



For the October issue of *The Japan Society Review* we have selected a mixture of books that illuminate different aspects of modern Japan. The opening review focuses on the catalogue of the exhibition *Conflicts of Interest: Art and War in Modern Japan* held at the Saint Louis Art Museum, October 2016 to January 2017. Illustrated with a collection of visual works, this volume chronicles Japan's rise as a modern nation from the beginning of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to the aftermath of Pearl Harbor in 1942, shedding light on Japanese visual culture and the narratives it circulated for its citizens, allies, and enemies on the world stage.

Living during those turbulent decades, Japanese poet and writer Noguchi Yonejiro (1875-1947) had a fascinating life travelling between Japan, United States and the UK. *Yone Noguchi: the stream of fate* is the first volume of a new biographical work about him which examines Noguchi's life to the year 1904, when he returned to Japan after his sojourns abroad. Based on extensive research and including archival documents and several illustrations, the book offers new insights

into this interesting transcultural figure, an early example of a Japanese achieving literary recognition in the English-speaking world and writing on Japan in English.

The second part of the Review is dedicated to three literary works published in translation in the recent years. *Life for Sale* is a little known novel by the celebrated author Mishima Yukio who explores the meaning of life in post-war Japanese society from a 'pulp' perspective. *Sweet Bean Paste* by Durian Sukegawa is a poignant meditation on contemporary issues such as stigmatization and prejudice in Japan through the relationship of two contrasting characters working together in a *dorayaki* (bean paste pancake) shop. Finally, *Kinshu: Autumn Brocade* by Miyamoto Teru tells a story of love, loss and karma, conveyed in a series of letters between a divorced and thoroughly estranged couple.

As always, thank you to the wonderful volunteer reviewers who have made possible this issue.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Contents

- 1) *Conflicts of Interest: Art and War in Modern Japan* by Philip Hu, Rhiannon Paget, Sebastian Dobson, Maki Kaneko, Sonja Hotwagner and Andreas Marks
- 2) *Yone Noguchi: the stream of fate* by Edward Marx by Edward Marx
- 3) *Life for Sale* by Mishima Yukio
- 4) *Sweet Bean Paste* by Durian Sukegawa
- 5) *Kinshu: Autumn Brocade* by Miyamoto Teru

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Reviewers

Chris Arning, Laurence Green, Peter Kornicki, Susan Meehan and Robert Paul Weston.

Image: Hasegawa Sadanobu III, Japanese, 1881–1963; *The Three Brave Bombers*, 1932; triptych of color woodblock prints; 15 1/8 × 28 15/16 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Lowenhaupt 818:2010a-c.

Conflicts of Interest: Art and War in Modern Japan

by Philip Hu, Rhiannon Paget, Sebastian Dobson, Maki Kaneko, Sonja Hotwagner and Andreas Marks

University of Washington Press (2016)

ISBN-13: 978-0295999814

Review by Laurence Green



Released to accompany the Saint Louis Art Museum's collection of over 1,400 objects relating to the Japanese military (largely focusing on colour prints), there lies a neat play of words at work in this lushly illustrated exhibition catalogue. Is it the literal conflict of interests between two rival nations, set against each other in open, bloody conflict? Or perhaps it is the conflict of interests within ourselves as we – viewers at a calm, composed remove from the horrors depicted – look on and find a kind of fascination, if not outright beauty, in these depictions of violence and martial prowess.

It is the latter of these that perhaps makes this collection of artworks so visually arresting. With a core focus on the Sino-Japanese (1894-1895) and Russo-Japanese (1904-1905) wars, these prints take us through the gamut of Japan's intensely rapid period of modernisation from the beginning of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to the aftermath of Pearl Harbour in 1942. As such, we not only get a vivid sense of a fast-moving evolution in military technology, but a palpable air of the idea of 'modernity' itself; of new ways supplanting the old as Japan rushed to equip and attire itself in the guise of a powerful, Westernised nation.

