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*Stories of the
"Floating World"
of postwar Japan*

*Selected
and
edited by
Jay Gluck*



Ukiyo

浮世

*Stories of the "Floating World"
of postwar Japan*

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TRANSLATIONS BY JAY GLUCK IN COLLABORATION WITH:
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To
PAUL YOSHIRO SAEKI, O.B.E.
(1869-1966)
teacher and friend

*originally on his 92nd birthday
marking 75 years of "interpretation"*

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TRANSLATIONS:

JAY GLUCK: *Captured by Americans.*

GRACE SUZUKI and JAY GLUCK: *Revenge, Love in the Annam Jungle, Black Out, Black Market Blues, Please Not a Word To Anybody, Ups and Downs, The Only One, Korea Through Japanese Eyes, Lady Tarzan of Korea, Rice Weevils, Sazanka, The Communist, One World.*

MOMOI MAKOTO and JAY GLUCK: *The Admiral That Davy Jones Didn't Want, These Ten Years, The Affair of the Arabesque Inlay.*

SAKAGUCHI YUKIKO and JAY GLUCK: *Banshu Plain.*

HASHIZUME SUMIKO: *A Crane That Cannot Come Back.*

KIMURA MICHIKO and GENEVIEVE CAULFIELD: *Echoes From a Mountain School.*

AKIYAMA ISA (author): *Homecoming 1945.*

YAMAMOTO TOMOMI (author): *Damot—Homeward Bound.*

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INTRODUCTION



AT THE COURT of an emperor (he lived it matters not when) there was, among the many gentle arts, one which though not of very high rank was favored far beyond all the rest; as a result, the great looked with scorn and hatred upon the upstart. Thus, preponderant though it was, it was soon worn out with petty vexation, fell into a decline, and grew melancholy and retiring.

The Occidental newly arriving in Japan will often feign a Japaneseness by performing tea ceremony using powdered coffee, or sleeping on the floor alongside a perfectly good bed, or decking himself out in an ill-fitting kimono, secondhand and at least a decade out of style. Not wishing to go against such time-hallowed tradition, I open my maiden anthology with a paraphrase of the opening lines of what is probably the world's first novel, and certainly the greatest classic of Japanese literature, *The Tale of Genji* (11th century). Such invocation of an older and greater work was a favorite Japanese literary technique, although it is now even more out of fashion than the kimonos my tourist friends take home; however, this in no way detracts from their beauty or their practicality, or from the fact that novelist Lady Murasaki, by means of this technique, presents a concise history of a thousand years of Japanese fiction.

The Japanese term *sho-sestu* is usually translated as "novel"—however, its literal meaning is "small view," implying a narration of a life, or an account of living, which will take less time to read than to live through, and which might run, as *Genji*, some three-

quarters of a million words (in English translation¹) or, as some in this selection, a few hundred. The English term "novel" implies, according to Webster, "a compact plot and a point." The Japanese *sho-setsu* may very well have this, but it more than likely will not. The common Occidental understanding of the Oriental attitude that this phenomenal existence called life has no logical plot, and possibly no point to it either, should make further explanation unnecessary—just as the fact that some stories *do* have a plot, even a compact one, and do make or come to or have a point, should show that this Oriental attitude is not so simply stated and perhaps not so universally accepted. *Sho-setsu*, then, encompasses the whole of prose fiction. We should not expect it to conform to our standards or to our ideas or definitions. It is compartmented, perhaps more so than our own, but not always in the way ours is. This should only point out to us the utter arbitrariness of any such divisions.

The "gentle arts" are at least as numerous and probably more varied in Japan as anywhere else, and among them fiction has been "not of very high rank." Certainly that of highest rank has been the dance. It is an essential element in all of the Japanese performing arts, from pure dance, both sacred and at the other extreme (though "sacred" in use) very profane, through the various forms of dance-drama, which also run the gamut from sacred to most profane; the combat dances, from spectator sports like sumo-wrestling (whose performers are called literally wrestle-dancers), to the dance callisthenics of the martial arts of judo, karate, and various armament drills; the etiquette dances which ritualize the making and serving of tea, arranging of flowers, the reception at court or in a private home, the offerings to deity, the geisha's serving her client, the artist's warming-up rituals, and even that choreography of the artist's brush known as calligraphy. Like the plastic arts, the graphic arts have, in Japan as elsewhere, enjoyed "high rank" and imperial and noble patronage.

