



Welcome to the first issue of The Japan Society Review in 2019. Thanks to our team of dedicated reviewers, we again hope to bring you details of the latest and most interesting publications, films and events related to Japan. As in previous issues, we will maintain a balance between academic, non-fiction publications and works of popular culture, including contemporary work and literary classics, celebrated authors and new comers as well as film, stage productions and other Japan-related events taking place in the UK. This first issue of 2019 exemplifies this approach and presents five books that deal with a wide range of topics and styles, from Japanese history to a tale of a world without cats.

The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia is an academic work edited by Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov. It examines the material, geographical and political disruptions and impact of the Japanese empire in East Asia in the aftermath of Japan's military defeat. Drawing from a variety of resources in different languages, the chapters included in the volume explore issues such as the repatriation of Japanese personnel, the question of prisoners of war and war criminals and the legacies of Japanese management and administration in the former colonies.

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This issue also include three reviews of Japanese novels. *A Shameful Life* is the new English translation of Dazai Osamu's *Ningen Shikkaku*, a first-person account of the struggles of the protagonist to find his place within the alien world that surrounds him. *The Beast Player* by renowned fantasy writer Uehashi Nahoko focuses on the story of a young girl in an imaginary world populated by dragons and other creatures. The third novel reviewed is *If Cats Disappeared From The World*, an ingenious story of a terminally-ill young man who contracts with the devil to extend his life by making things disappear from the world, but struggles to remove cats from human existence.

Finally, we also include in this issue the review of the stage play *Flight Paths*, an ambitious project combining aerial acrobatics, video installations, partially sighted performers and Japanese culture.

We hope our reviews will help to expand your interest and curiosity about Japanese history and culture and you will enjoy the reading of this issue!

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Editor

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Reviewers

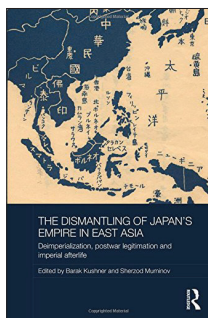
Morgane Chinal-Dargent, Roger Macy, Harry Martin, Susan Meehan and George Mullins.

The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia

edited by Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov

Routledge (2016)
ISBN-13: 978-1138187641

Review by Roger Macy



A widespread view has been that the Japanese Empire became an entirely closed chapter after August 1945, when it collapsed abruptly at the end of World War II. Whilst historians, and in particular historians of Japan, have been aware of isolated threads connecting before and after 1945, the subject has gained renewed interest through work in unexamined areas and access to closed archives, particularly in the Soviet Union and China. This renewed research was stimulated by a five-year European Research Council-funded project, centred at Cambridge. After a conference, a book of sixteen papers has been produced, *The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia: Deimperialization, postwar legitimation and imperial afterlife*. It was jointly edited by Barak Kushner, reader in Modern Japanese History at Cambridge and Sherzod Muminov, then also at the FAMES faculty at Cambridge and now lecturer in Japanese History at the University of East Anglia. These authors in particular have been able to draw from material in a wide range of relevant languages. But by adding translations of papers written in Japanese, they have been able to aggregate an impressive and influential addition to historical knowledge.

Being an academic book from Routledge, it is not cheap, but many readers could profit from time within its covers. The book has a decent index, whilst the bibliography is contained within the notes for each chapter. With the list of contributors sensibly in alphabetical order by family name, any ambiguity in reading can be ironed out (although characters here would have been helpful). Brief views of each chapter follow.

Kato Kiyofumi starts the volume with an overview of events, 'The Decline of the Japanese empire and the transformation of the regional order in East Asia'. Although the author wrote in English, his focussing on Japanese historians makes his synthesis instructive. The division of Korea along the 38th parallel is narrated as the accumulation of events in the dying days of the Japanese administration, rather than a wartime great-power agreement as has been narrated in Western sources, such as by Bruce Cummings. It is enlightening to read western motivations from an Asian perspective but sometimes I thought his judgements too unqualified. For example, it was not "unthinkable" that Great Britain, in 1945, 'would

ever consider following the mantra of decolonization'. *Au contraire*, it was Labour Party policy. But, given that the UK's military actions in East Asia in the 1940s were so far from its thoughts, Kiyofumi can be forgiven for framing this viewpoint.

