

Southern Exposure:

Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa

The first thing that needs to be said about *Southern Exposure* is that it is a publication of some significance. Okinawan writers have, in recent years, demonstrated their brilliance by winning a variety of Japanese literary awards, notably the Akutagawa Prize. Few contemporary Japanese readers harbour any doubts about the quality of the literature being produced in Okinawa – here meaning the island chain south of Kyushu that has had such an unhappy history over the course of the previous century or two.

Review >
Japan

By Leith Morton

After losing its independence in the seventeenth century due to the forced annexation of the kingdom of the Ryukyus into the Japanese province of Satsuma, often referred to by Okinawans as the Satsuma invasion, from 1879 Okinawa became part of the Japanese Empire. The fact that many Okinawans eventually became fiercely patriotic can be gauged from the huge number of casualties in the Battle of Okinawa, the only land campaign during the Second World War fought on the homeland Japanese islands. During this campaign, nearly a quarter of the population of the main island of Okinawa died, approximately a quarter of a million deaths. As a result of the war, Okinawa was severed from Japanese control and ruled directly by the US until its reversion back to Japan in 1972.

Today, as the editors point out in their introduction (pp.1–36), Okinawa is still seen as a ‘marginal’ prefecture, with the lowest living standard of any of Japan’s prefectures. Prejudice still exists on the mainland against Okinawans, with their distinctive dialects and ethnicity. Okinawa cherishes its differences, not merely in language, but also in customs, food, and religion, from mainland Japan – although with the spread of mainland cultural influence through the mass

media, such differences are becoming more diffuse and less distinctive. Thus, the appearance of an anthology such as this of translations of modern Okinawan literature is a rare and welcome event. Translations of Okinawan literature – whether classical or modern – are very few in number, and this volume undoubtedly represents the largest single such collection to appear in English to date.

The anthology is divided into two parts: translations of modern poetry and fiction. However, poetry is treated very badly, with only seven poems totalling a mere ten or so pages. If we compare this meagre total to the twelve stories (which make up well over 90 per cent of the 359 pages of translations) then it is disappointing indeed. The book does not at all represent the mass of poetry (in traditional and modern forms) produced in Okinawa over the past century. It is noteworthy that one of the leading authorities on Okinawan literature, Okamoto Keitoku, in his 1996 piece on modern Okinawan literature, included in the recent seventeen-volume history of Japanese literature produced by Iwanami, begins his essay by stating that, in Okinawa, modern fiction took shape much later than the modern poetry produced in large quantities from early in the modern era (Okamoto 1997: 177).

However, despite this major shortcoming, this is nevertheless a historic and welcome beginning to what I hope will be many volumes of translation and exegesis on Okinawan writing. The translations read well in English, and the few pages that I checked against the originals revealed no errors. The translations themselves, done by a team of American and Japanese scholars, must have presented a number of severe linguistic challenges, as several of the stories utilize a number of the many dialects for which Okinawa is famous.

The few poems are by four Okinawan poets, including the most famous Okinawan author of all – Yamanokuchi Baku. The stories, save the first two, are all written in the post-war era, with the bulk of the fiction dating from the 1960s. Thus, many of the stories are reflections on the war and the American occupation. The stories also reveal an overwhelming concern with ethnic identity, which is hardly surprising given the modern history of Okinawa.

Yamanokuchi Baku is represented by a charming, ironic tale dating from 1938 about a pre-war Korean businessman in Japan who passes himself off as Japanese in order to avoid racial discrimination. The businessman finds himself observed by the narrator, who is no other than the Okinawan poet Baku; a twist that adds to the gentle irony and charm.

A number of tales are about prostitution, specifically the Okinawan prostitutes who service the needs of the vast number of US servicemen who live on the military bases which occupy much of the territory of contemporary Okinawa.

Kishaba Jun’s 1955 story ‘Dark Flowers’ relates the sad chronicle of Nobuko and her African-American paramour. The identification of Okinawans as the blacks of Japan works as both metaphor and theme, but the tale is told with little subtlety. The leading contemporary Okinawan novelist Oshiro Tatsuhiro is represented by a long and powerful story called ‘Turtleback Tombs’ dating from 1966. This tale is set in wartime and is a complex meditation upon religion, heredity, and ethnicity; themes that occur in other of the author’s works.

‘Love Letter from IA’ (1978) has the distinction of being translated into English by its author, Shimokawa Hiroshi, who lectures in English. Comparing the English version to the original, it is fascinating how the tempo and timing of the prose in the two languages is so different yet the story reads just as easily in translation. This is a tale about casual cruelty, the cruelty of Tomiko towards her old classmate, Sueko, who is separated from her American husband.

A better story, in my view, is Yoshida Sueko’s ‘Love Suicide at Kamaara’ (1984) about the relationship between an ageing Okinawan prostitute and an African-American deserter, their relationship demonstrating the difficult and obscure nature of love.

The two final stories by Medoruma Shun and Matoyoshi Eiki respectively (the two young lions of contemporary Okinawan writing) are excellent examples of the art of fiction. Both use narrative voices that are tentative and shifting – although not exactly the ghostly narrators that we have grown used to in much post-modernist fiction – to portray the complexities of contemporary Okinawan life in language that is both poetic and haunting.

The volume, then, is worth reading, and certainly worth purchasing, not merely for its intrinsic scholarly and literary values, but also because it reveals an area of Japanese literature hitherto little exposed to non-Japanese readers. All in all this is a handsome volume that contains various delights. <

- Molasky, Michael and Steve Rabson (eds.), *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press (2000), pp.362, ISBN 0-8248-2300-1 (pb).

Reference

- Okamoto, Keitoku, ‘Okinawa no Shosetsu, Engekishi’ (Iwanami Koza) in *Nihonbungakushi*, Vol.15, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten (1996), pp.175–191.

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