In literature Japan has differed little from other cultures in bestowing high rank on poetry and dialectics, the oldest records being a sanctified official history and an anthology of the poetry of emperors, nobles, and commoners. Both types were compiled by imperial command.

¹ The first translation by Arthur Waley, 1925-33; a more concise, less Victorian, version by Edward Seidenstocker in 1976 postdates this essay.

In *The Tale of Genji* the hero discusses with the heroine the romances and popular literature. (Popular, that is, with those who could read—and though limited, a larger group than 11th century Europe presented). He questions whether these “are good things for a young girl to read;” he questions their relation to life—or the good life. This discussion indicates that these romances and the diaries, which we might term confession stories, were “looked upon with scorn” and read in the privacy of the bedroom—but “favored far beyond all the rest” of the literary and art forms in being so widely read and appreciated. Little of contemporary poetry and certainly none of the religious or pseudo-religious and statist dialectics ever enjoyed such popularity.

Prose fiction, then, enjoys a world-wide acceptance as being that which one takes to bed to read for other than its purely soporific qualities. Persians and Indians give equal recognition to their long poems, novels in rhyme; but Japanese literature has none. Even twelve centuries ago when Japanese tastes in poetry were broader and poems were of greater stylistic variety and length, a few minutes was enough to read one through. Perhaps the language is too staccato in structure; a long poem might rattle its characters and readers apart; or perhaps the same quality makes much of the prose poetic enough. A European can take his playwrights to bed with him, but most of the best Japanese theatrical literature is better not separated from its spectacle and dance and cacophonous instrumental accompaniment. Christian or Jew might take his Scripture to bed; the Japanese has spared himself the sanctification of his best old literature. But lives there a literate anywhere who does not take a novel of romance or adventure into his most private apartment?

The Japanese write in a script which is a mixture of the Chinese ideographs² and their own syllabary, the former used singly or in combination for the root of a word, with the latter indicating verb ending, adjectival or adverbial suffixes, and the like. Thus the verb “eat” might be written with character “X,” so that “eaten” would be X-en, “eating” would be X-ing. To complicate matters, X alone might

² Simplest being barely stick-figure pictographs evolved from pictures, like a two-legged figure for “man,” with his arms outstretched top mean “big” while abstract ideas—thus “ideograph”—are expressed in combinations, like the related series of one woman seated under a roof to mean “safe”, with three under same roof for “noise” and two of course mean “trouble”.

be read as eat, ate, food, cuisine, solely depending upon context; each ideograph having at least two ways to read it, one Japanese and one distorted Chinese, and often four or five (for Chinese of different eras when various usages of the term were imported—Chinese has but one reading of any ideograph). There are about 45,000 ideographs, but modern Japanese use but a fraction of these. Newspapers and popular magazines limit themselves to fewer than 2,000, expressing more complicated words in the phonetic syllabary. Foreign loan words³, of which English is said to have provided some 7,000⁴, mostly technical, are almost always written in the syllabary. Again, there are two dissimilar syllabaries, with thus two symbols for each syllable: thus a-i-u-e-o, ka-ki-ku-ke-ko, etc., for other consonant-vowel syllables. One of these, *katakana*, is a square-shaped series used today mostly for foreign words as we use italics, or on printed signs much as we would use a square, easy-to-read, Roman lettering. The other, *hiragana*, is a lovely flowing style, preferred by Lady Murasaki and used today for the root endings and native words not written in ideographs. And prior to World War II these two usages were reversed. As complicated as this sounds, it is a generalization and simplification of the actual state of affairs. Even the syllabary has odd readings and exceptions to its rules almost as maddening as English spelling.

The Chinese have been writing in some form for over 4,000 years. The script was developed to about what it is today perhaps 800 years before Christ. Confucius and Lao-Tse used it over 2,500 years ago. This script was introduced into Japan by hired Korean scribes perhaps a few centuries after Christ, but Japanese didn't really catch on to its concept until about the middle of the sixth century AD. And then, as they have done so many times, they exploded into action. The emperor ordered oral legends and annals of the Imperial clan, along with some of those of others which did

³ Early in the period of modernization in the late 1800s, both Chinese and Japanese adapted obsolete ideographs to new meanings, thus an old philosophical word "*den*" for a type of mystic dragon power, became the root term for the equally inexplicable "electric—" and *den* plus *wa*, talk, is "telephone". In 1952 when television was introduced there were long and heated debates about what to call it, and academicians favored *den-ga* or *den-ei*, variants on "electric pictures." But they took so long that the public came to use the English word and unable to pronounce either 'l' or 'v' came up with *terebijon*, shortened soon to *terebi* both written in *katakana* as foreign words.