The catalogue's introduction gives ample space to dismissing the received idea that Japanese prints of the Meiji era (1868-1912) were somehow an elegiac last gasp for the woodblock format, so popularised in the *ukiyo-e* of the Edo period (1603-1868). But perhaps there is some argumentative weight to be found in why this misconception holds such currency in the first place; that it is the very romanticism of this 'last gasp' image that makes it so compelling to Western audiences numbed to countless re-presentations of undisputed masters like Hokusai and Hiroshige. In these Meiji era prints, we find two distinct worlds collided together: the classical two dimensionality and linework of the woodblock print paired with the cold steel of battleships and sleek black Imperial uniforms. Just as the original proponents of the *Japonisme*

movement in the 19th century were charmed by the exoticism of *ukiyo-e*, so too are we drawn in by the 'newness' and unfamiliarity of the prints contained here.

As such, this catalogue is not only a story of the prints themselves, but of those who collected them at a time when they were deemed unfashionable. In a fascinating opening essay by Philip K. Hu, we are presented with a contrasting picture between Western and Japanese collectors – the latter of which remain far more shrouded in mystery as a result of the culture of Japanese art collecting in which collectors maintain a high deal of privacy and auction sales records as well as provenance data are rarely available. The picture is one of a handful of specialist, private galleries and one-off exhibitions, as opposed to the more public-orientated spirit of Western gallery exhibition.

In the spirit of 'collection' an interesting anecdote is repeated across two of the essays, involving renowned Japanese novelist Tanizaki Jun'ichiro. Recalling with nostalgia the Tokyo of his youth, he wrote in 1955:

'The Shimizu-ya, a print shop at the corner of Ningyo-cho, had laid in a stock of triptychs depicting the war, and had them hanging in the front of the shop... There was not one I didn't want, boy that I was, but I only rarely got to buy any. I would go almost every day and stand before the Shimizu-ya, staring at the pictures, my eyes sparkling...'

Tanizaki's words will no doubt feel familiar to collectors the world over – the sheer thrill of desiring that which one does not have. It is an odd sensation to feel such beauty emanating from such horrific subject matter. But beautiful these pictures undeniably are, even more so when one considers the craft put into their creation, something which the catalogue's incredibly comprehensive bibliography and reference notes amply elaborates upon. And yet, as these prints lost market-share in the face of rising sales of photography and picture postcards, the very thing these prints were able to offer becomes more plain: the power of fanciful, fantastical imagery to illustrate what which would be impossible or impractical for a photograph to; to immerse the viewer in the action with an intensity and 'closeness' that practically leaps from the page. Indeed, it is rather amusing to see that the extent in variety amongst the prints presented here even reaches to a kind of cut-out, assemblable 3D diorama, complete with glueable tabs and how-to guide.

The idea of an aestheticised modernity, fully embodied by the nature and possibilities of contemporary media technology is examined in further detail by Rhiannon Paget in an essay looking at how imagery of Japan's wars in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was consumed in the West. With frequent references to popular publications of the time such as the *London Illustrated News*, we are given a taste of the thrills the media evidently saw in the awakening of the 'slumbering' Eastern nations and the promise of a 'good battle' between Japan and China. Later, she observes how media in both the West and Japan quickly envisioned the attractive, aristocratic young women who worked as nurses for the Japanese Red Cross as eroticised figures – a modernised, idealised evolution of the *bijin* figures who were such a staple in the earlier *ukiyo-e*.

Rounding off the collection of essays, Maki Kaneko focuses on the case of the 'Three Brave Bombers' – a semi-mythologised trio of young Japanese soldiers in the early 1930s who, each carrying a tube-like Bangalore torpedo made of bamboo, blew themselves up against a Chinese barbed wire fence in an attempt to breach it. The image and power of this story spread with an almost meme-like virality across all forms of media in Japan at the time and was even adapted into a Kirin beer advert appended with the tagline: "Charge! Charge! Kirin Beer Always Makes a Path for the Future".

