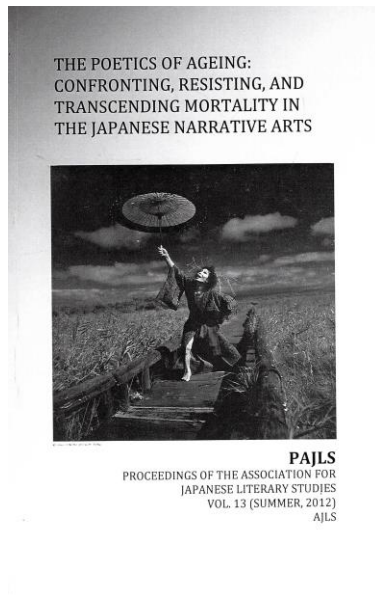


“Young Writers Anticipate Death: Shiga and Kajii
in Convalescence”

J. Scott Miller 

*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese
Literary Studies* 13 (2012): 276–289.



PAJLS 13:

*The Poetics of Ageing: Confronting, Resisting, and
Transcending Mortality in the Japanese Narrative Arts.*

Edited by Hosea Hirata, Charles Inouye, Susan Napier, and
Karen Thornber

Young Writers Anticipate Death: Shiga and Kajii in Convalescence

J. Scott Miller
Brigham Young University

If aging teaches us anything, it is that our earlier views of death seem terribly warped. Perhaps we all sense, as we grow older, a shifting lacuna in our prior understanding of death; that now, at this present moment, we understand the gravity of death better than we did even six months ago. We are amazed, perhaps even ashamed, at our own youthful neglect of death's import. Yet that is not to say that when we are young we do not respect the power of death. We are certainly each, to a greater or lesser degree, touched by death's terrible, cold chill as it enters our lives, whatever age that may be.

A question to ponder as we age, then, is whether it is possible to somehow recover the particular mindset of youth that seems to fear all the wrong things about death. One way to approach this recovery is to read younger people writing about death, hoping to find in their contemporary narratives clues to a clueless worldview, a time often characterized as innocence but more accurately an age of budding suspicion, the creaking of hinges on Pandora's box.

In this paper I seek to elicit some insight into the perspectives of young writers regarding death by examining the works of two Japanese writers who were forced, under quite different circumstances, to confront their own impending deaths at younger ages. The first, Shiga Naoya 志賀直哉, wrote "*Kinosaki nite*" 「城崎にて」 in 1917 after recuperating at a spa resort on the Sea of Japan coast following a near-fatal accident in Tokyo. The second, Kajii Motojirō 梶井基次郎, wrote "*Yami no emaki*" 「闇の絵巻」 in 1930 after having spent time convalescing from the effects of tuberculosis at a spa resort in Izu. Whereas Shiga went on to recover and live a long and prosperous life, Kajii died from his chronic illness within two years' time. Their perspectives share several points in common that suggest younger reactions to the thought of imminent death.

World literature is awash in prose and verse written by and about young men on the field of battle preparing to meet their premature deaths. Homer, Virgil, Wilfred Owen, Heike 平家物語, Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉, and Ōoka Shōhei 大岡昇平 all find the occasion of war fitting for anticipations and elegies on youth mowed down by Mars' sharpened sickle in the prime of life. And a comparative study would doubtless yield rich insights into this particular but universal kind of death-view. Japanese tradition certainly finds ample inspiration from the tragedies and ironies of young soldiers slaughtered in battle.

But I will eschew exploring this particular kind of youthful death in this paper—not that it lacks potential or interest—because the theme of the conference, *aging*, with its focus on gradual senescence, seems by its nature to exclude the idea of sudden, violent, orchestrated death. If anything, aging is what happens when one manages to elude war, disease, and other fatalities long enough to be able to consider a different kind of death, and so poses both an interesting and a fortunate dilemma: having escaped a sudden, dramatic, surprising, death, one is now in a position to look at the beast square-on, to stare it in the eye, measure it, examine its teeth and claws, even look forward to it. Anything, it seems, but ignore it.

Shiga Naoya

Ignoring death, it seems, is utterly impossible for the narrator of Shiga Naoya's famous short story "*Kinosaki nite*" ('At Kinosaki', 1917).¹ Having survived being hit by a train in Tokyo, the narrator reluctantly follows his doctor's advice to spend several weeks of convalescence at a hot springs resort.