A key point, that has rarely been emphasized enough, is the effect on individuals of the precipitously instant jump of Japan's borders from that of an empire to a confined island-state. Part of the Potsdam pill that the Japanese government had to swallow in August 1945 was the countervailing ethnic clearances that were already under way in Europe. The scale of this debacle in terms of millions in forced migrations is addressed by Araragi Shinzo below. But there were also millions who stayed put. How individuals were affected at the cultural level when political and language barriers suddenly jumped over them is beyond the scope of this volume. Kawashima Shin, in "'Deimperialization" in early postwar Japan', finds another focus, examining the adjustments made, or not made, by historians and institutions in the postwar Japan to the new reality. He then navigates through the different ways Taiwanese who found themselves in postwar Japan were categorized. Continuing to use Taiwan as a focus, he examines the attitudes of Japanese historians themselves and argues that, for different reasons, writers on opposite ends of the political spectrum made 'Taiwan: a colony consigned to oblivion'.

Barak Kushner headlines his chapter, 'Japan's Search for postwar legitimacy'. But my reading of his wide-ranging research is that there was not so much a search as an attempt to preserve legitimacy by not looking very hard. It seemed the new borders of Japan formed a wall against knowledge of the state's conduct in the erstwhile colonies. He summarises, 'Unfortunately, the national amnesia about empire in the narrative [of reconstruction], which the war crimes trials uncovered and revealed both to the international community and to Japan itself, demonstrates that this understanding of tragedy was limited and did not include the damage that Japan visited upon the rest of East Asia and the Allies'.

An implied comparison with adjustments in Germany is left to the last chapter of Kushner's and Muminov's book but the essential legal difference in the two defeats is only implied and ought to be stated: the German government was destroyed in 1945 and rebuilt institutionally from the bottom up; the Japanese government had legal continuity of all its institutions and personnel. SCAP's legal and actual position was to direct the defeated Japanese government.

Driven by Allied public opinion, the first major focus of SCAP, was to demilitarize and pursue war criminals.

But Kushner shows that, in the immediate post-defeat era, the Japanese government competed with Allied military authorities to prosecute war criminals. But they had quite different objectives and in particular a different understanding, or rather understandings, of 'responsibility for the war'. Kushner has left the competing narratives around the defences at the Allied trials, much covered by dramatists and their critics, to be examined by Sandra Wilson below.

Kushner has a section on the 'Media and Society' but is hampered, like all researchers of the period, by the paucity of records on the major mass media of the era, radio; and a section with this title might reasonably acknowledge this. Fictional treatments of the period at least allude to the wholesale broadcasting of the proceedings as casting a 'dirty' shadow. But indirectly, the research of Kushner and his co-authors only confirms the transience of any 'democratizing' influence of radio, so my quibble does not affect the main arguments.

Kushner, as an American (I presume) fairly introduces a comparison with failures to come to terms with the aftermath of the American Civil War. This reviewer, as British born, is, by similar reasoning, on thin ice in not making comparisons with a tardiness in addressing the aftermath of the British empire.

In 'The collapse of the Japanese empire and the great migrations', Araragi Shinzo gives us an overview of his research in short survey translated by Sherzod Muminov. He has numbers for each of the migrations in Japan's modern era and, no doubt, reference to his original work would clarify the sources for each number. The numbers are staggering: the estimate is 6.6 million Japanese required to remove back to the home islands, of which 3.67 million were employed by the state, in military or civilian roles. Of agricultural settlers in Manchuria, only about half ever survived to be repatriated. Millions of non-Japanese also had to move. Araragi concludes by saying that 'The human migration caused by Japanese imperialism and its total war have left an enduring legacy of pain and psychological wounds in many countries...', and he makes more than a start in contextualizing these migrations and in considering for each to what extent they were economic, forced or contingent. His willingness to consider Japanese responsibility as a historian is admirable, especially as his survey could have justified a pre-qualifying phrase that migrations can and do happen in the absence of imperialism. He also admirably abstains from any kind of 'not just us' qualification; but British readers should reasonably consider that aspect.