Kaneko observes this dark humourism as an example of the *ero-guro* (erotic grotesque nonsense) culture of hedonism found in 30s Japan, an atmosphere suffused with the glory and sensuality of death, feeding directly into the wider climate of militarism.

It is against the backdrop of discussions such as these that we can take in the entire spread of this catalogue (a weighty one, at over 140 individual plates). Time and time again, society has shown that people invariably favour media-constructed images to reality – or at the very least, that media (whatever its format) contains astounding power to engage us as viewers and subvert our way of thinking. It is the very nature of the Japanese print as *popular* media that makes it so impactful. These images were designed to entertain, to enthuse, to shock. With hindsight, we look back on them and see the deeply sinister nationalism and cruel jingoism written plain. And yet, their visual, artistic vibrancy remains undiminished, their capacity to offer a window (albeit an often grossly exaggerated or subverted one) onto a lost world unerringly engaging. With the British Museum's landmark 2017 Hokusai exhibition meaning awareness of Japanese prints amongst a general audience has never been higher, *Conflicts of Interest* presents a fascinating counterpoint, bringing the medium and us as viewers into modern times with a sharpness and clarity that is thrilling to behold. [S](#)

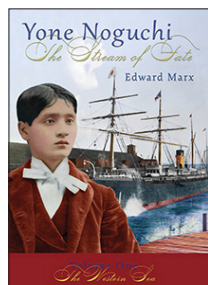
Yone Noguchi: the stream of fate

by Edward Marx

Botchan Books (2019)

ISBN-13: 978-1939913050

Review by Peter Kornicki



Noguchi Yonejiro (1875-1947), who was known in the West as Yone Noguchi, had a roller-coaster of a life but his works have fallen by the wayside. Who was he? He grew up in Japan and entered Keio Gijuku (now University) but in 1893, before he had turned 18, he abandoned his studies and sailed to California, apparently without any particular object in view. There he worked as a journalist and sometimes as a domestic servant, but he also became acquainted with the American poet Joaquin Miller and other writers of the San Francisco Bay area. Perhaps as a consequence he decided that his calling was to be a poet. He published two books of poetry in English in 1897 and then

moved to New York, where he published his first novel, *The American diary of a Japanese girl* (1901). It was at this time that he had an affair with the writer Charles Warren Stoddard, and contracted a secret marriage with Léonie Gilmour (1873-1933), an American educator and journalist. Shortly after he moved back to Japan in 1904 and became a professor of English at Keio University, he learnt that Léonie had given birth to a son; this was Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), who was later to become an acclaimed sculptor and artist. In 1913 Noguchi travelled to Britain and lectured on Japanese poetry at Magdalen College, Oxford, at the invitation of the poet laureate, Robert Bridges, and he also lectured to the Japan Society in London.

By the time he made a lecture tour in North America in 1919-20 he had made the acquaintance of W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and George Bernard Shaw, among other contemporary luminaries, and already enjoyed considerable fame. He was the first Japanese to publish poetry in English and he wrote extensively on Japanese drama and art in English, including studies

of the major ukiyo-e artists. At the very least, then, he was an interesting transcultural figure, an early example of a Japanese achieving literary recognition in the English-speaking world and writing on Japan in English.

On the other hand, Noguchi has been described as an opportunist, a fifth-rate poet, and as a strident nationalist, and doubts have been raised about his command of English. Morita Norimasa, the author of the essay on Noguchi in the eighth volume of *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits* (ed. Hugh Cortazzi) was distinctly unimpressed, describing Noguchi's lines,

'Mystic spring of vapour:/ Opiate odor of colours:/Alas – I'm not all of me!', as 'a mere collocation of unusual words... many of them lifted from Edgar Alan Poe's writings' (p. 406).