In the finest I-novel tradition, Shiga models his story after his own life. In 1913, at age thirty, while taking an evening walk in mid-August with fellow writer Satomi Ton 里見淳, Shiga was struck by a Yamanote Line train and severely wounded. He sustained injuries to his head and back and was hospitalized, but

¹ There are several English translations of this story, versions by Edward Seidensticker, William Sibley, Lane Dunlop, and more recently Roy Starrs. In addition, Sibley and Starrs both include discussions of the work in their monographs on Shiga.

after two weeks' treatment made a miraculous recovery and was released. His doctor, fearing complications, suggested that he spend a few weeks at a spa in order to avoid spinal complications. Since *Kinosaki nite* is often cited as a quintessential model of I-novel style, we may derive a certain amount of insight through considering *Kinosaki nite* as a rough map or palimpsest of Shiga's own thoughts and anticipations of death as he recuperated in the thermal springs of Kinosaki.

The narrator of *Kinosaki nite* describes his three-week stay as a reluctant exile, a life of reading, writing, watching passers-by, and taking walks. The pace of the narrative is very much like a stroll, descriptions of nature and action interspersed with flashback passages and reflections on the meaning of life and death. The narrator notices a hive of wasps outside his veranda window and is drawn to the corpse of a dead wasp that finally vanishes after a heavy rainstorm. He observes the death throes of a bamboo-skewered rat struggling in a stream to save itself while bystanders throw rocks. On an evening stroll he notices a solitary mulberry leaf twisting and turning in the still air, and further up the road inadvertently crushes a newt when he throws a stone in its direction. After three weeks he returns to the city.

These events serve as boulders in the narrator's stream of thought, around and over which flow his reflections on life and death. They also trigger flashbacks to other memories: glimpses of his life in the city, his accident, his deceased loved ones, a reading from his middle-school years, a recently-completed story. The course of the narrative stream moves from the numb, disoriented shock of surviving near-death, to wondering if there is a purpose to his having been spared, to an awareness of how close to death he has always been, to a reconciliation and even familiarity with death that sees it as part of life and identity.

His ending paragraph—"After three weeks I left the place. It's been over three years since then, and I have been spared only

せきついで

that case of spinal tuberculosis." 「自分は脊椎 カリエスになるだけは助かった。」—brings into clear focus the narrator's metamorphosis. Like the creatures he randomly observes, he existed in a world where there were obvious dangers but, moving to and fro, until a brush with death opens his eyes, he is unmoved

by emotions or thoughts about death beyond a primitive sense of fear and a natural inclination to assume it will not happen for a very long time. Once he survives his brush with death, however, he finds himself in a perilous, arbitrary world where instant death is always a possibility, but one that he has managed to (barely) escape. He considers his state if what could have, might have, surely should have, happened had actually taken place: "I would be there now, slumbering on my back under the dirt of Aoyama Cemetery, pale, cold, hard, the cuts on my face and on my back

あおやま

eternal, never healing..." 「今ごろは青山の土の下に仰向けになつて寝ているところだったなど思う。青い冷たい堅い顔をして、顔の傷も背中の中の傷もそのままだ」。。。。

As Shiga's narrator imagines himself in the grave, he realizes that he would be lying beside his mother and grandfather, yet *unable to interact with them*. This observation underscores the narrator's singular perspective regarding two things that he finds bad about being dead. First, one cannot heal, so whatever wounds ones bears upon death remain there, gaping. One senses from the narrative the shame such a condition would accrue, and it is this attribution of shame and discomfort in death that is one of the strengths of his insight. Second, he emphasizes the *social isolation* of death, since even in proximity one cannot acknowledge those nearby, nor interact with them. His observation of the dead wasp on the rooftop underscores this sense of social invisibility, since the other wasps busily go about their lives around the corpse without taking any notice of it at all. In essence, death adds exile to shame.

