Return to Japan

After journeying to a fantasized or praised West, can the Japanese do anything but physically and mentally return to a Japan of nostalgia, and remain there forever? Such is the fascinating hypothesis examined in a series of papers collected under the title Return to Japan from ‘Pilgrimage’ to the West.

By Gérard Siery

Return to Japan from ‘Pilgrimage’ to the West is based on the argument, described on the back cover, that a number of modern and contemporary Japanese writers, critics, and intellectuals ‘travelled to the West in praise of Western civilization only to revert to their conception of “true” Japanese spirit, cultural, and aesthetic values’. It is composed of two main sections. The first is subdivided into two parts called ‘Prototypes’ and ‘Variations’ – subtitles that are nowhere justified.

The second section consists of seventeen case studies extending from the Meiji era to the Heisei era. In the keynote, Ian Reader, describes the process of pilgrimage as a looping pattern that could be used to account for the return to a Japan of nostalgia after the journey to a fantasized West. The journey to a sacred place or a fantasized West owes its origin to a journey from a Japan of reality. As pilgrimages are mental and symbolic constructs, they need not be real or physical. The return to the departing point may give the pilgrim the status or position he was dreaming of. It can also be a ‘source of conflicting paradigms with the images of Japan and Japanese identity’ (p. 15). It then deals with the first pilgrim to imag e Western thought, and who was a writer, like it to be or it is used to be: hence the opposition between the West and Japan, modern Japan and the Japanese past.

Hirakawa Sukehito begins with Lafcadio Hearn’s short story, A Consensua, or as an illustration for the looping pattern of his Japanism. Shigemi Nagawa asserts that Yokumitsu Riichi’s journey to Europe drove him to recognize the ‘uniqueness of the Japanese race and that Nihon kaido, a “conceptual product of modernity”, crystallized into ‘overcoming the modernity’ (p. 18). According to Hae- Kyung Sung, Okakura Tenshin never ceased to relate a civilization with the West, but came to defend Asian values, as embodied by Japan, against the selfishness of the West. Kinya Tsuruta demonstrates that Tanizaki Junichirō fantasized about a West he never actually visited, adapted it to his purposes, and shifted to the celebration of Japanese values and uses of the Koreans. He never eliminated the presence of foreigners, however, and managed to create proper and concrete figures of Westerners. Yoichi Nagashima retraces how Mori Ougi, a translator of Western works who, failing to adapt the Western novels to Japanese values, shifted to a new type of historical writing, called shiden, that was always devoid of Western devices.

Stephen A. Owen presents a survey that Kunikida Doppo, who never jour- neyed to the West, nevertheless, rediscovered the Japanese jiritsu through the works of Shusui Kusui (1759), and various Chinese works. Katsuya Sugawara examines how Nagai Kafū’s unfinished work of Japan and America and France helped him criticize the modern society of the Meiji era and revert to the artistic values of the deceiving shakuhachi. Inagata Shigemitsu discusses the kaidō pattern. Kinoshita Mokutaro criticized the Japanese craze for fashion; he contributed to the hybridization of Japan- ese culture, rehabilitated the work of Kobayashi Kiyochika through Impressio, and rediscovered Tokugawa Japan by returning to the ‘Japanism’ research that was put into a national discourses in important works. Shigemi Nakata underlines that ‘overcoming the relationship of identity and national cultures’ (Yokumitsu, Kobayashi) or Japanese nationalism can hardly be maintained.

In his concluding remarks, Hirakawa Sukehito insists upon the fact that the multi-layered phenomena of Japanism, however pathologized, continued to be spoken in Japan, remains to be written in Japan as a ‘truly comprehensive chapter of modern Japanese literary histori- y’ (p. 149). Unfortunately, he fails to provide the reader with a proper assessment of this hypothesis, except for the sad announcement that ‘Many of us aged members have already returned to Japan, if not emotionally at least in our food preferences’ (p. 150).

