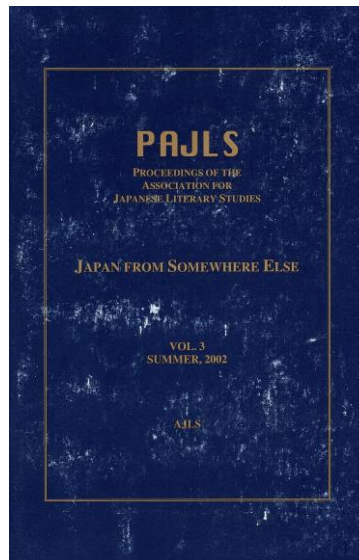


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JAPAN THROUGH A FOREIGNER'S EYES: A FAMILY VISIT

Mako Yoshikawa
University of Michigan

October, 2002. It was my mother who called our attention to the poem tacked on the wall. The poem was written on rice paper, in brush strokes so elegant that it seemed a work of art even for those of us who could not read the characters.

"The poet is talking about the journeys he's made through his life," she said.

I looked up. Although the undisputed center of our family, my mother is usually quiet during our gatherings, seemingly content to take on the role of appreciative audience to my charismatically voluble stepfather.

"The poet asks: How long have I been traveling, and how long will this journey last?" she continued. "Where are we going?"

She paused here, turning to smile at my stepfather, who was moving about yet again (his tray table rocking precariously back and forth in front of him as he did so) in an increasingly desperate bid to find a comfortable sitting position. He had gone from crossing his legs to folding them on the side to squatting. Now he stretched his legs straight out in front of him; they just barely fit under the table.

We were a party of eight, women from my family and our assorted partners, and we had the room to ourselves; our server, a kind woman who managed to be the exemplification of grace even as she moved about on her knees, had just stepped out. There was a tatami floor beneath us and paper lanterns above; flushed from long soaks in steaming hot baths, we were dressed in *yukatas* and sitting on mats on the floor, and there was a small table, laden with delicacies such as *yuba* and *matsutake* rice, in front of each of us. Still, traditionally Japanese though the setting was, we were yammering away in English, after all. In the cascade of chitchat and oft-repeated anecdotes about our various cats and local gossip that passes for our family conversations, it was difficult, sometimes, to remember that we were in an inn in Nikko, the small mountainside resort town towards the center of Japan, and that we had spent the day walking through a monsoon-like rain and a picturesque mist in a pilgrimage to a grand shogun's temple.

When, midway through dinner, our conversation shifted to a poem written by a famous Japanese artist named Higashiyama Kaii rather than

an English-speaking poet such as Yeats or Dylan Thomas, as it usually would, we were reminded with a start of where we were.

“The poem ends with a question,” said my aunt Ai-chan, smoothly picking up where my mother had left off. “A big one—What does it mean to live?” Ai-chan, who lives in Japan but is fluent in English thanks to a sojourn in Philadelphia as a teenager, was traveling with us in Nikko.

“You know, Japanese literature often ends with big questions like that,” she said. “Real questions, not rhetorical ones like a Western poem or essay might end with. There’s no conclusion. Western writing, fiction as well as essays, is constructed more on a line.”

“That’s right,” said my mother, glancing over with pride at her baby sister. They see each other rarely now, once every two years if they are lucky.

“Maybe reading Japanese literature is more like looking at art,” Ai-chan said suddenly, addressing my boyfriend, a sculptor. Engaged in a (losing) battle against keeping his *yukata* from flying open, he looked up, flashed a brief and only slightly harried smile.

“It’s more open to interpretation. Japanese literature appeals to our senses,” Ai-chan continued, thinking it through, “while Western literature appeals more to....” She paused, at a loss for the word.

“The intellect, maybe,” I said. “Logic or reason.”

She nodded and took a sip of sake. “When I taught English in Nagoya, the biggest challenge was to make my students stick to the point. Their stories and essays veered all over; they had difficulty with the idea that they had to construct an argument as well as shape a narrative.”