Shiga's narrator also introduces contrast between approaches to life and death, especially active-passive and East-West poles, with his reference to the "Lord Clive" story. As a young man he read about the danger and subsequent motivation of Clive's brush with death. Yet when his own life was spared, despite his desire to have the experience motivate him to action, he found a surprising inner calm and a kind of familiarity or comfort with death. Instead of the active, aggressive reaction he anticipated and even yearned for, his own feelings are drawn towards resignation and tranquility. Although he does find the incident of the rat's violent death gruesome, and it causes him to reconsider

the peace he has made with his own mortality, in the final analysis his is not a modern, preemptive response, but one rooted in tradition and Buddhism. His subsequent walks take him on a ritual journey, a rite of passage where he sloughs off innocence and comes to live with a renewed appreciation for life but under the anticipation of his own impending demise.

Shiga uses the narrative of *Kinosaki nite* to explore the process of metaphysical or spiritual transformation, from a naive, youthful fear of death to a more mature comprehension of its ubiquity in life. In the process, his narrator comes to realize the power of life as it creeps, crawls, flies and swims all around him, and how death is part of that vitality. And, in a way, he underscores the importance of confronting one's own mortality in the process of spiritual maturity. He understands that he was saved from death by accident and from subsequent complications—that, for the moment, he remains alive to heal, to scar, and to move on—but, in the final analysis, in ending with the phrase "I have been spared only that case of spinal tuberculosis," he also shows that he has lost the willful blindness of youth, his eyes now permanently open to the inevitability and imminence of death. This awareness has become a wound that will never heal.

Kajii Motojirō

Fourteen years following Shiga's departure from Kinosaki another young writer, Kajii Motojirō, wound up his multi-year stay at another hot springs resort. And, like Shiga, after three years' gestation (1930) he published his thoughts on mortality, but as an essay entitled *Yami no emaki*, rather than a short story (although the style and voice of both works are similar enough that they blur generic lines). Kajii grew up in Osaka, where his natural predilection for writing led him to associate with like-minded, budding authors during his school years. When he contracted tuberculosis at age twenty his health rapidly deteriorated and, although he managed to complete high school and progress to college, he battled the illness until his death from the disease at age 31.

In 1925 he sought recuperation at Yugashima *onsen* 湯ヶ島温泉, a spa resort in the middle of the Izu Peninsula. There he again fell into the company of writers, in this case Kawabata

Yasunari 川端康成. Kojii's writings have been linked with Japanese modernism, and reflect his broad reading and intellectual approach. At the same time, in *Yami no emaki*, as Shiga does in *Kinosaki nite*, Kajii unites the personal with the aesthetic as he equates his own death sentence, its fears and anxieties, with the human fear of darkness and of death.

Kajii's essay opens with a report of the apprehension of a famous thief in Tokyo who is able to steal and escape in complete darkness. He reflects on our natural fear of and aversion towards the dark, and suggests that we need to muster great courage and willpower to step into dark spaces. Then he offers an alternate approach: embrace darkness, as in a power outage, and it suddenly becomes tranquil. This leads him to describe his stay at the spa, and how there he learned to see the beauty of the darkness. He describes several incidents in his growing effort to find comfort in the dark. Then he segues into the main section of the essay, which describes a nighttime journey he would take from Kawabata's inn to his own lodgings further upstream. He describes how he would walk that path without a lantern, proceeding from point to point, yet learned to experience the rich textures and sensations that greeted him at every turn: a nocturnal frog catching bugs beneath a street lamp, the water flowing beneath a bridge, the dark hole in the sky formed by the shadow of an oak tree, the silvery shimmer of bamboo in the starlight, a sudden and surprising glimpse of another traveler walking ahead in the dark, the frightening sound of rapids from the stream below. The scene concludes with his arrival at his own inn, and the peace it would bring, despite his newfound comfort with darkness. He concludes the essay with an observation that, several years later, living in Osaka, he still has an affinity and appreciation for the darkness that artificial light seems to violate.

Kajii's essay unfolds on two levels. Superficially, it is a mini-memoir, a collection of related memories retold with fondness and loving description. More deeply, it is an allegory that reveals his own struggle to come to grips with the death sentence imposed upon him by tuberculosis. Structurally it follows his own nighttime journey, upstream and into the dark, wherein he discovers a wealth of beauty where he least expected to find it,

enough, in fact, to fill a picture scroll. And we, as readers, are led to see this elegantly painted scroll through his enlightened eyes.