'The campaign for the release of war criminals' in the Japanese media, examined by Sandra Wilson, is likely to

be new information to any postwar Briton without access to Japanese-language media, and so is valuable, and helps the more recent viewer to see that the inflation of a comfort zone in more recent media representations is nothing new.

Wilson says, 'It would have been very difficult to express open sympathy for war criminals between 1945 and 1952 or portray them in a positive light. In 1952 and 1953, on the other hand, at least five popular movies were made portraying the prisoners favourably'. *The Thick-walled Room* (Kobayashi Masaki, 1956), however, portrays Japanese war conduct unfavourably, so I am not sure that it is "evident" that the 3-year delay in its release is lay at the desk of the U.S. government. Kobayashi's film title is correctly transcribed as *Kabe atsuki heya*. However three of the other four titles have errors in transcription. That of Saeki Kiyoshi (not 'Saiki') is *Arashi no naka no haha*, Aoyagi Nobuo's is *Montenrupa no yoru wa fukete*, and Sasaki Keisuke's is *Haha wa sakebi naku*.

Her 'conclusion' goes on to new ground of Allied attitudes to the later abandonment of trials and release in 1958 of the remaining prisoners. This, without instantiation, seems to generalise 'the Allies' in a way that does not accord with my reading of British media or archives.

Sarah Kovner's account of 'Allied POWs in Korea' also uncovers an area not usually heard about by Western readers. Mostly, Kovner narrates events before the surrender. But this allows her to show the weaknesses in the subsequent Allied trials, the lack of proportionality in the incarceration of commandants of prisons relatively well administered, as well as the path not taken in looking at underlying causes of fair or brutal treatments.

Franziska Seraphim looks at 'War criminals' prisons in Asia'. Recent visitors to Tokyo might, like me, be unaware that the mall now developed as 'Sunshine City' is built on the site of the notorious Sugamo prison which, in the postwar era, increasingly concentrated those charged or convicted of war crimes. Seraphim paints a picture 'of Sugamo prison in Tokyo being the only visible reminder of Japan's 'vanished empire'. But Seraphim starts at the Empire's peripheries, relating how those further-flung prisons were reported back to the postwar Japan.

In the rewarding kernel of the book, 'Post-imperial Japan and the Soviet versions of history and justice in East Asia, 1945-1956', Sherzod Muminov has researched the Siberian internment at state and individual level, bringing new sources to our attention. In this chapter, he focuses particularly on the USSR's role in the trials of war-criminals. He also focuses on the likely motives of Stalin in the sudden decision in August 1945 to transport half-

a-million Japanese soldiers across the border and intern them there, for years of labour in trying and often deadly conditions. This he characterizes as a reaction to an abrupt curtailment of 'loss of levers' over Japan itself. Similarly, after failed attempts to bring Japan's bacteriological warfare to the centre of the Tokyo trials, the USSR focussed on trials of its Japanese internees under Soviet internal law. Muminov marshals and summarizes his widespread sources with a care that is difficult to give justice to by any further condensation.

Urs Matthias Zachmann looks at influential thinkers in the field of international law, showing some surprising continuities between thinking before and after 1945. Indeed, even by March 1945 a study of the United Nations had been completed for an arm of the Foreign Ministry.

Kanda Yutaka looks at the particular case of Shiina Etsusaburo following the opening of his diaries in 2012. Linked to several postwar prime ministers, he was 'the closest of Kishi's aides' after the war, having acted for him in Manchukuo previously. But Kanda shows that, although Shiina kept his asianist mindset after the war, his position continued to evolve, persuaded by the facts of Japan's economic rise. Shiina eventually proved an able supporter of Ikeda's economy-first policies.