*

My two sisters and I were born of Japanese parents in Princeton, New Jersey. Our father, a physicist, was working in America for what he and our mother both assumed was just a spell. This interim period lasted from 1959 to 1973, long enough that the childhood memories of all three of us girls are rooted in the wide-open spaces of this country. I was seven when we decided to “return home” to Tokyo, ostensibly for good; I had never set foot in Japan. We set up house in a tiny apartment in the heart of the city, and my sisters and I enrolled in public school. I eventually forgot a good part of my English; my younger sister, two at the time of our move to Japan, could soon speak only in Japanese. This life went on for two years, until my mother finally convinced my father that Japan was not the best place to bring up three girls, and we packed up our

clothes, dolls, and books once again and made our way back to Princeton.

My mother, who considers herself Japanese and still is, in fact, an official citizen of that country, has been living in the West (America, Switzerland, and now England) for almost forty years now, and she has been with my American stepfather for about half of that time. Perhaps I am just too young to remember what she was like in the first few years after moving here, yet it seems as if the household she runs has not changed all that much in the decades that have passed since then. When I was growing up, chopsticks were the norm at home, but we celebrated Christmas with all the trimmings and we ignored *tanabata*; we spoke English with only the occasional Japanese phrase (“*Ogyogi-ga warui!*” a refrain I heard whenever I sat with my knees up at the dinner table) thrown in. After going back to Princeton, my sisters and I relearned and mastered English, went to American schools and colleges, and dated American men of all different colors and stripes. Our parents encouraged us in all these pursuits.

These days, we make family trips to Japan every couple of years or so—trips that are clearly visits rather than a return home—and each time, I am overcome by all the what-might-have-beens. I look at my cousin Mieko as a surrogate for me and my sisters. Forty-two years old now, Mieko has an impressive career as a harpist, performing, teaching, and flying regularly to Europe and America to work with different orchestras. While she has had boyfriends over the years, even moving out to live with a lover for a while, she has not ever seriously considered marrying anyone. She lives in a studio apartment in my grandmother’s house, along with her parents, her brother, her brother’s wife and their two children.

When I see Mieko, and I always make it a point to do so when I am in Japan, I wonder whether I would still be single and working full-time if I had been brought up there. Would I get together regularly with Mieko so we could complain about how Japanese men never cook, or would I be married with children, as all of my other cousins are? Maybe I would be helping to take care of a grandmother-in-law in a multigenerational home in Tokyo.

But during my visit to Japan this year, perhaps because I had turned in the final draft of my second novel the week before (or more likely because I had the thought of this essay pressing on my mind), I found myself thinking more specifically about how my career would have been different if my father had not acceded to my mother’s requests, and if I had grown up in Japan as originally planned. If I had become a Japanese

novelist—a monumental *if* in itself—what kinds of books would I have written? Would my stories have centered around love and family, as they do now, with the only difference, a not inconsiderable one, being that the main characters are Japanese rather than Japanese-American? Or was my aunt correct in suggesting that the way in which Japanese and American writers construct a text is fundamentally different? In other words, if I were a writer who had lived her whole life in Japan, would I be writing novels that were different not only in subject matter, but also in form?

*

I went through a period in my twenties when I drowned myself in contemporary Japanese literature—Kawabata, Mishima, Tanizaki and their like. That immersion lasted for about two years, the length of time, coincidentally, that I have spent in Japan. Still, even though I probably consumed close to a hundred of those works, my Japanese literature exposure is meagre compared with all the texts in the Western tradition that I have soaked up in my life, starting from *The Cat in the Hat*, the Narnia Chronicles and *Little Women*, and extending to *The Brothers Karamazov* and J.M. Coetzee's recent novel *Disgrace*. Similarly, while two years might seem a long time to spend in Japan, it's a mere jaunt compared to the thirty-four that I have spent living in America, England and New Zealand.

Nor would it matter if I had read a thousand Japanese novels, or if I had spent six years of my childhood in Tokyo instead of merely two. All those books and years would still be but a reference rather than an entire cultural context. By virtue of their sheer bulk, the Western writers that I have read have inevitably had the greatest influence on how I write. While I feature Japanese characters in Japanese settings in my novels, I have far less in common with Japanese novelists than I have with other American writers.