One scene in particular stands out in the essay: his discovery, one evening, of a fellow traveler in the darkness. Here is the passage:

Along the way stood one solitary household with a tree in front—perhaps a maple?—bathed in light like a magic lantern, it alone shining luxuriantly in that immense, dark landscape. The roadway itself brightened slightly at the spot, but this made the shadows ahead even darker as they swallowed up the path.

One evening I noticed a man—like me, without a lantern—walking further up the road. I saw him because his figure suddenly appeared in the illuminated space in front of the house. The man, his back turned to the light, gradually receded into the darkness and vanished. I watched the entire scene, moved in a strange, singular way. Stirred by the man's disappearing figure, I thought, "In a short time I'll be walking into the darkness just like him. If someone were to stand here, observing, they'd probably see me vanish, the same way he did..."

「その途中にたった一軒だけ人家があつて、楓のような木が幻燈のように光を浴びている。大きな闇の風景のなかでただそこだけがこ

んもり明るい。街道もその前では少し明るくなっている。しかし前方の闇はそのためになおいっそう暗くなり街道を呑み込んでしまう。

ある夜のこと、私は私の前を私と同じように提灯なしで歩いてゆく一人の男があるのに気がついた。それは突然その家の前の明るみのなかへ姿を現わしたのだった。男は明るみを背にしてだんだん闇のなかへはいって行ってしまった。私はそれを一種異様な感動を持って眺めていた。それは、あらわに言ってみれば、「自分もしばらくすればあの男のように闇のなかへ消えてゆくのだ。誰かがここに立って見ていればやはりあんなふうに消えてゆくのであろう」という感動なのであったが、消えてゆく男の姿はそんなにも感情的であった。」

Kajii, for whom seeing and coming to enjoy the beauty in darkness is his discovery alone, finds that another person has been walking, just like him, along the same dark path. It is a signal moment wherein he realizes that the isolation he has felt confronting his own impending death is, if not universal, at least fairly common. And it is because of this sudden revelation, I believe, that he continued to polish and refine his essay for several years before publishing it: he was reaching out to those fellow travelers of the dark path. One of Kajii's main motivations for writing appears to be the need to preserve and document life. It is an urge we all share, but for Kajii it is the awareness that what light he sheds on the human experience, though it be individual and idiosyncratic, links him with the human journey and all mankind who travel a dark path together but whose existence may appear, in the brief mortal moment, to be a solitary stroll.

In a letter from Yugashima in late 1927 Kajii writes "I aim to take pleasure (*yorokobu*) in darkness rather than sunlight."² And there is no question, from the essay *Yami no emaki*, that such pleasure is one of the great discoveries of the Yugashima experience. Nevertheless, by 1930 he has returned to Osaka, has bathed himself in the artificial light of the urban world, and has, as Hamakawa Katsuhiko 浜川勝彦 notes, integrated light and darkness (*mei* 明 and *an* 暗) into his notion of *yami*.³ But I believe his use and reconciliation of these opposites in the essay and its very paradoxical title *Yami no emaki*—*A Picture Scroll of The Dark*, seeks to define a new aesthetic, one that accepts the dark as a place of beauty and richness worthy of honor in the traditional picture scroll (*emaki*) format.⁴

Stephen Dodd, in his article on Kajii and illness, sees the 'magic lantern' scene in *Yami no emaki* as softening "the impact of death, reconfiguring it from a single, personalized event into one in a series, a continuous process of transformation from light to dark."⁵ I see it, instead, as fine-tuning and focusing the essay on the image of a heretofore-undetected fellow traveler, a shift from subjective to objective point of view. Kajii the dark-walker has been taking his solitary night journeys as if a pioneer exploring new aesthetic terrain. This is very much in keeping with the spirit of his fellow writers and artists, for whom the world was a vast blank canvas upon which they were experimenting with new approaches and forms to satisfy a seemingly insatiable desire for creative expression. But when he sees someone else on the same dark path—ahead of him, no less—walking without a lantern, Kajii has no choice but to conclude that this path is not solitary; that there are others who choose to walk alone in the dark at night to discover its hidden aesthetic pleasures. As he watches the

² Stephen Dodd, "Darkness Transformed: Motojirō," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 33:1(2007): 85.

³ Hamakawa Katsuhiko, *Kajii Motojirō ron* 「梶井基次郎論」(Tokyo: Kanrin Shobō 翰林書房, 2000), 192–93.