Park Jung Jin examines the history of North Korea, as it affected the repatriation of both Japanese left behind in 1945 and 1948, as well as those Koreans in Japan who identified with the Communist regime. Just as in other East Asian countries, there was a need and desire to keep Japanese technicians after Japan's abrupt collapse. Park takes us through the frequent changes of policy both as regard individuals and groups as well as relations with Japan.

Erik Esselstrom recounts the story of the visit of Chinese Health minister Li Dequan in 1954 from Beijing. Rather over-shadowed since, the visit of the PRC's Minister of Public Health was anything but obscure at the time with a media frenzy reporting this visit at the height of the Cold War. One needs to be reminded that as late as this, the Chinese government had non-Communists heading ministries. Li brought the long-awaited list of remaining Japanese detainees in the PRC, and these men soon started returning to their families who had been in a limbo of bereavement. But the reactions to Li highlighted the complete array of Japanese political viewpoints at this time, possibly also coloured by her gender.

Sato Takumi selects the general-interest magazine Sekai as 'a barometer of postwar thought'. Launched by the relatively high-brow publishing house, Iwanami, the magazine reflected how pacifist viewpoints held the mainstream throughout the post-war period.

Shirato Ken'ichiro finds the sinews connecting another limb of Japan's empire to its postwar through the broadcasting industry. He delves into the history of the vertically integrated Manchurian Telegraph and Telephone Company. This powerful organisation also managed broadcasting, unlike in other colonies, where radio was under the control of NHK. Probably the most important factor in the development of MTTC was that it did not have a monopoly of the airwaves on the Chinese mainland and had to reach out to appeal to its audience. Entertainment programmes flourished, particularly in Chinese, often using the voice of the singer Li Xianglan (to use one of Yamaguchi's many names). One distinctive characteristic of Manchukuo broadcasting, which it shared only with Taiwan, was paid advertising and sponsored programmes. Although this disappeared at the apex of spiritist polity, it was redeployed in Japanese postwar commercial broadcasting often by personnel with continuity of experience.

Michael Baskett sheds light on 'Japanese Cold war film exchange with China'. From the Japanese side this topic has historically, if considered at all, been considered an unbreached wall. This chapter brings back into the view the delegation to China, led by the well-known film director Kinoshita Keisuke. The reactions of both sides are tantalising but Baskett also shows that competition for influence in Asian markets was mediated through festivals that had strong functional lines back to the colonial era.

The final chapter by Kerstin von Lingen briefly surveys how Germany has come to terms with Nazi war deeds from 1945 to 2015. Lingen shows that it has not been a straight inexorable line but demonstrates that waves of trials have been both the result and cause of political movements. As early as 1958, 'a coordinating legal body was established to systematically investigate deeds in the former Nazi empire that stretched far beyond the postwar borders of the Federal Republic'. A new wave of trials started as late as 1999. Lingen states, 'These moves certainly help to distinguish Germany from Japan, where no equivalent proceedings at the behest of the government have ever taken place'. The new trials 'sharpened the reputation of the Federal republic as a credible guardian of the law and to separate the current government morally from previous regimes'.

I would only add that, as the trials in Germany have dried up with the deaths of the remaining suspects, the divergence in the two nations' regard of history has only widened. I have seen nothing to compare with the National Socialist Documentation centres which have been opened in major German cities. §

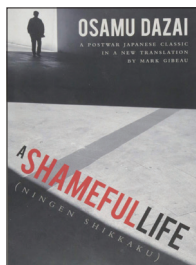
A Shameful Life

by Dazai Osamu

Stone Bridge Press (2018)

ISBN-13: 978-1611720440

Review by George Mullins



Ningen Shikkaku (translated as 'A Shameful Life') still persists as one of the most widely read and critically acclaimed novels in Japan. *Ningen Shikkaku* has been previously translated into English by Donald Keene (under the title of *No Longer Human*), but Mark Gibeau's latest translation certainly provides a refreshing and interesting reconstruction of this Japanese classic. The short novella follows the inner confessions of an outwardly jovial, but deeply troubled protagonist. Readers are transported behind the façade of young Oba Yozo, an alcoholic Tokyoite that fails to meaningfully relate to the modernising world surrounding him. The self-destructive behaviour of the protagonist seems to reflect writer Dazai Osamu own tormented world in this deeply confessional novel.

