The Japan Society Review 77

Book, Stage, Film, Arts and Events Review

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The October issue of *The Japan Society Review* includes a variety of topics and authors showing the diversity of Japan-related publications, which have arrived at bookshops and libraries this year. On this occasion, the Review concentrates on Japanese literature, cinema and food aiming to also cover the wide-ranging interests of our readers.

The issue opens with a review of the most recent novel by Murakami Haruki, *Killing Commendatore*, an epic work in which the renowned author breaks from first-person narration for the first time in almost ten years. Our reviewer Beau Waycott explores the narrative, characters and style of Murakami's novel reflecting on its achievements and failures. *The Bear and the Paving Stone* is a collection of three works by award-winning author Horie Toshiyuki. A celebrated scholar of French literature, Horie sets two of the stories in France, often emphasising the emotional memories of the protagonists. The titular story won the Akutagawa Prize in 2000. A more recent Akutagawa-winner (2016), Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store People*, closes the literary section of this issue with the story of an unconventional female character who has been working in a convenience store (*konbini*) for eighteen years. Written in a simple register, but touching complex issues related to the labour economy, consumerism and social expectations for women, *Convenience Store People* is the first translation of a novel by Murata.

Regarding Japanese cinema, this issue includes the review of an academic volume examining the life and career of female actor and director Tanaka Kinuyo. As Kate Taylor-Jones details, *Tanaka Kinuyo: Nation, Stardom and Female Subjectivity* studies Tanaka's work, not only in her outstanding career in front of the camera, acting for celebrated directors such as Mizoguchi Kenji, Ozu Yasujiro or Kinoshita Keisuke, but also in her pioneering role as a film director. Tanaka directed six films between 1953 and 1962 and was the only female director during the post-war golden age of Japanese cinema in the 1950s.

To conclude, our review of *Robata: Japanese Home Grilling* sheds lights on a popular form of Japanese grilling originating from the Hokkaido region. Written by chef and food consultant Silla Bjerrum, this cookbook is a perfect introduction to Japanese cooking, while simultaneously teaching the history and theory behind *robata*.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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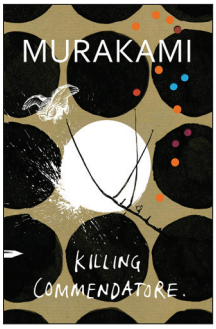
Harry Martin, Niraja Singh, Kate Taylor-Jones and Beau Waycott.

Killing Commendatore

by Murakami Haruki
translated by Philip Gabriel and Ted Goossen

Harvill Secker (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1787300194

Review by Beau Waycott



Breaking from first-person narration for the first time in almost ten years, Murakami Haruki's *Killing Commendatore* is an epic novel that fails to capture the wry poignance and fully immersive settings of his earlier works. Whilst there are passages of charming and warm prose, as well as some promising nods to contemporary politics, Murakami's end product seems disconnected, sterile and, above all else, unconvincing.

The protagonist (who is, in a true trope of Murakami, unnamed) is a 36 year-old portrait painter living in Tokyo, whose stable life is suddenly shaken when his wife announces her infidelity and issues a divorce. Feeling numb and bewildered, the painter embarks on a month-long expedition around Hokkaido and the Tohoku region, spending time alone in various *onsen* (hot spring bath houses), *izakaya* bars and unmaintained *ryokan* hotels, seasoned with infrequent -yet formative- and spontaneous rendezvous. Returning to Honshu, he settles on the hilltop house of an acquaintance's father in rural Odawara, Kanagawa Prefecture. Settling into the slow and static lifestyle of a recently-separated luddite, he spends the majority of his time, much like before, in isolation: reading; cooking; examining artworks, and, for the first time in almost a decade, painting for pleasure, rediscovering styles of art he last practised at art college, far removed from the naturalistic and impersonal portraits he has exclusively created for so long.

The opening chapters are lucid, engaging and very promising, with Murakami's precise intermingling of the metaphorical and the literal; the prosaic and the sterile; the surreal and the mundane all culminating to holistically characterise the protagonist in Murakami's exact and practised style. Murakami breathes new life into his fascination with bildungsroman, subverting the genre in the protagonist's early characterisation by allowing him to question -and then rediscover- both artistic style and inspiration not in adolescence, but in middle age.