⁴ He also anticipates Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's 谷崎潤一郎 essay, *In'ei raisan* 「陰影礼賛」(*In Praise of Shadows*, 1934), that seeks a similar reconsideration of Japanese aesthetics.

⁵ Dodd, 86.

traveler disappear into the darkness he considers—perhaps for the first time—that there could be others behind him, for whom his sudden appearance and disappearance would be equally shocking, cheering, and instructive. From this perspective death takes on a new meaning. Throughout the essay we have, by default, assumed that the *yami* of the title refers to death, both because of Kajii's own terminal illness and because it is a commonplace in poetry and literature to equate the two.

However, at the magic lantern scene all of this is turned on its head, because Kajii, hitherto liberated creatively by his peripheral status as patient, finds grounds for a common humanity in his impending death. Alone in the dark, he has discovered a fellow traveler, and although he knows not what lies ahead in the darkness, both his new aesthetic appreciation of the dark and the realization that it is populated with fellow travelers takes away the sting, offering even the promise that, as one can discover beauty and tranquility in darkness, so can one hope that there is an abundance of both light and beauty in that darkness we now fear as death.

Connecting the two works

An admittedly cursory comparison of the two works reveals several interesting points they share in common. Both authors were young at the time of their experiences. Kajii was 19 years old when he contracted tuberculosis, 24 when he went to Izu. Shiga had just turned 30 when he sustained his injuries. So they were not adolescents, yet had not entered into that age when thoughts of death might naturally begin to occur. Both found themselves at hot springs resorts to convalesce. The culture of the day and the nature of their illnesses recommended the water treatment. In going to their respective spas they were following in a longstanding tradition of both healing practice and pilgrimage, with the *onsen* setting serving as a liminal space, a place of dislocation and transformation. Going to a spa for long convalescence was also a kind of living death, because at any given moment one did not *appear* to be healing, and because it took one out of the social complex. Like Genji 源氏 in Suma 須磨, the authors in their respective *onsen* towns faced an isolation that represented societal death, where they no longer engaged with

familiar human society. Shiga's story begins by noting his narrator's reluctance to stay any longer than necessary at the spa, while Kajii's path back from visiting Kawabata implies a kind of mini-exile, a return to isolation.

Both protagonists take walks along a streamside path, and in both cases water is a source of life (filled with fish, crustaceans, amphibians) and death (dying rats, washed-out wasps). Both find their greatest insights walking in the darkness along the stream. And both come to make peace with that darkness in a way that implies enlightenment or resignation. As it gets dark, Shiga's narrator sees that life and death are two sides of same coin, and that death is part of what defines us as individuals. Kajii, who also believed that "loneliness should be viewed as the source of individual uniqueness" learns to find great peace in the beauty of the dark.⁶ And both use unusual terms in relation to the darkness: in Shiga's work, the terms *shitashimi* 親しみ (familiarity) and *shizukasa* 静かさ (tranquility) are linked multiple times to his attitude toward death, while Kajii uses the term *ando* 安堵 (relief) to describe his discovery of darkness' beauty. These inclusive and positive terms reflect a revised, uncommon view that underscores the paradox and transcendence of their respective insights.

Suicide, or its absence

Finally, one of the more telling aspects these works share in common is something they seem to lack—an overt consideration of suicide as one possible response to both narrators' traumatic circumstances. Considering the number of Japanese writers—before and after—who wrote on and even carried out suicide, it seems almost unusual that the topic would play such a minor role in two works with death as their primary focus. Kajii, understandably, could have chosen to end his futile struggle with tuberculosis quickly through suicide, but instead seeks to expand his understanding through a detached consideration of its aesthetic merit. Shiga's narrator, whose fate was less sealed, nevertheless succumbs to gloomy thoughts during his evening strolls. In his case the only mention of suicide comes in relation to the scene of the rat, where he makes the observations that “suicide is not an

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

option for animals” 「自殺を知らない動物」 a telling phrase but one that, I believe, underscores his rejection of suicide as a possibility for himself. Following on this observation the narrator launches into one of the most candid, if ambivalent, sections of the story, wherein he describes his own heroic struggles for self-preservation immediately after his accident and how, now that he has made a kind of peace with death, he still cannot say with absolute assurance that he would not struggle to live if he were in the same position again. Shiga's narrator's post-rat conjecture is his Hamlet moment: to endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to act and end them? He works it through to be a kind of balancing act between making peace with death and taking his own life, and his conclusion, that he could not be sure which he would do, is as far as he goes toward acknowledging suicide as an option.⁷