Morita goes on to quote what he calls a 'piece of doggerel' entitled 'Butcher Americans and British, Our Enemies', which shows how wholeheartedly Noguchi adopted wartime rhetoric. What is more, Edward Marx, the author of the book under review, admits that Noguchi's moral failings included 'dishonesty, deception, plagiarism, bigamy, warmongering, cowardice, hypocrisy, racism, recklessness, and downright stupidity' (31). If readers are not already put off by this catalogue of failings, they may nevertheless wonder if Noguchi is worth such close attention, for this substantial volume takes readers only up to the year 1904, when he returned to Japan.

Marx first came across Noguchi in the context of modernist English poetry when doing his PhD at the University of New York. His avowed aim here is to write a biography that steers a middle course between the adulation and the criticism, but he is all too aware of the unreliability of Noguchi's own autobiographical writings, which seem to be riddled with invention. Marx has clearly conducted extensive research in various archives, as is obvious not only from his footnotes but also from the many contemporary illustrations he has managed to find.

The book would have benefited, however, from the attentions of an editor, for several reasons. Firstly, there is a great deal of uninteresting quotation from letters and other writings that could more economically have been summarised or omitted. Do we really need to know, for example, that Stoddard wrote in his diary, 'all of us at home all day' (264)? Secondly, whenever Noguchi makes a new acquaintance Marx launches into a digression in the form of a potted biography. While some of these are interesting, they do disrupt

the narrative and in most cases go into more detail than seems necessary. The subject of the book, after all, is Noguchi. Thirdly, it is surely no longer necessary to rearrange all Japanese names to suit Western norms.

What do we learn from this exhaustive biography? First of all, the extensive quotations from Noguchi's correspondence and writings reveal an uncertain grasp of English idiom, and this raises the question of how much his various friends and lovers revised his poetry. Marx is not afraid to describe some of it as 'gibberish' and shows in a telling comparison of a draft with the published poem how much had been changed (195).

Secondly, it is clear that Noguchi's activities and reputation were shaped by some of the events he lived through. His move away from California was probably occasioned by the rising tide of opposition to 'Oriental' migration; his success in England (both Thomas Hardy and Laurence Binyon were impressed by him) was to some extent due to the good will generated by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance; and his journalistic successes in 1904 were due to his ability to translate Japanese reports on the outbreak of war with Russia into a form suitable for an American audience, although his writings were, as Marx notes, 'heavily propagandistic, promoting views of the Japanese as ultra-patriotic, self-sacrificing heroes' (376).

Thirdly, he had roles to play both as an interpreter of Japan to the West, explaining haiku to English-speaking readers, and as an interpreter of the West to Japan, being the first Japanese to write on Yeats, whom he had met during Yeats' American tour (354, 338). In addition, there is much fascinating detail on the Japanese community and press in California in the 1890s and on American japonisme in general, much of it informed by impeccable research.

Noguchi himself, it has to be said, does not come across as an appealing character or even an interesting writer. What is interesting, though, is that many Americans and Britons were attracted by his writings. Exactly what they were attracted by is difficult to say. Willa Cather, writing in 1898, long before she achieved fame as a novelist, provides some clues in a review: 'While Noguchi is by no means a poet in the large complicated modern sense of the word, he has more true inspiration, more melody, from within than many a greater man', she wrote, and she described his verse as 'simple, spontaneous, unstudied songs' and 'conspicuously Oriental' (177).

Perhaps that was the point. In 1900 Otono Watanna published a novel entitled *A Japanese Nightingale* which enjoyed much success, but she

was no Japanese: she was in fact a Canadian of mixed Chinese-British ancestry named Winnifred Eaton who had adopted what she supposed to be a Japanese pseudonym. There was evidently some cachet in being Japanese. It seems likely that Noguchi made the best of his advantages as a Japanese in America, but he remains, to this reviewer at least, an enigmatic figure. Perhaps the best thing that can be said about

him is, as Marx writes of the journalist Frank Putnam, that he had 'more poetic ardour than talent' (232).