⁴ In 1963, perhaps double by 1993, though in the meantime many faddish colloquialisms have also faded.

not conflict too much, to be recorded. Under aegis of Regent-Prince Shotoku, scribes wrote down recitations of tribal memorizers to compose official histories: *Tennoki* (Emperors' Annals) and *Kokki* (National Annals) 620, later maliciously burned [though questionable remnant called *Kujiki* has attracted attention from late 1980s] then recreated from reciters as *Kojiki* (Ancient Annals) 712, and *Nihon Shoki* (Nippon Chronicle) 720, both available in English.

But the Japanese and Chinese languages bear no relation to each other and it was found to be easier to write in Chinese than to attempt to adapt to the highly declined polysyllabic spoken Japanese language the Chinese script evolved for a monosyllabic tongue. An anthology of some 4,500 Japanese poems by 450 different poets, *Manyōshū*, or Myriad Leaves, was compiled and recorded about 760 AD. (A selection of 1,000 were superbly translated and published in Tokyo in 1940 and scholar-poet Yasuda Ken has published other excellent samplings since the Pacific War). *Manyōshū* poems use the sound values of Chinese ideographs to record the sounds of Japanese words, in effect an intricate rebus writing. Imagine an Englishman writing in pictures using fractured French pronunciation: draw an eye, French *oeil*, and here indicating the English word "we," or two eyes, *yeux*, for "you."

Soon two syllabaries were developed by abbreviating certain ideographs beyond recognition and using them to indicate sounds only (much as our own alphabet evolved, "A" being an abbreviated picture of an ox, called in Semitic tongues *Aleph*, etc.). Chinese loan words came into the language along with the writing system, as well as an alternate Chinese way of pronouncing each ideograph. They were used grammatically as Japanese, with verb endings, in Japanese word order, and often with somewhat changed meaning. The script developed a great mystique and few could master it—which pleased the ruling elite. But practical women of the educated class simplified matters, writing in the everyday speech and using the simpler sound characters, or *hiragana* syllabary, almost exclusively. Personal diaries were kept in this way, romantic tales were jotted down, and the literature of fiction was born.

Most early novelists and romantic diarists were women of the educated court class, of whom the greatest was, of course, Murasaki Shikibu, Lady Purple, authoress of *The Tale of Genji*. The 13th to 17th centuries were marked by Mongol invasions and internal wars to which vassal lords brought combat artists and war correspon-

dents to record their valor for posterity and to document their claims for expenses and in event of victory a share of the spoils from their liege lords. A parallel development was the war tale, which became more fictitious as time went on. *The Heike Story* is a modern chop-suey version of one of the greatest of these, and is available in English. The old diary styles continued, now written by men, often sage recluses, as *Hojoki* (Jottings from My Ten-foot-square Hut), of about 1212 AD, and *Tsurezuregusa* (Harvest of Leisure), about 1330—both available in English paperback. At this time noh-drama developed from old folk plays, *kagura* (literally "gods'-entertainment") and Buddhist miracle plays interpreted in Zen style. The best are by a father and son, Kannami and Zeami (active 1370 through 1443). From these, readapted for a merchant and plebeian audience and livened up in a snappy review style, evolved kabuki plays of the 17th and later centuries.

Japan closed herself off from the world in 1637. During the following period the flamboyant kabuki developed (originated as a female dance-review but soon limited to male actors as an anti-prostitution measure); poetry thrived as ever, but mostly limited to those short epigrammatic forms which had predominated in *Manyoshu*. Confucianism was rediscovered with a vengeance, and endless dialectic tracts with commentaries and critiques were turned out (the most important of which monopolize the English-language collection misnamed *Sources of the Japanese Tradition*), as well as popular colloquial Buddhist commentaries. But more important was the boom in books meant just to entertain.