As for Kajii, the closest he comes to considering suicide is in the opening passages, when he talks about mustering the will to step forward into the dark, and how dreadful that prospect can be. For a brief moment the reader may believe that Kajii is making a point for decisive (suicidal) action, to take that step into the void with resolve and courage. Yet he then immediately suggests that, if we abandon such willfulness and instead accept the darkness, we can find a new kind of peace. Critic Sudō Matsuo 須藤松雄, in his *Kajii Motojirō kenkyū* 梶井基次郎研究, notes that the Yugashima period in Kajii's life divides into two kinds of darkness: that which provokes dark passions and actions, and that which exudes an engaging natural beauty.⁸ After several years and drafts, Kajii's published essay urges its reader to choose the latter over the former, a veiled preference, I believe, for letting

⁷ It is interesting to note that in the Lord Clive story mentioned earlier by Shiga's narrator, Clive's brush with death was a result of his trying to commit suicide—the gun misfired twice—and not by accident. This veiled reference to suicide and its link to the aggressive, empire-building Lord Clive is a key to understanding the mindset of Shiga's more passive, contemplative narrator, and opens up the idea of suicide as a preemptive, desperate approach to the issue of impending death.

⁸ Sudō Matsuo, *Kajii Motojirō kenkyū* (Meiji shoin 明治書院, revised edition 1976).

death take its course over suicide (which is usually portrayed as a dark and aggressive action).

Both authors, then, downplay or sidestep suicide, their arguments making a stronger case for a kind of transcendent perspective that accepts, rather than fights, death's place in life. This transcendent point of view, or insight, relegates the kind of desperate, aggressive attitude behind suicide to an inferior place where fear of death and darkness blinds us all. Rather than fight desperately like the rat, Shiga suggests, we should flow wherever life's stream takes us. Rather than bleach the beauty from darkness with lanterns and streetlights, Kajii says, we should open our eyes wider and learn to be at peace in the dark. After all, they seem to be suggesting, it is not *when* or *how* death will come, but *why*, and *how one confronts it*, that should occupy our intellectual and artistic anticipations. Suicide, after all, only precludes what might otherwise enrich us both spiritually and aesthetically.

So what can we learn about young writers' anticipations of death by reading these two works? Perhaps the most important thing is that not all Japanese writers die by their own hand, nor see it as the natural course of life. Although suicide is an option for both Kajii and Shiga, their thoughtful writings reveal a process of coming to grips with death that transcends motives for suicide. Indeed, both essays share a remarkable harmony in their acceptance of and even embracing attitude towards their inevitable deaths. Shiga's short work *Kinosaki nite*, which anticipates his later and much longer novel *An'ya kōro* 暗夜行路 (*A Dark Night's Passing*, 1921-1937), follows a pilgrim's trajectory as he walks into the darkening wilderness and returns with an enlightened awareness of the unity of life and death. Kajii's essay *Yami no emaki* details his own portrait of an artist expanding his powers of aesthetic appreciation to include darkness and death, and his discovery of companionship along what we all imagine to be a final, solitary journey.

In the process of anticipating death at a young age both writers demonstrate a turn from youthful fear of death to a more mature acceptance of its place in life. Both returned from their short-term spa exiles to create two remarkable short literary works that, in ensuing years, have given them at least a modest degree of

immortality. Yet both works end with a more than just a tinge of melancholy, the price they paid, perhaps, for their perceptive, even precocious, insights into death.

Bibliography

Dodd, Stephen. "Darkness Transformed: Illness in the Work of Kajii Motojirō." *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 33:1 (2007): 67-91.

Hamakawa Katsuhiko. *Kajii Motojirō ron*. (Kanrin shobō, 2000).

Kajii Motojirō. "Yami no emaki." In *Shi, genjitsu*, September 1930.

Shiga Naoya. "Kinosaki nite." In *Shirakaba*, May 1917.

Sudō Matsuo. *Kajii Motojirō kenkyū*. (Meiji shoin, revised edition 1976).