It is whilst living in this house that the protagonist discovers the painting of the previous owner, Amada Tomohiko, who is a well known painter, renowned internationally throughout the art world for his deft skill following traditional Japanese styles and techniques (although old age has now reduced Amada to life in a residential home, incapable of logical conversation or thought). The piece, entitled 'Killing Commendatore', depicts a killing scene from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, contextualised in what appears to be Japan's Asuka Period (552-645). Following this, an enigmatic and mysterious neighbour of the protagonist appears, Menshiki Wataru, who disrupts the protagonist's (and plot's) new equilibrium by bringing frequent social visits to the house, and the subsequent multiple of narrative changes. Most notable, a seemingly unconnected nightly aural assault begins to take place on the protagonist, with a bell, presumably a piece of ancient Buddhist memorabilia, ringing throughout the small hours nearly every night.

Connecting all of these events is the titular two-feet-tall Commendatore, who appears to have manifested himself out of the painting, complete with hooded Japanese garb. This is, perhaps, Murakami's biggest mistake in the novel; whilst the Commendatore serves a very clear purpose in terms of the text's narrative, Murakami fails to even attempt to create a credible inter-plot mythology, or justify any reasoning behind sudden and unexplained periods of magical realism. Moreover, much like in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the plot is contextualised through historical events, with Murakami attempting to draw together seemingly isolated characters through past, collective events. Whilst the historical nods in *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* are transportive, taking the action out of the present and into the past, in *Killing Commendatore* they are exclusively significant expositionally, merely adding often insignificant details to narration. However, nods to events such as Kristallnacht or Nanking are perhaps the closest Murakami has ever come to political in his novels, and do provide both an interesting perspective in which to view the author and his works, and the exciting possibility of more political commentary to come.

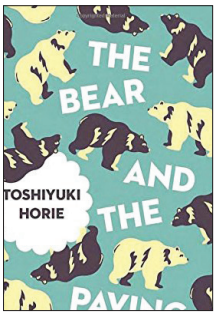
In terms of narratology past the first five chapters or so, the work is something of a shambles. The entirety of the plot becomes retrospective: we learn from the first lines that the protagonist will spend only nine months in Odawara, and eventually reconcile with his wife. As such, the extreme detail given to relatively insignificant events later in the novel seem almost superfluous; for example, the protagonist makes over a dozen visits to where the bell was found, more often than not just to conclude nothing has changed. Murakami is widely known for his remark 'My lifetime

dream is to be sitting at the bottom of a well', and *Killing Commendatore* (along with many of his other novels) is testament to this, with great detail given to negligible trips to a well in Amada's garden.

This leads to the real problem of the novel: it seems Murakami has made no selection in the inclusion of events and details whatsoever- absolutely everything is included. Unlike in Murakami's earlier works, which led to his international stardom, such as *Norwegian Wood* or *Pinball*, or even the twentieth-century American literature from which he draws so much inspiration (with Menshiki in *Killing Commendatore* apparently written in partial homage to Jay Gatsby), there is no judicious adoption of only truly necessary scenes of descriptions. Even more frustratingly, the protagonist evolves very little throughout the plot, and finishes the text in almost precisely the same place in which he started. Indeed, by the novel's end the protagonist writes of his return to the suburbian abyss 'That's the kind of life I wanted, and that's also what people wanted of me'.

Overall, Murakami fans will probably feel frustrated with this novel. It starts off incredibly promisingly, only to wallow in overdescription that leads to no significant change or evolution of character. Whilst Murakami's classic style does penetrate through the bulk of the text, be that his excellent mixture of sentence lengths, or warped yet gripping comedic elements. I don't feel many followers will be overjoyed with this publication. It is worthwhile to remember, though that this new novel does bring the promise of a newly politicised and perhaps more outspoken Murakami, always a quiet and underpublicized individual, which is something I believe all fans can rally behind. §

The Bear and the Paving Stone



by Horie Toshiyuki
translated by Geraint Howells

Pushkin Press (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1782274377

Review by Harry Martin

Pushkin Press' recent publication of novellas translated from contemporary Japanese authors has contributed some fantastically unique and original works to the English language library. *The Bear and the Paving Stone* is a collection of three works by award-winning author Horie Toshiyuki. The titular story, winner of the Akutagawa Prize in 2000, consumes most of the volume, with two shorter pieces supporting the main theme but nevertheless managing to impart their own unique offerings.