The book takes the form of a Japanese 'I-novel', with a little plot or direction but a great emphasis on the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist. The book is comprised of three journals which lay bare the tragic tale of Oba Yozo's life. The journals acts as a first-person account of the downward spiral of the protagonist. Each journal is increasingly more depressing and weighted than the last, as Yozo struggles to find his place within the alien world that surrounds him. The shortness of the novel mirrors the fast paced destructiveness of Yozo's own life. Through the directness of the journal accounts, we are placed in a privy position to witness the emotional turmoil of this shameful life. Despite being a shorter book, it possesses a high concentration of tragedy and emotional gravitas.

To begin with, a young Yozo is afraid of human interaction and cannot comprehend the social world around him. He masks his insecurities by developing a jovial demeanor and becomes the entertaining class clown to all his peers. His feigned positive attitude, however, results in feelings of guilt over a lack of truthfulness to those around him. He becomes tormented by the mask that he conceals his true emotions. As he grows up, Yozo moves from his family home in rural Northern Japan to pursue a career as an artist in Tokyo. He is attracted to the debauchery of the Tokyo lifestyle and becomes an alcoholic. Alcohol becomes a way of nulling his depressive thoughts and a method of escape from his inner self. His relationships with women are strong and intense: he has many sexual encounters with prostitutes

and develops deep connections to many women. But ultimately his self-destructive tendencies mean his life is doomed to fail. He tragically attempts a double suicide, which fails and leaves his delicate life in shatters. He also joins an underground Marxist group and develops a morphine dependency. His destructiveness leads him down a narrow path, and he ultimately squanders his family wealth and is left in a miserable, isolated position. The novel bleakly concludes with Yozo's admission to a mental hospital at the early age of 27. The charisma and artistic potential of the young man is ultimately wasted. What is left is the depressing picture of the shell of the man that was once Oba Yozo.

The parallels between Yozo and Dazai himself cannot be ignored. Dazai's own life was also one of tragedy and exhausting emotional turmoil. He himself struggled with identity and depression, and he too developed intense relationships with troubled women. Through morphine addictions and alcoholism, he followed the same path to hell as Yozo. Still in his 30s, Dazai and his lover, Torie Yamazakai, tragically committed suicide together. This came only shortly after the release of his masterful work, *A Shameful Life*. It is therefore possible to see this novel as a quasi-auto-biography: Dazai was spilling out his own misanthropic and bleak world views into the emotionally dense novel. This certainly aids to the powerfulness and tragedy of this masterful work.

The novel manages to firmly place its context in a changing, post-Meiji period, Japan. The glitz and glamour of modern life is undercut with the sinfulness and anonymity of Tokyo's dark underworld. One can't help but seeing this contrast reflected within Yozo's very being. The positive outward persona of Yozo, contrasted with the inner turmoil festering within, is a powerful dichotomy. Surely writers such as Mishima, in *Confessions of a Mask*, took influence from this bleak portrayal of the duality of Japanese social life. Massive changes may have led to increased modernisation and a more European way of life, but what impact did this have on Japanese culture and people's identities? Dazai, along with other influential Japanese writers such as Kawabata and Tanizaki, attempts to confront this issue. However, *A Shameful Life* is still relevant beyond its contextual setting of modernising Japan. The theme of the individual struggling to survive in wider society is certainly a reoccurring phenomena, both spatially and temporally, and therefore this novel will still hold relevance for contemporary audiences. This explains why it has been widely adapted in anime and live-action form in Japan, and why the dark introspective writer still has a large following to this day.