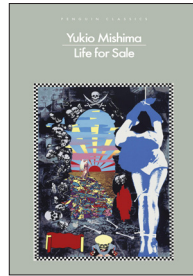
Marx has clearly done extensive research and has presented the most well-documented account of Noguchi's life so far. I hope that in the second volume he will tackle the difficult question of the reasons for the popularity of Noguchi's writings and provide an index. §

Life for Sale

by Mishima Yukio
translated by Stephen Dodd

Penguin Classics (2019)
ISBN-13: 978-0241333143

Review by Susan Meehan



In 1967, 42-year-old Mishima Yukio formed a private militia which he named the Tatenokai ("Shield Society"), and swore to protect the emperor of Japan. In 1970, he went as far as trying to organise a coup to restore the power of the emperor. Mishima failed spectacularly, and went on to commit seppuku then and there. He had meticulously planned his suicide for about a year.

In 1968, a couple of years before his death, Mishima's *Life for Sale* was serialised in *Playboy Japan*. As with much of Mishima's work it dwells on death, suicide and the emptiness of existence yet is also light, fizzing with humour and surreal goings-on.

The protagonist, Hanio Yamada, is a young, handsome and successful copywriter working for Tokyo Ad. He wakes up one morning startled to have survived a suicide attempt even though it was done on a 'complete whim', as if 'planning a picnic.'

Unlike Kafka's Gregor Samsa, an exhausted travelling salesman who wakes up one morning in the form of a large vermin or cockroach, the words and letters Hanio tries to decipher as he reads the newspaper one morning turn into cockroaches before his very eyes. He concludes that the world boils down to nothing more than this. Both Gregor and Hanio appear weary of life.

Having failed to commit suicide, 'a wonderfully free and empty world opened up before him' as Hanio makes a complete break from the daily grind, immediately resigning from Tokyo Ad. He then places an ad in the newspaper:

'Life for sale. Use me as you wish. I am a twenty-seven

year old male. Discretion guaranteed. Will cause no bother at all.'

It does not take long for Hanio to be in demand. He lurches from case to case as an assassin or detective-for-hire. He becomes involved with characters including shady mobsters, infatuated women and a vampire, and somehow rather charismatically bumbles through. Prepared as he is to be killed, he turns out to be rather adept at evading death, often leaving demise and bafflement in his wake.

Full of wild escapades, the novel also contains saucy passages which I imagine were a concession to the *Playboy* readers. They are comical and unsophisticated... a bit like the *Carry On* films.

In hospital after an anaemic episode courtesy of his vampiric lover, the nurse looking after Hanio rolls up the hem of skirt 'to reveal white garters around the tops of her white stockings and above that, her fleshy thighs...' A startled Hanio exclaims: 'Wow! Is that what they meant when they said you get a good view in this hospital?'

As Hanio is getting ready to leave hospital, the nurse asks: 'So, are you getting your strength back?' By way of reply, 'Hanio took the nurse by her arms and pulled her onto the bed'. I laughed aloud.

Having concluded his assignments and escaped with his life intact, it dawns on Hanio that, having been exposed to the danger of death, he no longer wants to die.

On the run, it is not long before he is kidnapped by villains as the series of picaresque adventures come to a climax and ends are tied up. He has never before clung on to life with such ferocity...

A welcome addition to the English language translations of Yukio Mishima's work in the lead-up to the fiftieth anniversary of his death and deftly translated by Stephen Dodd, it is an exuberant if patchily saucy read and reveals a different angle to Mishima. §

Sweet Bean Paste

by Durian Sukegawa
translated by Alison Watts

Oneworld Publications (2017)
ISBN-13: 978-1786071958

Review by Chris Arning



Durian Sukegawa's *Sweet Bean Paste* is a tender story chronicling the unlikely bond between an ex con and an elderly lady with a shadowy past. The novel starts in a comical vein like a classic 'odd couple' narrative but turns into something else: a poignant meditation on the generation gap, stigmatization in Japan, the perils of lazy prejudice in a stratifying society, the value of devotion to one's craft and how we can find meaning in the mundane, no matter how tawdry or hemmed in our circumstances.