Still, how we write is a very different question altogether from how we are read, and it may be a long time still before we Japanese-American writers can be considered apart from our Japanese counterparts. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Remains of the Day* focuses on an English butler living and working in an English estate. Some time after it was published, I read an article about it which noted the similarities between the Japanese and the English; in both countries, the writer noted (his tongue slipping in and out of cheek), people tend to be repressed, class-conscious, etiquette-observing tea drinkers. The assumption was clear: Ishiguro was really writing about Japan when he was writing about England. It did not

matter that the book did not feature a single Asian character; the novel was still being read as a Japanese man's perspective on a Western country. Perhaps we could say that times have changed since the late 80s, when the book came out—that in this multicultural, politically correct environment we now live in, readers would know enough not to conflate a Japanese-Anglo writer with a Japanese one. Perhaps. In terms of achieving this goal—for it is a goal, and a worthy one at that—I cannot help but feel that we still have a ways to go.

*

At the Nikko inn, our conversation about the differences between Japanese and Western writing soon evolved into a yoga demonstration. Inspired by the soreness that my stepfather and boyfriend were feeling, my older sister, a yoga teacher in the Bay area, took advantage of the tatami floor and our proximity to it to demonstrate a few moves. While all was chaos and unnaturally extended limbs for a while, our discussion about Japan was not quite finished.

This time, it was my boyfriend who picked up the subject. He had not met any of my family before; until this, our third day of the trip, he had not spoken up much when we were all together.

“The countryside here is so dramatic,” he said. “I didn't think it would be so lush and green. I didn't know it would be so rugged.”

My sister, who had been showing us how she could walk on her knees, paused mid-stride to listen.

“And what really surprises me,” he continued, “is what an impact the landscape has had on Japanese culture. It's so rugged here that a lot of the countryside here is almost impassable, but the people here have really made an attempt to integrate the landscape into their lives. They've put these major shrines out here in the mountainside, and—since they clearly take their religion and their quest for serenity seriously—they've ensured in this way that they would have access to the landscape.

“The landscape, the people's love of nature, the religion and spirituality,” he said, marveling. “It's all of a piece here.”

There was a small silence while my family members and I took this observation in. “That's really true,” said my aunt Ai-chan at last. My mother, quiet once again, nodded to herself.

*

Weeks after we left Japan, when it came time for me to pull this essay together, I would ask my mother to say more on the subject of Japanese vs. Japanese American literature. She would tell me, speaking hesitantly at first, that those in the first generation of Japanese-American writers were isolated from both America and Japan, and that as a result, they lacked a proud sense of identity. She would add that whereas Japanese American writers are always necessarily conscious of their racial identity, it's not an issue for the Japanese.

My mother would further observe (warming to the subject, her hesitation melting fast) that in the Japanese literary tradition, there's an emphasis on the ephemeral quality of the world, that life is constantly being compared to falling cherry blossoms or autumn-red leaves. With such an emphasis, perhaps it's natural (the words tumbling out now) that in these texts beauty is always being discovered in the smallest and most short-lived of objects: dew on a leaf, snow flakes, the petals of flowers. After all, Buddhism and Shintoism teach us that the individual is not important; these religions suggest that there is not one god but, rather, that gods are everywhere—in trees, stones, the water of the ocean and the moon. Then, too, as if religion weren't enough to explain it all, the Japanese culture itself is made up of impermanent objects such as paper and wood, materials that didn't stand a chance against the bombs and resulting fires of the war.

It's all of a piece, she'd say, perhaps unconsciously echoing my boyfriend, and then she would smile, amused, perhaps, to see me so still, listening with such absorption to what she had to say. Japanese literature reflects the religion and the aesthetics and the landscape and the history of the country.

*

We left Japan at the end of October, my sisters and their partners going to California, my mother and stepfather to England, and my aunt to Nagoya. My boyfriend and I went back to Boston, where we developed all ten rolls of our photographs. When we looked at the pictures, I was taken aback to see how foreign Japan seemed, how glamorous and strange, especially in those featuring him, ginger-haired and six-foot four, grinning against a backdrop of pine trees or temples or what he referred to covetously as pint-size trucks. It astonished me, and humbled me, too, that someone who looked like that, that a person whose

experience was so conclusively and exclusively rooted in America, could comment with such astuteness on Japan. I felt overwhelmed, as I have been at times before, by how ridiculous it is for me to write about Japan, when there are so many different Japans out there, and I know so little about any of them.

But with what might be called typically American optimism, I was able to push these anxieties aside. For without too much of a stretch, I could say that it is as ridiculous for me to write about America as it is about Japan. And what is the point, after all, in tying myself into an existential knot which would make it impossible or at least exceedingly difficult for me to write ever again about any country? Isn't it far better to soldier cheerfully on; isn't it far better just to do what I can?