Horie, a renowned scholar of French literature, has contributed four titles in total to the Japanese literary scene, this being one of his more recent contributions from 2000. I have not read enough of his work to establish a comprehensive sense of his overall style; however this novella suggests a thoughtful, conscientious writer who initially beguiles with a soft, easy tone before later revealing much more solemn and profound themes.

The title story follows a Japanese writer visiting an old friend in Northern France, taking in some familiar Normandy sights such as Mont Saint-Michel and the local community in which his friend now lives. What initially seems to be an unassuming reunion between two old friends soon strays into more intense waters via discussions of literature, philosophy, and history. The second story, 'The Sandman is Coming', tells of a man joining a woman on an unassuming beach walk which later transpires to be on the anniversary of her brother's (and his friend's) passing. The third and final story, 'In the Old Castle', is of a slightly darker nature. Again set in France, the narrator reminisces about when he and his friend decided to break into a castle ruin, with sinister results.

Horie's writing is superficially relaxed as all three stories initially present themselves in a far more simplistic light than the complex themes which lie beneath. Unifying the three stories is Horie's creative emphasis on memory, where he abruptly interrupts the narrative with the resurgence of a past sensation which momentarily consumes the present with potent and powerful emotions. In *The Bear and the Paving Stone* the past is summoned through the characters' conversations about a famous French lexicographer and the narrator's friend's photographs, which conjure up images of Nazi death camps and the effects of the Second World War on his Jewish heritage and personal identity.

In the 'Sandman is Coming' there is an overwhelming sense of nostalgia and loss as the narrator and deceased friend's sister share a melancholy moment on the beach, reminiscing about the sand castles they used to build in their youth. Here Horie draws on the Japanese concept of impermanence, the bittersweet beauty of transience and how nothing is meant to last, both sandcastles and life. The narrator's

memories of his adolescence and the feelings he felt for both sister and friend remain all too relevant in the present time.

'In the Old Castle' begins with the narrator's receipt of an old photograph taken ten years earlier, when he visited a friend in France. This provokes a vivid recollection of the adventure he and his friend embarked upon; breaking into an old castle ruin. Although the shortest of the three stories, this concludes the novella and manages to encapsulate the flavour of the whole volume in its closing statement; how humanity is always trying to escape the unpleasant memories that accompany us through life.

The masterful way in which Horie has managed to interweave these three short stories is in itself a motivation to seek out more of his work. The notion of the past conflicting with and influencing the present is a universal sensation that we have all experienced; reading this book might offer an opportunity to meditate on some of our own lost memories, and consider how these may have affected the decisions and paths we have chosen in life. §

Convenience Store Woman

by Murata Sayaka
translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori

Portobello Books Ltd (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1846276835

Review by Beau Waycott

Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store Woman* is a book of deftly crafted paradoxes that hold a haunting mirror up to both Japanese and Western societies. The protagonist, Furukura Keiko, is a numb character depicted in bare and swift language, yet is one of the most intriguing personas I have read in recent Japanese literature. Aged 36, Furukura is single and has been working at the poignantly named 'Smile Mart' convenience store for over 18 years, having joined whilst a university undergraduate.

Furukura has always been a social outcast, recalling how, even as a child, she has always held a *laissez-faire* attitude towards conventional public behaviour, instead preferring simply to act according to a strange and deeply personal set of morals seemingly based on utilitarian violence. She doesn't understand why it is not acceptable to hit a classmate over the head with a shovel in order to break up a fight, nor why her mother's friends are shocked when she suggests that she uses a dead pigeon to cook her father *yakitori* as a celebratory meal. Her family encourage her to try counselling to "cure" whatever is wrong in her head, but the counsellor assumes time will naturally lead Furukura to normality.

Moving onto life as a university student, she makes no friends, and ends up finding sanctuary in a newly-opened Smile Mart *konbini*, where she sees herself with a clear purpose and goal, be it encouraging the sale of corndogs on a promotional deal, or devoting herself to "cleanliness crackdown time". Over time, the store sees eight managers and an incredibly high turnover of part-time staff, but Furukura remains a constant, working five days a week for 18 years. However, her family have many concerns about her: aged 36, living in a rotting and cramped apartment, alone, never having shown signs of romantic interest, and working a dead-end job with poor pay and no progression. Even Furukura's personality is contrived and essentially superficial, with her mimicking everything from fashion sense to inflection whilst speaking from co-workers.