As the author notes in a brief conclusionary statement, audiences may wonder why Dazai's work has been chosen to be re-translated in the 21st century. Especially considering that an already fantastic translation of *Ningen Shikkaku*, provided by Japanologist Donald Keene, exists. Aside from wanting to bring renewed interest in Dazai's penmanship, Gibeau stresses the differences between English and Japanese, and the large effect the translator's interpretation plays in the re-construction of a Japanese book. Each translator of Dazai's work will inevitably strive to illuminate different themes and interpretations of the book. Compared to

Keene's famous translation there are differences: Gibeau attempts to emphasise the voice of the protagonist Yojo, resulting in powerful feelings of intimacy and directness. Therefore, I believe Gibeau's translation is a welcome edition and supplies readers with a unique take on Dazai's compelling novel. I share Gibeau sentiments, believing that *A Shameful Life* is an important novel, written with an abundance of emotion and craftsmanship. 70 years on, Gibeau's translation shows that this captivating novel is still as relevant and powerful as it was on the day of its initial release. §

The Beast Player

by Uehashi Nahoko
translated by Cathy Hirano

Pushkin Press (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1782691679

Review by Harry Martin



The Beast Player is the long-awaited English translation of the famous *Kemono no Soja* series by renowned fantasy writer Uehashi Nahoko.

Already widely popular in its native Japan, the story has been adapted into a successful anime and manga series as well as a multi-series publication. Largely unknown in the international market, this new offering from Pushkin Press brings a highly original, fantastical newcomer into the global fantasy space, which will likely satisfy the most ardent fans of the genre.

Set in a fantasy world born entirely of the author's imagination, the novel follows the story of Elin, a young girl born into a family of Toda stewards, Todas being the revered serpent-like dragon creatures that serve to protect the Lyoza kingdom. Setting the scene with immediate effect, Uehashi depicts a landscape of small rural villages amongst snow-capped mountain ranges, lush forests and vast plains. Elin comes from an insular world focused solely on the preservation and care of these mythical beasts but possesses an innate sensitivity and bond that the others cannot feel.

Elin's mother is a beast doctor and cares for the most highly regarded of the Toda stock. Following a disastrous and unexplained series of deaths among the prized beasts, her mother is held accountable and sentenced to death, thus setting the scene for the coming story.

The novel follows Elin's journey from abandoned orphan to rural apprentice and her later move into a

prestigious sanctuary for Royal Beasts, the airborne, wolf-like creatures that guard the realm's royal family. Here she discovers her unique talent for animal care and an innate ability to connect with the beasts outside the strict and often harsh rules governing the "traditional" methods of rearing. Charged with the responsibility of nursing an infant beast back to health, Elin soon finds that she is able to establish a never-before-seen connection with the animal, setting her apart from her peers at the school and putting her in often precarious and complicated dilemmas which test her loyalty, morality and honesty.

Uehashi projects immense creativity and vision, creating a fantasy world of epic proportions. She incorporates culture, history and ecology so authentically that the story feels like a tangible reality for the reader. The depth and definition of her character creation makes the immense cast far more manageable, with every individual helping to drive the story forward.

Elin's character is perhaps the most profound, with her humanity and unique ability to communicate with the animals in a way that the other professional carers cannot fully understand leading to suspicion, competition and circumstances in which her innocence and purity are at risk of being exploited by the more sinister, self-gratifying motives of the other characters. Aside from the dramatic fantasy setting, this is fundamentally a coming-of-age story, following Elin's adventure from bleak beginnings to grand and unique achievement.