Cheap printing from carved woodblocks had been introduced into Japan along with writing back in the 6th century. First used for reproducing Buddhist sutras, the technique was turned to producing the novels once laboriously hand-scripted. Competition increased as publishers and writers multiplied faster than the newly and rapidly developing plebeian literate class. Prices came down as cheap paperbacks were ground out. To increase sales appeal, illustrators were hired, color techniques developed, and the ukiyo-e prints, "floating-world pictures", world-famed Japanese woodblock prints, blossomed as a great art in itself. These cheap novels were about the lives of the type of people who read them: gay blades of the city, shrewd merchants, professional women, actors and artists. They are a running commentary on city life of that gaudy Floating World, the *Ukiyo*, as it called itself from a Chinese poem. They are

living, poignant, humorous, written in the snappy, slangy speech of the time (sometimes untranslatable even by native Japanese scholars). Best sampling of two of the best writers' works is Howard Hibbett's superb *The Floating World in Japanese Fiction*. These are often short stories which appeared in series, comprising an over-all long novel (shades of our later Dickens). The important aspect of these stories, as relating to our modern Japanese writers, is that these men wrote in concise language, rather than that painfully indirect, abstruse, verbose, erudite style of the dialecticians of "official" literature. From this popular tradition comes the modern Japanese newspaper style, and it almost certainly influences some of the seemingly Western modern writers.

In 1853 Commodore Perry appeared and demanded that Japan end her seclusion. By 1867 she had done so, again with a vengeance. Western literature was translated helter-skelter. The old-style cheap paperbacks went the way of similar booms in the West, getting cheaper and appealing to ever baser tastes. The men of vision and education were now learning Western languages in the new colleges, absorbing Western ways, translating Western literature (and pap), and very consciously affecting Western style in their own writing. But with these many "petty vexations" literature "fell into a decline, growing more melancholy and retiring." Failure of the new ways to produce quick solutions to Japan's problems, along with resurgence of those who wished to transform and readapt the old ways, brought on a clash between liberals with no tradition to bolster them and new samurai with an imported Prussian militarism to graft onto the old traditional warrior roots. The writers, melancholy beyond reprieve, retired. As novelist-critic Takami Jun noted, in a 1963 PEN club talk, Japanese literature of the past fifty years had been "a hermit's literature."

The literary archaeologist-cum-anthologist is prone to reconstruct an evolutionary chart, a family tree, in terms of his own experience. He would build or reconstruct the ruin of a paradise garden in the image of a shard of a willowware plate. He would clutter the world with *chinoiserie*, toast his world in Delft, a technique that is, of course, reciprocated—for exchange is a two-way street. What Western visitor to Japan has not looked with—what . . . a mixture of horror or shock, amusement or trepidation—upon some Japanese attempts at reproducing a specific style of Western building? (I am prejudiced, based on my own Japan experience, having once lived

here in a typical example of Japanese campus Ameriquoiserie, a none-such version of Bible-belt barn architecture.)

Any anthropologist knows how dangerous yet essential it is to question a native informant. Ask an aborigine, "Who is your sire?" and he may point to the man who shot his totemic animal about the time his mother got her pains, or he may point to his mother's brother or, just possibly, the gentleman who made a habit of sleeping with mom. His concept of relation, of family, will not necessarily be yours. To the Japanese, spiritual continuity of family name is more important than blood (which may be thicker than water, but ink with which the family records are written is thicker yet). Great art and culture dynasties are maintained not only by childbirth but by adoption. In Kyoto I was introduced to the "family" from which a great lady from an ancient art family had reputedly come. There was no resemblance between daughter and "parent" beyond the superficial similarities of class. I learned later that she had risen from quite low estate through her ability, and had been chosen as a bride (by a family committee) to infuse new blood into the line. To give her a proper ancestry, she was adopted out to a good family in another city (who could use the forthcoming contractual link), then brought back to Kyoto as a "bride from a fine old line." Another time I was admonished by a Japanese friend who was afraid that my interest in a certain noted geisha was too serious and could jeopardize my future aspirations, yet she was his own natural half-sister. (To keep her as a hobby, of course, could have been helpful to such aspirations.)

Literature reflects a culture's soul. It is but one of several media by which culture expresses itself in our phenomenal world. If a literature is to reflect such a seemingly casual, yet ritualized, arbitrariness of approach to the product of sleeping on the floor, how are we to appreciate it from our padded pedestals? Roll off onto the floor and "ask an informant?"

"Japanese artist, from whence comest thou?"