It is only when a lazy and selfish worker, Shiraha, appears in the convenience store that real change comes into Furukura's character. At first, she is infuriated by his androcentric lectures on the Stone Age and evolution of mankind, but soon finds much more infuriation in his disrespect for the store that is the very centre of her life, seeing his indolence as a personal attack on her love for the Smile Mart. However, after Shiraha is dismissed from the store, Furukura is forced to re-examine all the choices she has ever made whilst at the store, and consider new ideas towards employment, marital status, family and happiness.

For me, the major paradox of the novel is the Smile Mart itself. The *konbini* is a haven of synesthesia: the ever-present cry of "*Irasshaimasé*"; the smell of floor cleaner; the cold chill of the barley tea refrigerator. Murata has expertly characterised a central location that is a microcosm of so many things, such as the uniformity expected of Japan's labour force, or the Japanese preoccupation with cleanliness (be it superficial or otherwise). Overall, however, I would argue that the main allusion is to the nature of capitalism- Murata believes it is an economic system driven not by producers, but by consumers. Furukura's pride in her *arubaito* (part-time job) shows the hypocrisy of Japanese expectations towards women: whilst unmarried women are seen as outcasts and not

fulfilling their societal duties, their quest for validation through work is often manifested not in high-powered careers, but as a exploited labour force seen as cheap and disposable.

As Marx once wrote, in order for workers to feel obliging and happy in the exchange of their labour, they need to see elements of their personality externalised in the products or services they provide; they need "to see themselves in the objects they have created". Murata clearly affirms this view, with Furukura seeing her job not as a means of employment but as a means to 'maintain [herself] as human'. Moreover, she doesn't just see herself in the store's products, but she knows the store's products are herself, with a beautifully written passage detailing how, with a basic knowledge of biology and a diet restricted to that of damaged stock and meal-deals, over the course of her employment Furukura's physicality has become composed entirely from products of the store. Murata encourages a Marxist interpretation of the text not just by suggesting or affirming it, but by actually taking a political theory of externalisation and expanding it to internalisation, both literally and metaphorically.

Thanks to Ginny Tapley Takemori's accessible yet holistic translation, having knowledge of Japanese culture adds much depth to the book, from occasional native interjections -'hai!'- to Murata's sardonic name choices, such as 'Keiko', meaning (when written, as in the original Japanese, with the kanji combination '恵子') 'happy (or blessed) child', leading you to question whether the situation Furukura finds herself in really is a blessing or a curse, and quite how much convenience these stores actually add to our lives. Even Takemori's translation of the title is a political choice, as the native title (*konbini ningen*) literally means "convenience store people" and not "Convenience Store Woman". Whilst I am unsure if Murata was involved in the title's translation, this specific choice seems to reflect the character of Furukura herself: whilst most would consider the Smile Mart a place of community, workers and customers alike, the title suggests that Furukura is an insular and self-gratifying person.

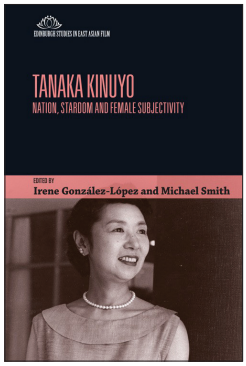
Convenience Store Woman is a rewarding read, and raises many questions in its flat prose and subtle allegories. Many complex ideas are suggested during the plot, all poignant around the world, be it the type of society Japan imagines during and after the slow process of depatriarchiliastion, to native attitudes towards Asian migration into Japan. Murata's combination of prose and plot is similar to Murakami's, examining the mundane and relatively static life of a protagonist to celebrate all there is to human existence, from the subtly heart-warming to the suddenly devastating. Written in a simple register that will leave you both smiling and infuriated, you may often wonder why you are continuing to read the novel at all. After all, the protagonist is largely a removed and unchanging character, and the plot takes place over very few locations. The true beauty of Murata's work is only found a few hours after reading; with an ending that hangs from the cliffs of ambiguity, you are almost forced to consider the fate of Furukura, and every other person sharing even one of her qualities. You are bound to an examination of your own life, and to acknowledge that you yourself encourage capitalism, and consumerism, and exploitation, and repression, simply by your very being. Murata's main authorial decision is the use of aposiopesis over the novel's final pages, telling you not just to spend time reading her book, but answering the questions she has raised over the past 176 pages. §