The main character is Sentaro, a down-on-his-luck part-time worker who runs a *dorayaki* (bean paste pancake) shop on his own in Tokyo. Sentaro is a bit of a loafer and jobsworth; he's only working in the shop to pay off debts and doesn't even like *dorayaki*. He is approached one day during cherry blossom season by a wizened old *obaa-san* woman called Tokue, who asks him for job. He dismisses her at first, but she persists and once he has tasted the exquisite bean paste she's left him in a tupperware container, he is won over. He invites her in to start training him in the making of proper *dorayaki*. Customers start to notice the difference between the insipid flavour of the processed stuff he has provided hitherto and this gorgeous, smooth, tenderly concoction, conjured up according to a recipe developed over 50 years. As their awkward relationship blossoms, the business starts to pick up and thrive and their lives change.

But just when you start thinking that this story will turn out to be a sort of twee, Japanese version of *Breaking Bad* with Sentaro as Jesse and Tokue as Heisenberg, teaming up to cook up an all-conquering *dorayaki* empire, you'll find out you're sorely mistaken! It is a Lynchian *Inland Empire* that this novel explores: finding the meaning in a human life in the face of one's disappointment at one's unfulfilled potential.

Tokue turns out to have been endowed with special super powers. But just like many a super hero, her special power – in this case her ability to conjure up great tasting bean paste and other sorts of confectionary – has emerged from an early scarring by trauma she has spent a lifetime to overcome.

Superficially, a main theme is love of food and food as symbolic mediator in Japanese society. Think

of the bento box as a signifier of mother love, or the nabe stew as a metaphor for familial togetherness. The novel put me in mind of the film adaptation of Joanne Harris's book *Chocolat* (2000) where an outsider opens up a *chocolaterie* in a French village and also of the classic Japanese film, *Tampopo* (1985), where 2 truck drivers help a struggling ramen shop improve their broth, to rescue the business. Perhaps the film it reminds me of the most of is *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, the critically acclaimed 2011 Japanese-American documentary where Jiro's punctilious attention to the minutiae and dedication to his own method for prepping sushi take centre stage. What that film and this book have in common is both protagonists cherish the concept of *ikigai* ('reason for living') and a related idea of *kodawari*. Ken Mogi in his book *The Little Book of Ikigai* (2017) defines *kodawari* as 'a personal standard, to which the individual adheres in a personal manner. It is often, though not always, used in reference to a level of quality, or professionalism to which the individual holds... Kodawari is personal in nature, and it is a manifestation of pride in what one does'. [1]

Tokue's *kodawari* is the acute attention she gives to every stage of the process e.g. the way she listens to the beans. Early on, Sentaro is baffled as Tokue talks about the critical importance of communing with azuki, during the preparation process and to ensure one knows 'how they feel' so as to ensure that their latent taste is lovingly coaxed out.

The azuki beans are almost protagonists in their own right. I was reminded of Miyazaki films, the idea of Shinto animism, bidding us give respect to the humblest of objects, but also that classic of Japanese anthropology *Rice as Self* by Ekiko Ohstuka-Tierney where she situates rice historically as a Japanese spiritual essence, remarking on the presence in the ancient records of the *Nihon Shoki* of *ina damashii* or souls of the rice grains. [2]

For Tokue this simple *kodawari* is a major part of her *ikigai*, it endows her a sense of value in a life of thwarted ambitions; a life blasted at the root by misfortune and blighted by prejudice and tragedy.

In the afterword to the book, Sukegawa writes about his motivation for having written this novel; that of every life, no matter how futile, being equal in the light of the universe:

'Some lives are too brief, while others are a continual struggle. I couldn't help thinking that it was a brutal

assessment of people's lives to employ usefulness to society as a yardstick by which to measure their value.'

