terminal, private and consecrated space-time; the other, a setting as incidental, transient, public and earthly as a outdoor bench that the narrator comes across by chance and sits on to take a break from his purposeless walk. The quotidian nature of Horie’s narrator’s experience of space-time is accentuated by the quotation of an observation of another space-time that is alienated from everyday life, created by another Japanese writer who happens to have also lived in Paris, nearly nine decades earlier.⁶

Takamura’s perception of Paris is equally distant from Horie’s. While the former’s poetry of Paris, from an earlier phase of his life, typically refers to place names of iconic value—Notre Dame de Paris, Île de France, Seine, Pont-Neuf—Horie’s narrator actively though respectfully avoids tourist topoi. Earlier in “Sakamichi no musō,” the narrator gently rejects Montmartre as a locale for his walk, despite the comfort of anonymity that crowded places grant him, and confesses to his preference for “dry,” “ordinary,” and “un-touristy” places for the purpose.⁷

⁵ Sato, 119.

⁶ Another point of departure from the predecessor would be the use of *kanji* for “lemon” (檸檬) instead of *katakana* (レモン) as in Takamura’s poem. While *katakana*, being a script conventionally used to represent foreign words, is appropriate for the (then still) exotic fruit in Japan of the time of the poem’s publication in 1941, and an important element of ethereality in the non-quotidian space of the deathbed, *kanji* enhances the heterogeneity of the space that Horie’s narrator is in – it’s scripturally “exotic” or “inauthentic” in Paris. Thus, the two observers’ relationships vis-à-vis the vector of the reference in each text are completely opposite: a Japanese man in Japan versus lemon as an otherworldly element, or a Japanese man in Paris versus lemon represented in East Asian script.

⁷

(Horie, “Sakamichi no musō,” 149–150.)

Montmartre, for example, offers both exhausting congestion and relaxation coming from the potential for anonymity, whether you reach the area from the front with cable cars and famous stairs or from the rear side on the route of sightseeing buses. While Montmartre is in itself charming, personally I prefer ordinary and non-touristy areas, such as the vicinity of Corvisart, where a dry slope extends from under the overhead railway of the Metro Number Six line, with narrow roads spreading like a spider’s web, or the route from Belleville, through Boulevard de Ménilmontant, to the heights of northeastern Paris, such as Le

The previous generation of Japanese in Paris had admired the city as a centre of high cultural production, mainly in high literature (poetry, theatre, novels) and fine arts (sculpture, painting, architecture), and as the ultimate destination of the centripetal movement of people from elsewhere who were eager to mediate French cultural products to their homelands, and who themselves hardly became a preferred object of the artistic gaze. Indeed, Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), Paul Verlaine (1844–1896), and Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) in particular attracted to Paris the aforementioned Takamura, who presents in the poem “Ame ni utaruru katedoraru 雨にうたるるカテドラル” (1921; trans., “Cathedral in the Thrashing Rain”) an explicitly “Japanese” visitor to the cathedral who begs the Madonna for her attention and support for his aspiration to assimilate French culture.⁸ Horie’s stance, as manifest in many stories and essays based in Paris, is conspicuously different, rightly responding to the changing cognitive map of the world; Paris as he sees it is a contested space with many foreigners, immigrants, refugees, temporary laborers, and their French-born children, who live their everyday lives in the sprawling city. Instead of the authenticated and highbrow Frenchness to which Takamura and others of his generation aspired, Horie presents the heterogeneous Francophone culture, with people of different ethnic origins speaking versions of French and consuming commodities of equally ambiguous origins. It is not surprising, then, that his stories often center on everyday food bought in grocery stores and ordered in neighborhood cafés and bistros, as well as failed or challenging communications in creolized French. This is not necessarily because “non-native” speakers cannot use the language “properly,” but because the French language reveals chasms and layers within itself, as it is being used in circumstances that contest the legitimacy of the standardized language. Horie’s portrait of the cosmopolitan city does justice to the age of diaspora, where oneness of the language and nationhood is demystified. Paris is no longer a homogeneous center, nor is it universally valued as the primary source of high culture; instead it is a showcase of fluxes of popular cultural products and their consumers.