Tanaka Kinuyo: Nation, Stardom and Female Subjectivity

edited by Irene González-López and Michael Smith

Edinburgh University Press (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1474409698

Review by Kate Taylor-Jones
Senior Lecturer in East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield



One of the first Japanese films I ever saw as a young teenager was Mizoguchi's *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku Ichidai Onna*, 1952). I was fascinated by the film but more specifically the lead actor – the luminous and highly talented Tanaka Kinuyo. Tanaka is, of course, one of the most well-known Japanese female actors of all time but, to date, English language scholarship has been somewhat neglectful in considering her extensive contribution to the history of Japanese cinema. This collected edition by Irene González-López and Michael Smith is a timely and important addition to the field of study. In *Tanaka Kinuyo: Nation, Stardom and Female Subjectivity*, the editors have bought together a series of scholars who all seek to explore different aspects of Tanaka's life and career.

The need for such a book can be found the three main areas that the book contributes to – star studies, authorship studies and of course, the much wider field of Japanese Film Studies. Working in the film industry from 1929 to the mid-1970s, Tanaka made films with all the great directors of the era including Ozu Yasujiro, Mizoguchi Kenji, Naruse Mikio, Kinoshita Keisuke, Kurosawa Akira and Ichikawa Kon. She was the star of many of the most notable Japanese films ever made including *Woman of Tokyo* (*Tokyo no Onna*, 1933), *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sansho Dayu*, 1954), *The Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama-bushi Ko*, 1958) and *Red Beard* (*Aka-hige*, 1965). She was also notable for being one of Japan's first women directors, making six features film between 1953-1962. The aims and objectives of this book are lofty but admirable, 'to make a case for her to be recognised as a pioneer both for her work as an actress and for her trailblazing oeuvre as a filmmaker' (1). To answer this aim, the book is divided into seven chapters, the first half exploring Tanaka as an actress and the second her filmmaking career.

The book begins with a slightly stilted opening by Furukawa Kaoru, the honorary president of the Tanaka Kinuyu Memorial Hall. Following on from this, the first two chapters by Lauri Kitsnik and Alexander Jacoby explore how Tanaka's star images intersected both with contemporary debates on femininity and Tanaka's own developing star image. Kitsnik's exploration of Tanaka's early work is based around the employed neologism of idiogest – a focus on the repertoire of performance signs, character types and images that surround a star body. As Kitsnik concludes, Tanaka's early roles were far more contradictory and complex than her mature adult star images would suggest. From troubled young mother to modern girl to tomboy, Tanaka's early films refuse to confine her to one specific role or category and speak to the wider debates on femininity taking place in Japan during this period.

Jacoby's chapter focuses on the more well-known stage of Tanaka's career, the 1940s-1950s that would see her star in films such as *Army* (*Rikugun*, 1944), *Life of Oharu* and *Ugetsu* (1953). In these film, Tanaka most often plays a self-sacrificial mother but as Jacoby argues, a focus on specific aspects of the film, in this case, the endings of the films of this period reveal the ability that "the star as auteur" has to challenge and alter meanings. Following on from this, Michael Smith focuses specifically on one film *My Love has been Burning* (*Waga koi wa moenu*, 1949). Tanaka's longstanding creative partnership with Mizoguchi would often reflect on the gender politics of the period. As Smith argues, a close reading of Tanaka in *My Love has been Burning* allows a disruption of the mainstream reading of Tanaka's later roles as a personification of the traditional conservative femininity or Yamato Nadeshiko.

For me, the second half of the book is the most interesting. The lack of output of female directors in East Asian means any scholarship as women as filmmakers is to be welcomed. Irene González-López and Ashida Mayu's chapter explores Tanaka's directorial film outputs, not via a focus on debates of the auteur but rather to explore her films as commercial vehicles that were enmeshed in the social, cultural and structural film system of the time. Focusing on *Love Letter* (*Koibumi*, 1953), her most well-known and successful film, González-López and Mayu explore how the film text operated, both on and off the screen, as a vehicle for the negotiation of the post-war social experience.