"I am from Kyoto, the Paris of Japan" (or if America-oriented, ". . . Boston of Japan," or ". . . Florence of Japan," and I once heard a Japanese traveler disputing before a Persian guest whether to compare Kyoto with Isfahan or Shiraz). Artists are similarly compared. A Japanese painter hailed as the "van Gogh of Japan" saw his first van Gogh when his public relations manager posed him before one. One of the recent and last, supposedly, ukiyo-e artists of

the old school is officially listed as heir to a great dynastic name, implying inheritance of a specific dynastic style. His accession to the title was based on convenience; he had not studied with any predecessor and in fact worked for the most part in Occidental water-colors, in Occidental proportion and perspective—and could not even claim to have been influenced by any of the French impressionists whom his own dynastic forebears had influenced. Work of another present-day Japanese painter, disciple of Matisse, bore no resemblance to that of his master except in the coloration and that, in truth, was the only aspect of his art heritage he had retained. Coincidentally, he used the same beautiful Japanese model.

Among Japanese writers, one drew acclaim from his American publisher: "Proust, a Japanese Proust . . ." And when asked what he thought of Proust, replied, "Who?" Writing with a thrift and conciseness which critics attributed to the influence of Hemingway, another newcomer was in fact only reacting against the verbosity of an expatriate American professor of literature.

The attempt to cross catalogue the influences of writer upon writer has little importance outside of keeping the literary archaeologist busy. For the important influences to be brought to light perhaps a psychoanalyst might be of help. From the artist's point of view (not the archaeologist's) there are two types of influence. The artist may copy or emulate the form of another and adapt his techniques, but in dealing with translations we might well ask who it is that the translator would emulate. The influence which reaches deeper, and which may leave no telltale mound or even slightest carbon-14 trace, is that influence which most inspires. And this may just as easily be another art medium as a place or a person. But within his own medium a writer might be greatly influenced, say, by Faulkner's post-Nobel Kyoto lecture on the success of failure and his idea—how very Oriental—of the inevitability of imperfection,⁵ and yet not be able to stomach Faulkner's writings. One might be inspired, say, by Selden Rodman's poetic biography of Lawrence of Arabia and strive to do what Rodman did—something comparable though not necessarily in the same form or style. Influences that count are those which contribute towards getting the "juice" (as

⁵*The Nobility of Failure* (USIS Kyoto lecture by William Faulkner, used as title for anthology of "Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan" by Ivan Morris in 1975.

Hemingway called it, perhaps that *ch'i* of Chinese art, philosophy and combat, or *ki* in Japan) to flow. It may be other writers (a translator from the Chinese whom I know uses Erle Stanley Gardner), it may be a bottle (we all know so many), it may be a painting, a joint, a pipe, a needle, sharpening pencils, walking up a mountain, esoteric shadow boxing, dance drills, or the pressure of due bills. Any sort of personal mandala will do just so long as it gets the head (or gut) spinning and produces detachment and associations for freeing the juice. The really important influence may be rather the vector or nature of the action—active, meditative, monochrome, polychrome, uphill, pointed, circular, shadowy, real. To truly plumb the effective influence would, I repeat, take psychoanalysis and a dissection thrown in. Any understanding this would give us of the artist or his art would not resemble that which he had hoped to convey and would be of as much use to us as his dead and dissected corpse, or the bleached skull on a psychiatrist's desk.

And you question again, perhaps angrily, perhaps justly so, "How are we to appreciate it from our padded pedestal?" Just by looking at it and trying to appreciate it for what it is, or what it has pretensions of being, with no preconceived notions, no mental forewords. (One should never read a foreword or an introduction till one has finished the body of the book.) The why and the how and the wherefore of it all is far less important. It is enough that these writers wrote when they did of what they did.

Turning again to Lady Murasaki, one is, with her, still "amazed at the advances which this art of fiction is now making," as Prince Genji exclaimed. "How do you suppose that our new writers come by this talent? It used to be thought that the authors of successful romances were merely particularly untruthful people whose imaginations had been stimulated by constantly inventing plausible lies. But that is clearly unfair. . . ."

"Perhaps," his companion answered, "only people who are themselves much occupied in practicing deception have the habit of thus dipping below the surface. I can assure you that for my part, when I read a story, I always accept it as an account of something that has really and actually happened."

Genji continued, "So you see, as a matter of fact I think far better of this art than I have led you to suppose. Even its practical value is immense. Without it what should we know of how people lived in the past . . .? For history books . . . show us only one small corner