Horie’s narrator, though a leisurely walker, is not a flâneur in the Benjaminian sense, either. As is obvious in the above quote, he remains too conscious with his own mundane life and bearing in the city to devote his attention to the environs, effectively disqualifying himself as a flâneur.

Prés-Saint-Gervais, Les Lilas, and Bagnolet. (My translation of the above passage.)

⁸ Sato, 28–31.

Instead of being obsessed with passing figures, objects of “love at last sight,”⁹ as Walter Benjamin suggests the flâneur is, here the narrator is preoccupied with his supper menu at one point and depressed (oppressed?) by the unbearable weight of vegetables at another. Rather than becoming transparent and anonymous, assuming the function of an imagined eye, he remains corporeal and conscious of his corporeality. He lives in the city of everyday life, rather than the Capital of the Nineteenth Century that was more visual than corporeal, a spectacle rather than a lived space.

In the balance of this paper, I will focus on the title story of Horie’s Mishima Yukio Prize winning omnibus *Oparaban* (1998), where Chinese and Japanese temporary residents form a restrained and yet affectionate friendship over their frustrating experience of learning how to speak in French, managing to eat “Chinese” food while in Paris, and playing table tennis for which both of their home countries have been known in the media at one time or another. Speech patterns (accents, vocabulary, archives of idiomatic expressions or the lack thereof, etc.) and tastes are often considered irreducible traces of nativity, either obstructing or attracting foreigners who wish to get to know a given culture as though it were tangible, autonomous, and timeless. Often triggering either a nostalgic longing for the home that one has left behind or a fetishistic infatuation with an exotic land, an accent (*namari*) is commonly taken to manifest a local flavor of the place that the speaker in question is thought to belong to. In fact the existence of the set phrase “local flavor” itself suggests how figuratively abstracted taste is as a metaphor of cultural essence, while being an instance thereof. Taste or preference of a certain flavor is usually attributed to a native body and place. Thus, both speech and taste—each involving movement of the tongue—are considered bodily rather than mental activities, which thus bear the mark of nativity. I will show below that Horie’s fiction effectively undoes the myth of nativity manifested in the body, through episodes of everyday life in Paris, the capital of the age of diaspora.

SPEECH

We only ever speak one language – or rather one idiom only.

We never speak only one language – or rather there is no pure idiom. [Derrida 8]

⁹ “The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight, but at last sight” (Benjamin, 124).

The following episode of “Oparaban,” involving a Chinese man and the Japanese narrator, which accounts for the title of the story, raises issues with the conventional coordination of linguistic proficiency in the binary between nativity and non-nativity:

[REDACTED]

First, without even asking my nationality, he tried to tell me, in French, that he had been to Tokyo “before.” I say “tried,” because it took him fully ten minutes or more to remember the French word for “before.” His complexion turned a bright shade of red, and after a long spell of cogitation broken by sporadic grunts, what came out his mouth was *auparavant*, a word that does not usually surface in casual conversation. When converted back into the alphabet, the transliteration of this term using the Japanese syllabary can be spelled “oparaban.” It is an adverb employed to explicitly denote a difference of time between two events, and is rather formal. I noticed that many of the Chinese students at the boarding house used it without fail in place of the more common *avant*, but I had made no attempt to ascertain why. In spite of his poor dental alignment and the missing upper incisor, the professor pronounced the word with remarkable clarity. The syllables came out in a disjointed chain, one link at a time, as it

¹⁰ Horie, “Oparaban,” 9. Quotations in Japanese are all from this edition.

were, like kernels of corn popping. The result sounded rather like the Japanese transliteration “oparaban.” It was a real gem, an incantation chanted by a wizard from a far-off land. Utterly under the spell of its sound, ...¹¹