This multi-layered approach is then continued in Ayako Saito's fascinating chapter on the relationship between Tanaka and Tanaka Sumie, the female screenwriter who worked with Tanaka on two of her films, *The Eternal Breasts* (*Chibusa yo eien nare*, 1955) and *Girls of Dark* (*Onna bakari no yoru*, 1961). Saito's chapter seeks to firstly provide a critical evaluation of Tanaka's films in the context of the broader debate on Women's Cinema in the post-war period. Secondly, via a study of both texts and modes of production to suggest that Tanaka, far from confirming patriarchal narratives, in fact, sought to challenge and debate female representation on the screen. The chapter offers insight into the relationship between the two Tanaka's via an examination of both the scripts and the end film product that resulted.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández chapter focuses on Tanaka's 1960 film *The Wandering Princess* (*Ruten no ohi*, 1960) and locates this film within the broader context of 1960s Japanese cinema. *The Wandering Princess* focused on the life of Saga Hiro who entered into an arranged marriage with Puije, the young brother of the last Emperor of China, Puyi. Puyi of course for most of his reign was nothing more than a puppet of the Japanese Imperial forces and *The Wandering Princess*, as Armendáriz-Hernández notes, is located as part of the post-war reflections on the imperial past. These reflections were dominated by 'narratives of suffering, war guilt and colonial nostalgia' (165) and, due to the desire to reconfiguration reconfirm Japanese masculinity after

both defeat and occupation, focused on the male experience. Tanaka's film not only focused on a female narrative but as Armendáriz-Hernández explored contained female input at all levels of production. The end film product may not have challenged post-war memories in any radical way, and certainly did not offer any atonement for Japan's imperial past, but what makes it valuable to scholars is the attempt to provide a 'genuine female subjectivity in the post-war Japanese cinema' (180).

This focus on the female subject is continued with Yuka Kano's final chapter on *Girls of Dark*. Kano's study of lesbian images and desire in *Girls of Dark* yields a fascinating exploration of the potential women's communities and spaces that Tanaka's film present. As the chapter explores, both the films narrative and visuals offer the potential for both female desire and subjectivity, not only at the level of text but once again via Tanaka's working relationships with other women, namely the original novel writer Yana Masako and screenwriter Tanaka Sumie. With the interplay of both text and context, Kano places the film inside wider debates on Women's Cinema, and she concludes that 'in the connecting and negotiating with different women'(200), *Girls of Dark* becomes an important addition to wider debates on diversity and gender in Japanese cinema.

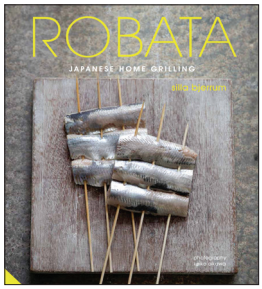
With a focus on questions of gender, production and authorship, this collected edition will make a fascinating read for several interlinked areas of film studies outside of a focus on Japanese film. The book serves to situate Tanaka not only in her own career and life but as part of a wider debate on women in Japanese cinema. Furukawa's few opening pages' hint at, but never elaborate on, several elements of Tanaka's childhood and early start in the industry. If I have one main criticism of this book is my wish that this section had more information and detail to it. I can appreciate the need to include someone who is so intimately involved with the preservation of Tanaka's history in this study, but as an opening chapter it presents more issues than it answers and I would have liked to seen this contextualised and discussed more. The later chapters, with a focus on other women who worked with Tanaka, are, for me, the big draw and opens up several avenues of research that I hope other future scholars will follow. As with all collected editions, some chapters are stronger than others but all play a vital role in bringing new insights to the career of Tanaka and the films she both made and starred in. §

Robata: Japanese Home Grilling

by Silla Bjerrum

Jacqui Small LLP (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1911127345

Review by Niraja Singh



*I*n May this year, the Japan Society held a successful supper club, showcasing the food and cooking of renowned chef and food consultant, Silla Bjerrum, co-founder in the late 1990s of London's first sushi delivery service, Feng Sushi. The menu was based on her new cookbook *Robata: Japanese Home Grilling* published in April. Bjerrum's recipes convey the importance of achieving *umami* (the fifth taste) in *robatayaki* through a very fast and pure form of grilling at high temperatures using natural flavour-enhancing ingredients such as soy-based sauces, miso, and shiitake mushrooms.