In this book, there is an implicit contrast made between the superficial and speedy materialism of modern Japan and traditional Japan and its crafts, and its dying arts, as epitomised by the recognition of *Ningen Kokuho* (Living National Treasure). As an appreciator of the beauty of lacquerware and practitioner of calligraphy this spoke to me. In terms of his writing, the book was easy to read. Dorian's prose is as silky smooth as Tokue's bean paste and his preference for the succinct sentence is like her eagle eye for the best beans. Credit should also be given, of course, to the translator Alison Watts for her easy style. Later in the novel the epistolary format is used to give us insight and to eavesdrop on the thoughts of both characters.

The one thing that didn't ring true for me was the character of Wakana, who seemed a little bit of a sidekick and lacking her own agency. Kurt Vonnegut once wrote that every character should want something – even if it is a glass of water – I would have liked to have seen her character fleshed out. I also felt that the tension dissolved a little as it entered the final third and I would have liked to have had an inkling about how Sentaro would turn out – either by creating his own *dorayaki* brand, some sort of reconciliation with his father or perhaps by returning to writing and fictionalising Tokue's life.

Nevertheless, I'm quibbling. I really enjoyed this book. It was very touching and made me nostalgic for my time in Japan. Some of my best friends in Yamaguchi were elderly *obaa-san* women. Their

wisdom, warmth, wit and kindness made it a more hospitable experience. I also loved the focus on the food as a Japanese obsession. I also loved the focus on food as a Japanese obsession. The novel's take on Japanese food stuff as metaphor for life resonated with my memories of a much beloved ex girlfriend whose family name was Usuki (the mortar in which mochi are pounded. Finally, I taught in a school for those with learning difficulties whilst on the JET programme in 1999 and felt sad at the prejudice they faced in society at large. In dealing with leprosy, Sukegawa's novel avoids striking a sanctimonious note. He simply tells a human story with an unobjectionable moral at its heart: when we look for the humanity in every person – no matter how inauspicious the circumstances, it brings the best out in them and us.

For me, the main take out was the value of living authentically and seeing the blessing in every blow.

Last word to Tokue, who writes to Sentaro, in order to console him when he is feeling discouraged:

'Your life is meaningful too. The time you suffered behind bars, your finding dorayaki – I believe it all has a purpose... All experience adds up to a life lived as only you could.... You may never become a writer or a master dorayaki cook, but I do believe there will be a time when you can stand tall...'

[1] Mogi, Ken (2017). *The Little Book of Ikigai: The Essential Japanese Way to Finding Your Purpose in Life*. Quercus Editions.

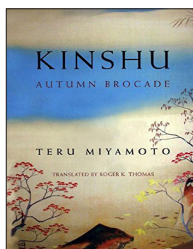
[2] Ohtsuka-Tierney, Emiko (1993). *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*. Princeton University Press. §

Kinshu: Autumn Brocade

by Miyamoto Teru
translated by Roger Thomas

New Directions (2007)
ISBN-13: 978-0811216753

Review by Robert Paul Weston



When my wife spotted the review copy of Miyamoto Teru's *Kinshu* on the bedside table, the book's main title writ large, she assumed it was a treatise on alcoholism.

'You're giving up drinking?' she asked me.

The problem was the final letter *u* – or lack thereof – in the word *kinshu*. Written without it, a native Japanese reader might assume the word is an English transposition of 禁酒, a prohibition on liquor

– hardly ideal for a meditative novel on love, loss and karma. Indeed, Miyamoto's original title was *Kinshuu* (錦繡), a multi-layered word for a fabric of beautiful embroidery; a similarly beautiful and varied poem; or a richly coloured mosaic of autumn leaves. Hence the elucidative English subtitle: *Autumn Brocade*.