Here we see an interface of the “native tongue” and a “foreign language” complicating our understanding of the two notions. The Sinified pronunciation of the French word “*auparavant*” is compared to its Japanese transliteration “oparaban,” not in *katakana*, the script that signals foreign (and particularly Western) origin of the spelled word, but in *hiragana*, which suggests a perceived domesticity of the word. In this case, the transliteration in the script retains the special effect of the enunciation that took place, and blurs the origin of the word—it should be French, but when it is pronounced by the Chinese man, it sounds like Japanese. What may appear to be a simple instance of infidel pronunciation by a “non-native” speaker is mediated by its association with yet another “mispronunciation” by a third party. The question is no longer one of what is “right or wrong” in the use of French language, but about an effect of a word in one language (French) being pronounced by a native speaker of another language (Chinese) and heard by an individual whose primary language is yet another (Japanese). The syllabic articulation of the word *auparavant* is implicitly contrasted with the “native” pronunciation of the word, in which it would come out in one piece, all at once, attesting to the fluency of the speaker. Instead of disparaging the Chinese man’s lack of command of French, the narrator praises the crispness and springiness of the enunciation, comparable to popcorn. In lieu of the carefree and insouciant enunciation of a native speaker, who takes it for granted that s/he owns and controls the language, the Chinese man’s pronunciation has a magical quality that the narrator positively recognizes. The trinity, involving the language, the speaker and the listener, dissolves itself and thus effectively renounces the binary of the authentic/inauthentic, native/foreign, or original/fake. The quest for linguistic legitimacy is no longer an issue, but the incidental materialization of poetic effects is.

In the above quotation, the narrator observes that Chinese residents in the boarding house choose “*auparavant*” over “*avant*” as an adverb to refer to things past. In the ensuing paragraph, he relates that the uniformity of this word choice is such that that a French TV quiz show uses the

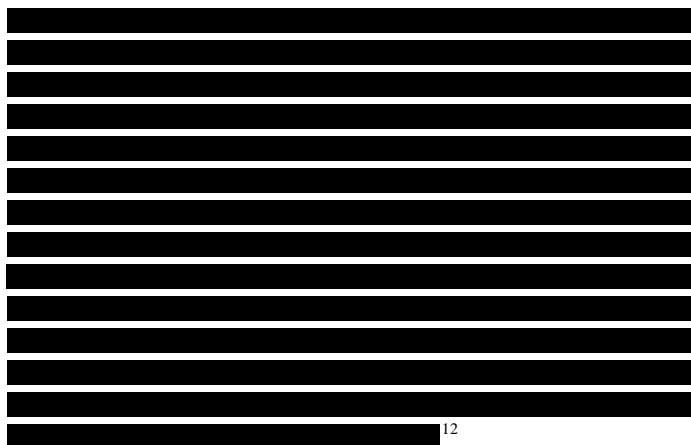
¹¹ Horie, “Oparaban,” trans. James Koetting, 24–25. Quotations from the story in English are all from this edition.

word—pronounced with the accent—to mimic the Chinese. The narrator then has an opportunity to ask the “professor” if there is any reason for the exclusive choice of the particular French adverb for “before.” Indeed there is—the Chinese man shows him an abridged Chinese-French dictionary, in which “*auparavant*” is the only entry for “before.” This incident showcases the pitfalls of bilingual dictionaries in which words are paralleled semantically but not contextually. The narrator explains the occasions on which the adverb should be used – information often lacking in concise dictionaries. Foreign language learning tends to prioritize what a word means over its idiomatic usage. Ironically, the ramification of the emphasis on semantics leads to a specific effect on the representation of the speaker in terms of the manner in which s/he speaks French, to the extent that a caricature is invented and circulated. It is not what “*auparavant*” means, but how often, and how exclusively, the word is used by Chinese speakers of French that lets emerge a linguistic contact zone. Moreover, it is not French language that demonstrates cultural identity here any longer; it is the Chinese who inadvertently, and perhaps unknowingly, have earned a distinct ethnic characteristic that has emerged only in their negotiation with a foreign language.