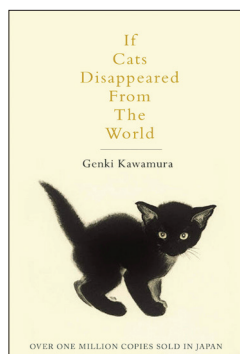
This literary contribution from Pushkin Press is another wonderful piece of Japanese literature, artfully translated by Cathy Hirano, exposing another talented and hugely popular author to a much wider, international readership. §

If Cats Disappeared From The World

by Kawamura Genki
translated by Eric Selland

Picador (2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1509889174

Review by Morgane Chinal-Dargent



Kawamura Genki is not your typical contemporary Japanese writer: he is a phenomenon. At not even 40, this man of many talents has already demonstrated his genius by writing several novels, essays and producing internationally acclaimed films such as *Your Name* (*Kimi No Na Wa*, Shinkai Makoto, 2016) or *The Boy and the Beast* (*Bakemono No Ko*, Hosoda Mamoru, 2015). More impressively, his debut novel *If Cats Disappeared From The World* published in 2012 has sold more than a million copies in Japan and been translated in several languages which makes it newly available in the UK and all over the world.

In *If Cats Disappeared From The World*, Kawamura tells the story of a postman in his thirties who discovers that his days are numbered because of a brain tumour which will cause his imminent death. Upon returning home from his doctor's appointment, our narrator finds the devil sitting on his couch in the form of his doppelgänger dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts. This strange character will propose to him a simple trade-off: for each item that the young postman would be willing to make disappear from the world, he will gain one extra day of life. While the protagonist agrees to separate from objects such as clocks or movies, he finds himself truly conflicted when the devil decides to trade his life against the existence of cats. Our narrator has led a quite lonely life since his mother's death as he lives estranged from his father and broke up with his girlfriend many years ago. Consequently, Cabbage, his cat, is the only living soul he shares his life with. From there, the young man begins to truly question his existence and the importance of the objects and customs that humankind created and takes us in his thoughtful questionings.

Behind this simple plot, this 200 pages long novel reveals a deep reflexion on life and shares an important message: the things we own sadly end up owning us. Through the eyes of a young man on the brink of death, Kawamura beautifies the meaning of life and its true purpose which is to be lived to its fullest. Throughout the week during which the story is set, the author manages to question the alienation of our modern societies and the central place that consumption took in our

lives over the will to truly experience things. When the young protagonist takes the decision to rid the world from phones, Kawamura engages a real reflexion on the place that technology took in our busy lives, a discourse even more relevant in modern Japan which is widely acknowledged as the cradle of high-tech.

Mobile phones have been around for only about twenty years, but in just that short time they've managed to take complete control over us. In just twenty short years something that we don't really need has come to rule our lives, making us believe that we can't do without it. When human beings invented the mobile phone, they also invented the anxiety of not having one. (Kawamura, 2012, 42)

This quote actually provokes the reader in questioning to which other items of our lives this could apply. The novel also explores the themes of family and love. For a young man who has to accept the fatality of his existence, the place of meaningful relationships and the regrets that arise from not cultivating it offers to the reader the opportunity to reevaluate their own lives. In other words, Kawamura tells a story of love and loss which makes the reader realise the incomparable beauty of life by confronting us to the inevitability of death.

Regarding Kawamura's stylistic approach, the novel shares a lot of its aspects with the legacy implemented by major contemporary Japanese writers. The constant oscillation between trivial daily scenes mixed with outbursts of surrealism surely reminds of Murakami Haruki's trademark when the omnipresence of cats evokes the universe of Hiraide Takashi. Moreover, the recurrence of cultural references from music to films contributes to immerse the reader into the universe of modern Japan. Eventually, Kawamura decluttered minimalistic writing style still manages to find a unique way to blend humour and philosophical reflexions which result in a poetic simplicity that the following quote appropriately exemplifies:

Love has to end. That's all. And even though everyone knows it they still fall in love. I guess it's the same with life. We all know it has to end someday, but even so we act as if we're going to live forever. Like love, life is beautiful because it has to end. (Kawamura, 2012, 72)

