

The Skin of the Pike Conger Eel

(*Hamo no kawa*)

Written by Kamizukasa Shōken

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Introduction

The literary world in Japan has been centered in Tokyo since the beginning of the modern era, and the typical pattern for writers from other regions has been to go to Tokyo to join the “literary establishment” (*bundan*) and pursue a literary career there. No other city or region could boast a community of writers of national stature. Recent changes in the production and consumption of literature, including the development of the Internet, may signal the end of the Tokyo-centered literary establishment (and, indeed, perhaps of the category “pure literature” [*junbungaku*] itself). But this fact shows all the more clearly how strong the Tokyo-centeredness of modern Japanese literature was, and until how recently it continued. Writers as recent as Nakagami Kenji (winner of the Akutagawa Prize in 1976) and the wildly popular Murakami Haruki left their native Wakayama and Hyōgo Prefectures for Tokyo to become writers.

However, there have been exceptions like Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, a native of Tokyo who relocated to the Kansai (Kobe-Osaka-Kyoto) after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. Tanizaki set many of his subsequent works in the Kansai, and his fascination with the region’s culture, history and people seem to have led – directly or indirectly – to his so-called “return to Japan” (*Nihon kaiki*) and “return to the classics” (*koten kaiki*). There were in fact a few other writers living and writing in Osaka contemporaneously with Tanizaki. The anarchist poet Ono Tōzaburō, the popular novelist Fujisawa Takeo, and Oda Sakunosuke (one of the “Decadents,” along with Dazai Osamu and Sakaguchi Angō) all spent time in Tokyo, but returned to their native Osaka to write. Other Osaka-native writers lived in Tokyo but set their works in Osaka.

These works by Osaka writers featuring Osaka scenes and people have been called “Osaka Works,” or *Osaka-mono*. The term, used to describe a work featuring typically (or stereotypically) Osakan places, themes and people, could perhaps also be translated as “works in the Osakan tradition.” While there is in fact no “Osakan tradition” recognized as such by Japanese literary historians, I would argue that for Osakans, there is such a thing as an “Osaka Work,” as well as some consensus on which works would belong to such a genre or tradition.

Kamizukasa Shōken’s “Hamo no kawa” (1914), the story translated here as “The Skin of the Pike Conger Eel,” has been said to “hold a place as a classic among the novels of the so-called ‘Osaka tradition’ (*iwayuru Osaka-mono no shōsetsu*) ...and is the prototype of postwar novels, movies, plays, and TV series of the ‘Osaka tradition’” (Kobayashi 1989). In a letter to Oda Sakunosuke, Uno Kōji, himself a native of Osaka, used Kamizukasa as a reference point in a tradition extending back to the Edo period and forward to the younger Oda: “In the almost complete absence (except for Kamizukasa Shōken) of writers who take as their materials the common people of Osaka, it is you alone, past or present (with the exception of Saikaku and Chikamatsu), who write so enviably well – better than Kamizukasa himself – of the common people of Osaka” (Kawara 1967).

“Hamo no kawa” is set in a smoky, bustling grilled-eel restaurant in Dōtombori, the quintessentially Osakan entertainment district along the neon-lit Dōtombori canal. The work belongs to Osaka in several other specific ways. First (as pointed out by Kobayashi) its main character Ofumi joins a “lineage” of strong Osaka female literary characters who make sacrifices for their shiftless men. Ofumi struggles to manage the restaurant in the absence of her husband Fukuzō, who has incurred debts and decamped to Tokyo. This pair of Osaka character types goes back to the puppet plays of Chikamatsu (1653-1725) and continued to appear after Kamizukasa in works like Oda’s “Meoto zenzai” (1940).

Another strongly Osakan element in the story is food. The “skin of the pike conger eel” of the title is an Osakan food that, in the story, symbolizes the bond that still exists between Ofumi and the absent Fukuzō, who asks in a letter that Ofumi send money and pike conger skin to him in Tokyo. Further, the metaphor of food is expanded beyond these two characters to encompass “the cycle of life and death” (Maeda 1986) as Ofumi’s uncle Gentarō visualizes an endless round of eating, living, dying, and rebirth in the restaurants of Dōtombori.

In addition to the appeal of its portrayal of the strong female protagonist Ofumi in the vibrant Osaka of the early 20th Century, “Hamo no kawa” is of interest to English-speaking readers because of its key position in the “Osaka tradition” – a tradition that hints at the breadth of modern Japanese literature, extending beyond the Tokyo literary establishment, of which many readers may be unaware.

Works Consulted

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