TASTE

Taste is conventionally considered to be natural and national; while neurology might attribute the sense of taste to the taste bud, considering it purely bodily or “natural,” such a pseudo-idiomatic expression as “*Nihonjin no kuchi ni au* 日本人の口に合う”—literally meaning, [this cuisine] suits the Japanese taste, or is tasteful by the Japanese standard—indicates that aesthetic judgment of flavors is thought to represent nationality, even though an individual might make such a judgment on a specific occasion, without consulting the rest of the nation or the history thereof.

However, as in any other taste (in the sense of aesthetic judgment) that Pierre Bourdieu holds as indicative of class distinction, sensory taste or culinary preference is acquired through practice and thus should be culturally and socially inflected. Also, as has been argued, the *raison d’être* of taste does not only lie in the national essence but can also rest on the level of the family, region, or global community and, more importantly, can be transformed as the body moves across various boundaries. The recognition that taste is cultural and composite of various and variable formative factors effectively dissolves the national body as dictator of taste.



However, among the Chinese newcomers were hangers-on who had moved in with acquaintances already there but were unable to get enrolled or find a job and so had no place to go. Day and night, they would come down to the communal kitchen when it was meal time and make themselves something to eat. What's more, a horde of other students in the same predicament would appear, as if out of the woodwork, at around the same time. A big pot of rice was expertly boiled up. An immense slab of pork that had been plopped down on the table with a thud in the morning to thaw out was chopped up with an equally immense cleaver. Chunks of broccoli, carrot, mushroom, and occasionally tomato and cucumber were thrown into a large pan and sautéed in oyster sauce and mushroom-flavored soy. In no time at all, a veritable feast, enough to feed a party of six or seven, was sitting on the table. Oddly, the same crowd also had a weakness for instant noodles prepared by cooking the dried noodle and powdered soup in boiling water. There were Japanese varieties made in Singapore, mainly for sale throughout Southeast Asia, that came in beef, chicken and seafood flavors you could never find in Japan. The Chinese students would polish off several of these packs, one after another, in a single sitting.¹³

¹² Horie, "Oparaban," 8.

¹³ Horie, "Oparaban," 24.

Industrial nations import and distribute ingredients and manufactured and packaged food across national borders, and use them variably in conjunction with material and physical conditions of the destination cultures. Hence, in “Oparaban,” the Japanese brand of Chinese-inspired dried noodles is reinterpreted in Singapore, produced there and distributed from there into various parts of Southeast Asia and beyond; Chinese immigrants or temporary visitors in Paris, who have arrived there from Southeast Asia, buy them and cook them in ways that the Japanese in Japan would not have imagined, using accompaniments and condiments that are available in Paris (but most likely not limited to those produced by French farmers) and conjure up dubiously Chinese cuisine. As is evident from this episode, the fluxes of ingredients and recipes have multiple origins and do not constitute any geographically or chronologically linear itinerary. Thus, authenticity is not lost in the process of translation but is absent at the outset. The Chineseness of Chinese noodles may only have been imagined somewhere en route from ancient China, where the noodle was invented, to the counter-cum-dining-table in the shared kitchen of the boarding house in a Paris Chinatown.

Curiously, however, despite the disappearance of origins in the practice of domestic cooking, there remains a noticeable degree of insistence upon ethnic authenticity about the process of cooking. Cooks tend to stake their authority in their rootedness in their ancestors’ cultures. The newly emergent demand for authenticity in the midst of the multi-ethnic social fabric in cities like Paris manifests itself not only in terms of flavor but also of culinary and dietary practices. The following episode in Horie’s story illustrates how manners and customs alien to the French are imported into Paris. Acquaintances of the narrator, a married couple with little children, invite him to lunch at a Chinese restaurant in the “ghetto” of Chinatown:

[REDACTED]