Eric Selland's work should also be acknowledged for managing to convey the subtleties of such style in his English translation. In the end, *If Cats Disappeared From The World's* tremendous success (the book was already adapted in a movie produced yet again by Kawamura himself) surely finds its roots in the truly universal

message it shares with the world. The novel is a smart yet deep reflection over life, love and the capacity to let go of what is not truly necessary to give meaning to

our existences. *If Cats Disappeared From The World* is a beautiful story that each of us should read in order to be reminded of the significance and true value of life. §

Flight Paths

written by Glen Neath

co-directed by Maria Oshodi & Kumiko Mendl

Review by Susan Meehan

Flight Paths brings together two pioneering theatre companies, Extant and Yellow Earth Theatre. Extant, the leading performing arts company and charity in the UK managed for and by visually impaired professional arts practitioners, was founded in 1997 by Artistic Director Maria Oshodi. Yellow Earth Theatre is a British East Asian (BEA) touring theatre company led by Artistic Director Kumiko Mendl and was formed in 1995 by five British East Asian (BEA) actors: Kwong Loke, Kumiko Mendl, Veronica Needa, David KS Tse and Tom Wu.

Amelia and Sarah step onto the set, a flight departure lounge. Have they arrived from Japan? They seem to know a lot about Japan and Sarah can speak some Japanese. They walk around purposefully with white canes and describe the space to each other. They are partially sighted and, it turns out, enviably supple. They are also incredibly down to earth, opinionated and funny. Aerial silks dangle from the ceiling. Each silk consists of two lengths of fabric rigged from the ceiling.

Through their story-telling, Amelia and Sarah inhabit the realm of the *goze*, blind female shamisen players who would travel around medieval Japan playing music and retelling epic tales. They bring to life the *Tale of the Heike*, an account of the 12th century struggle between the Heike and Genji families for control of Japan. The two women also weave in the story of Hoichi, a blind *biwa* or lute player whose ears were ripped off, as retold by Lafcadio Hearn, another restless traveller of Greek and Irish heritage who ended up in Japan in the late 19th century.

Amelia and Sarah accompany their story-telling with acrobatics, rather than with shamisen music or singing. They deftly climb up the aerial silks, resembling Cossack dancers as they pull up their knees to gain height. They recount their personal stories as well as those of Takashi and Victoria, blind artists from Japan and Nigeria. Takashi is a UK-based Japanese viola player. When he arrived in England his English was very limited, but he has forged a career as a free-lance viola player. His presence is captivating even though he is not physically on stage but present via film and



a loud speaker disguised in a water bottle carried around and interacted with by the actors. Like Takashi, Victoria is physically absent. We hear her tucking into cake and slurping tea via a loud speaker also contained in another large water bottle. She is a deep thinker like Takashi, but more expressive – as he would be the first to acknowledge. She considers herself to be six years old – the last age at which she could see. She sings beautifully.

Sarah and Amelia develop a move called the Stratford – this is Stratford Circus Theatre after all and Amelia and Sarah are attentive performers. Like the *goze*, Amelia and Sarah name their art after the places to which they travel and like the *goze*, Sarah learns her art on the silk from Amelia through repetition and muscle memory. The fall is fast and disorientating for the performers and kept me, a mere observer, on the edge of my seat.

We suddenly hear the clash of metal and samurai. We have been thrust into Lafcadio Hearn's magical story. A samurai has come to take Hoichi to play for his master. The sea rages and the ghostly fires of the dead Heike burn all around him. Sarah and Amelia pull themselves up on the silks, tip themselves upside down, do the splits, pull off a sideways pose, a plank, a figurehead and interpret the tearing off of Hoichi's ears. The repertoire is fast and breath-taking too. A series of shamisen jingles can be heard in the background.

Amelia and Sarah are called to board the airplane. They pick up their belongings and are off – to entertain others I hope. They have bags of energy and lots of travelling, living and sharing of stories to fulfil! Extant and Yellow Earth Theatre have pulled off an ambitious feat, marrying acrobatics, partially sighted performers and Japanese culture. §