The omitted *u* is no fault of the translator, Roger Thomas, who successfully rendered the story's tender, conversational prose from Japanese. The severed *u* is more likely a victim of English's orthography and aesthetics, in which doubled vowels appear clumsy, more like typos than examples of editorial assiduousness.

On the other hand, what's in a name? What matters more is whether the novel lives up to its multi-

layered title. I believe it does – and does so well – but I say so with certain reservations.

Kinshu is an epistolary novel, told in a series of letters between a divorced and thoroughly estranged couple. Aki and her former husband, Yasuaki, have neither spoken nor seen each other in over a decade. Aki's opening letter describes a chance encounter on a gondola ascending Mount Zao in northern Honshu. Based on this mere sighting, Aki feels compelled to seek out Yasuaki's address and write to him, searching for the truth about his sordid and bloody departure ten years earlier.

Aki's opening letter tells how, only two years after marrying, the police telephoned her in the middle of the night. Her husband, they explain, has narrowly survived a suicide pact with another woman, a hostess from a Kyoto night club. The two were found in a hotel room near Arashiyama, the woman dead and Yasuaki clinging barely to life. Aki rushes to Kyoto and finds her husband in hospital, emerging from surgery following the treatment of stab wounds to his throat and chest.

The wounds are not found to be self-inflicted and, when he regains consciousness, Yasuaki confirms this. The woman attempted to murder him in his sleep, apparently in a fit of jealousy, although her full motives remain unknown. When he awakes, Yasuaki is gripped with shame, but also with wilful silence. After an infuriatingly spare apology, he walks out of Aki's life with little more than the clothes on his back.

They will not see each other again for ten years, when the chance encounter on Mount Zao prompts Aki to begin the correspondence that forms the novel.

This dramatic opening is followed by a meandering meditation on fate, karma and the random chaos of the universe, yet always with reference to discrete memories of the everyday – a fondly remembered meal; the strictures of household finance; beautiful scenery viewed from a passing train; snatches of half-heard melodies; a subtle expression on the face of a mother or son. In this way, groping for links between the prosaic and the cosmic, *Kinshu* is a beautiful, melancholic, ultimately hopeful novel.

At the same time, however, the book's representation of men and women – or rather,

husbands and wives – could be a struggle for some. Miyamoto's novel was first published nearly forty years ago, in 1982. Gender relations have moved on significantly since then. As a result, the portrayals of Aki and Yasuaki could come across as products of their time, more conservative than they might be today.

In particular, one of Yasuaki's letters asserts his belief that men are somehow innately predisposed to adultery. Aki rejects this, but the notion that male infidelity is inevitable may grate on modern readers. That said, there is a kind of softly brutal frankness to these letters, written long after the couple's irreparable rift. It gives both correspondents a gripping – if at times off-putting – authenticity.

Perhaps precisely because so much time has passed for the characters, as opposed to the reader, a structural mismatch occurs. I could not help wishing Yasuaki would simply show more compunction. Certainly, he apologises for the ruin he has made of the couple's happiness, but when I imagined myself in his position, I only saw blinding, all-consuming guilt. Similarly, when I put myself in Aki's place, I felt desperate fury. While she does express anger in her letters, she finds a surprisingly quick path to a zen-like forgiveness.

By choosing to tell the tale by way of letters, Miyamoto has left much room for reflection on the part of his characters. The result is the description of events that, when fresh, would leave anyone furious, confused, shocked into despair. For the reader, the destruction of the characters' marriage *is* fresh. The characters themselves, however, benefit from the salve of time. They describe their dramatic break, their anger and sadness, with quiet, wistful, almost lyrical prose.

The danger is this incongruity may alienate some readers as their anger butts against the characters' subtle reflection. Or perhaps the incongruity has a pleasure of its own. Looking back on this review, I can see how the novel's structure has deepened my thoughts about it, which is its own success. After all, so much of the novel is about precisely these things: Time and reflection. A multi-layered brocade indeed. §

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