One Sunday in the autumn of the same year, I was invited to lunch in the Chinatown district of the 13th arrondissement. The restaurant had a pagoda-style exterior, and faced a bustling square that was paved with tiles and surrounded by high-rise buildings. The invitation was extended to me by a couple who acted as local employment “coordinators” and gave me all kinds of odd jobs—everything from manning the reception desk at art galleries to translating handwriting analyses. They had two small children, and the only places where they were able to dine out as a family, other than self-service cafeterias and fast-food joints, were Chinese restaurants that were, moreover, fairly large. Once a month, they drove into Chinatown from the suburbs expressly for this purpose. The children might spill bowls of soup, drop the long slippery chopsticks again and again, fret and fuss, crawl under the table, or run around, but the Chinese waiters never said a word. They seemed to view such misbehavior as only natural in a child. Remaining perfectly calm and unfazed by all incidents, they tended strictly to the business of taking and bringing orders. In Paris, other restaurants admit only adults, and Chinese restaurants were therefore a crucial exception. Whereas children were unwelcome anywhere else, here they were allowed not as a magnanimous gesture but as a matter of course.¹⁵

Globalization does not homogenize cultures across territories. On the contrary, it can highlight disjuncture that emerges only out of the rapid and constant flow of people and goods. This does not mean, however, that members of an ethnic group are pinned down to their tradition, their origin, regardless of where they might move. In the episode above, the Japanese couple take advantage of Chinese custom to manage their social life in Paris the way it suits their family, barely though wisely managing not to trespass the rules set by the French. The issue at stake is not the

¹⁴ Horie, “Oparaban,” 12.

¹⁵ Horie, “Oparaban,” 25–26.

representation of any ethnic identity, but how to manipulate diverse social protocols to get by in the contested space of the city of immigrants.

CONCLUSION

“Oparaban” closes with a match of table tennis played between the Chinese man and the Japanese narrator, who have run into each other after the former moved out of the boarding house where they met. China is famous for its achievement in this sport, to the extent that names of distinguished athletes are known and idolized by Japanese youths, including the narrator. For a Chinese man to play table tennis is in effect, if not in intent, to comply with the stereotype. Indeed, the Japanese narrator reconfirms the attribution of the sport to the specific nationality by stating, “I was overjoyed to have the opportunity for a game with a Chinese opponent.”¹⁶ And yet Horie’s narrative manages to bring into the picture a material condition of the poorly made rackets, rather than racially defined physical qualities, which is to blame for the one-sidedness of the match that delivers victory to the Chinese man. This suggests something along the lines of the messages sent by way of the episodes on speech and cooking: corporeal acts are not natural but cultural, and thus can be accounted for by social and material reasons rather than natural or symbolical reasons. A sport might originate in a certain culture, and yet it has to cross borders to claim an international status and universal value that are sufficient for the sport to qualify for the Olympics, for instance, a festival that propagates nationalism.

It is ironic that without crossing territorial borders, there is no way, or point, for athletic games or achievements therein to exude a national essence—just as with the cases of speech and food. Anyone can play a sport regardless of his/her ethnic or national identity, as long as material and physical conditions are met. Yet we continue to dwell on the manifestations of ethnic characteristics, whether staged by those who claim to possess them as identity markers for the sake of national pride, or perceived by pre-programmed observers for quasi-orientalist causes. “Oparaban” sits on a fine balance between reinforcing and refuting the essentialist performance of authenticity. The way this highly politicized issue is presented in the story, through observations of quotidian life, reminds us that it has permeated us beyond (beneath?) the philosophical or intellectual level and reached the material or physical level.

As we have seen, Horie’s Paris thus departs from earlier Japanese portraits of Paris as a modern intellectual capital by its response to the age

¹⁶ Horie, “Oparaban,” 28.

of diaspora and consumer culture. The centripetal move from the cultural periphery is replaced by a matrix of vectors of people and goods in transit. Speech and food that are normally considered inherently ethnic—and thus potentially both attractive and obstructive for travelers—are mixed and matched in Horie’s work in accordance with complex material conditions in the global capitalist world, especially in Paris, a city “meant to be for foreigners.”¹⁷

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¹⁷ Matsuura, 75.