Whatever the defects of the book, it is full of insights about such problems as the hybridization of cultures or the Japanese psychosomatic reaction to the West, and is worth reading.


Dr Gérard Siery is a senior lecturer in compar- ative literature at the University Paul Valéry of Montpellier, France. He completed a PhD thesis on Orientalist writings in Japan from 1855 to 1905, wrote several articles on the relationship of identity and national images in literary texts, and translated three Garshen's Koshoku sekai shi and Nani- shoku okagami (2000-2001) gerald.siery@univ-montp3.fr

Gambling with Virtue

How has the notion of self changed in Japan over the last three decades of the twentieth century? Apart from this important question, Nancy Rosenberger examines the hybrid versions of personhood that three generations of Japanese women have created since the 1970s.

By Sabine Frühstück

There are many likeable aspects in Gambling with Virtue and, as any good book does, it opens up a number of avenues for further research. A particular strength of the book is the great variety among the women who speak from these pages. Rosenberger begins with a description of the lives of Donburi, a beautiful middle-aged woman at a rural high school during the 1970s. In part 2 she visits urban and rural housewives, urban working class women, and rural working class women with a high level of education, women with full-time and part-time jobs, as well as married and single women during the 1980s. In part 3 she returns primarily to housewives and female teachers at schools that were not.

Each part of Rosenberger’s book begins with an introduction to the main elements of ‘public discourses’ that serve as a background to the conversations and observations that she reports. By way of description and discussion this book is structured. This structure is rather ineffective, however, as it sets up an artificial gap between a mostly anonymous, monolithic, and presumably male world of ‘public discourse’ and the women’s diverse decisions, achievements, frustrations, and views. Rosenberger argues in her introduction that people’s ideas and practices are not simply the sum of their lives by ideas and actions that come from families, schools, workplaces, media, state policies, national ideologies, and the global marketplace. For the women whose voices the reader gets to hear, it is not as passive vic- tims of ‘public discourse’, then at least as merely reacting to and somehow dealing with what has been created by someone else. The processes by which women contribute to the national discourses in important ways, as politicians, journalists, teachers, and other important roles, are explored.

If nothing else, the great number of books by women for women pub- lished in Japan – from semi-academ- ic publications to advice books by (in some cases prominent feminists) and their opponents within and outside of the academy – testifies to the fact that Japanese women have been involved in (and ultimately also responsible for) the creation of the discourse on social expectations con- cerning women. I do not believe that the complexity of these processes should be sacrificed for the sake of simplicity and accessibility. It is certainly safe to assume that women’s lives in Japan have changed quite a bit since the 1970s and the 1990s, and the differences in atti- tudes among the different women that Rosenberger discusses are quite striking. When she sets out to show these changes, however, I sometimes wondered whether individual differ- ences were not mistaken for histori- cal ones. It was not always clear to me why the 1990s would have been any more significant than the 1980s or 1970s in terms of the difference that women’s personal choices were making. At least throughout the modern period anxi- eties about the danger that independ- ent and individualist women may pose to social order and stability have been evaluated largely. This has been the case even though the industrialization of which they could find no tangible place (Kunikida Doppo); a step in a quest that may extend far beyond Europe (Okakura, Endō); a cultural body taken for granted and not to be dissociated from a Japanese culture; or an option to be chosen, dropped, and chosen again (Murakami). In fact, some of the case studies clearly show that a fantasized West or an East of nostalgia can hardly be maintained.

In his concluding remarks, Hirakawa Sukehito insists upon the fact that the multi-layered phenomena of Japanism, however pathological, continued to be spoken in Japan, remains to be written in Japan as a ‘truly comprehensive chapter of modern Japanese literary histori- y’ (p. 149). Unfortunately, he fails to provide the reader with a proper assessment of this hypothesis, except for the sad announcement that ‘Many of us aged members have already returned to Japan, if not emotionally at least in our food preferences’ (p. 150).

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