Japanese food has become a global phenomenon, with local sushi restaurants found in almost every corner of the world. A newer variation of this trend is Japanese cuisine involving a fusion of sushi and *robata*. Originating from the Hokkaido region of Japan and roughly translated as 'fireside cooking', *robata* is a 'Japanese style of grilling food in delicious skewered morsels of fish, shellfish, meat and vegetables'. Raw and cooked dishes are served alongside one another with a focus on sharing in a kind of Japanese version of *tapas*.

The underlying premise of Bjerrum's cookbook is to encourage the reader to adapt this style of cooking, which has traditionally been the preserve of restaurants, at home using good quality seasonal ingredients with an emphasis on sharing food. The dishes themselves are designed to be equally successful whether you are cooking on a traditional *robata* grill, outdoor barbeque or simple oven grill.

Traditionally *robata* cooking has been done over *binchotan* charcoals. *Bincho* coals known also as white charcoal are made from a heavy dense species of oak, with the finest coals coming from Minabe in the Wakayama prefecture of Japan. The beauty of *bincho* coals for grilling is that they are chemical free, almost smoke-free, burn at higher temperatures than normal

charcoal and there is an absence of moisture from the bincho, hence their popularity with chefs, as this preserves the flavourful juices inside while keeping the food crispy on the outside. *Yakitori* is another popular form of grilling over *binchotan* coals, but a main difference is that robata has its roots in fish and vegetable dishes, whereas *yakitori* originally consisted of chicken and vegetables.

Bjerrum provides detailed instructions on how to set up a DIY *robata* grill at home, including the type of starter chamber in which to burn the coals initially before transferring to a drum or brick barbeque. For a makeshift *robata* grill in the oven, the trick is to create a mini pit high enough for skewers not to touch the base of baking sheet. Again, Bjerrum gives ample details on how to create this for the home oven. She masters a hugely accessible range of recipes, which are specifically adapted to home cooking.

Barbeque grilling in the West tends to be very meat centric, whereas Bjerrum argues that '*robata* is about delicacy, provenance and combining a selection of ingredients to create a nutritious, well-balanced meal'. Bjerrum herself does not stick wholeheartedly to the orthodox *robata* method, but adds her own experimental twists to create unique recipes. For example, *robata* grilled mussels dressed with miso flavoured butter for deep umami flavour or yuzu chicken, which is marinated in a mixture of yogurt, honey and yuzu that tenderizes the meat beautifully before grilling. More traditional Japanese fish *robata* dishes such as miso black cod or classic *yakitori* (chicken cooked on skewers) are also included in the recipes, as are a wonderful selection of vegetarian dishes such as *nasu dengaku* (miso glazed aubergines), *goma* (sesame) spinach, okra *robata*, and portobello mushrooms stuffed with shimeji and shiitake mushrooms. She also sets out an array of side dishes, sauces and salads, which can accompany any selection of grills from the book.

The cookbook is organised by type of *robata* based on ingredients, which creates an easy-to-use guide for newcomers to Japanese cuisine and is a great reference for the more experienced chef. For

Robata grilled fish and seafood

fish lovers, sea bream with wakame salsa and summer pickles of lemon and courgettes, Chilean sea bass with choy sum and onion relish, and soft-shell crab on crab rice are all delicious recipes to try.

The recipes are not only easy to follow, but the book itself is beautifully curated; Keiko Oikawa's photographs perfectly capture Bjerrum's mouth-watering food. Her cooking is a perfect introduction to Japanese cooking while simultaneously teaching you the history and theory behind *robata*. Do not be put off by the multitude of traditional Japanese ingredients, as they are relatively easy to find. Many are available in the local supermarket, and others readily sourced from speciality Japanese stores, which like sushi restaurants are burgeoning.

All in all, this cookbook will appeal to those with an interest in not only Japanese food, but also concerned with the provenance and seasonality of ingredients and taking their cooking to a higher level, as these have always been at the core of Bjerrum's cooking. §

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