

# Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's Modernism and His Relish for China

*Shunsuke Kamei*

## I. "Modern" Culture in Japan

The words "modern" and "modernism" may be defined in a number of ways, but however one chooses to define these words, the 1920s in Japan, that is, from the last part of the Taisho era to the beginning of Showa, should be called a period of modernism. I do not intend to discuss the political and social development of this period, but the so-called Taisho democracy and cultural internationalism which grew during and after World War I undoubtedly helped to make this a period of modernism. At the same time, the middle class gained some power and urban culture flourished. Tokyo, the major city of Japan, developed into a modern metropolis after the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, with Osaka following soon after.

At any rate, in those days, the words "modern" (either in English *modan* or in Japanese *kindai*) and "modernism" (usually used in English) were in fashion. The modernization of life and culture received support from various quarters. Magazines such as the *Kindai Seikatsu* (Modern Life) and the *Modan Nippon* (Modern Japan) appeared. Dance halls and cafés lined the busy streets of areas such as the Ginza in Tokyo and Dotonbori in Osaka, and "modern" girls (called *moga* in Japanese) and "modern" boys (called *mobo*) strolled along the modern-looking streets.

These cultural scenes obviously reflect the great influence of contemporary American culture. To the Japanese general public, America, as represented by New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other metropolises, was the most modern of all the Western nations. And American popular culture, as represented by motion pictures, introduced the very urban, free, and dynamic aspects of American life to the Japanese people.

As Ando Kosei (安藤更生), an aesthetic critic of the day, says in

his *Ginza Saiken* (銀座細見 A Close Look at the Ginza, 1931), "Jazz, movies, short skirts, sailor pants, dance and sports" were "the symbols of modernism." These "symbols of modernism" appeared as the result of imitation of the fashions of the American 1920s, the so-called "jazz age." Ando continues to describe the "Americanism" which "dominated the Ginza at the time":

First, look at the boys and girls on the streets there. Their dress, their style, is all nothing but what they have imitated from American movies. When Valentino came, young boys on the Ginza all suddenly sprouted long tufts of hair under the temples. When movies starring Colleen Moore came, young girls on the Ginza all suddenly bobbed their hair. Women on the Ginza have mastered, through studying scenes in American movies, the techniques necessary for associating with men, and they have learned how to fall in love in taxis, as American women do. Most of the food served at Ginza restaurants nowadays is not French-style, but American-style, and is accompanied with water instead of wine. The music played at cafés everywhere is the jazz which Americans favor.

The cultural elite, however, who tended to emphasize the importance of Japanese traditions, did not like this trend. To them, American culture did not have a deep spiritual value: it was materialistic, vulgar, and shallow. When they had to learn from the West, they chose to learn from European culture, which they thought was old and spiritual. Ando himself says that, only a decade earlier, the Ginza was "under the beautiful light of French culture" and "the dandies strolling there had their creeds – noble, beautiful, liberal, and free," but, he laments, "the Ginza has been degenerated."

There is an element of truth in the observations of Ando and others like him. Vulgarization of culture was seen in many quarters. "Dancing to Jazz and drinking liquors, so the night wears on" ("Tokyo March," words by Saijo Yaso, 1929) – this ditty seems to express the essence of the urban culture of a liberated new era. Another popular song goes, "A light samurai picture yesterday and an erotic revue today – modern Asakusa, full of nonsense" ("New Tokyo March," words by Saijo Yaso, 1930). The then popular phrase, "erotic, grotesque, and nonsensical," was the keynote of modern Tokyo culture. Although it may have been largely a reflection of the dark age of economic depression and rising militarism, the metropolis

itself seemed to be enjoying "modern" life.

## II. Tanizaki's Modernism

In spite of this apparent degeneration of "modern" culture, however, there were writers who tried positively and seriously to accept modernism. One of the most prominent among them is Tanizaki Jun'ichiro (谷崎潤一郎).

It is needless to say that Tanizaki is widely regarded as the leading traditionalist in modern Japanese literature, but he was actually the foremost "modernist" from the start of his literary career. Partly under the influence of Poe, Baudelaire, and Wilde, he pursued aesthetic exoticism to the extreme. As Nagai Kafu (永井荷風), his literary mentor, says, Tanizaki, being "completely urban," expressed "the deep mysterious feeling" of a human being who suffers physical agony in adoration of the beauty of the opposite sex.

Tanizaki soon became interested in movies, a very "modern" art. He was especially fascinated by American movies, which, to his eye, forcibly expressed the feminine beauty which dominates the male. In 1920, he even became a literary adviser to the Taisho Katsuei Co., one of the leading movie production companies, and wrote one scenario after another, beginning with the company's first picture *Amachua Kurabu* (Amateur Club, 1920), directed by Thomas Kurihara who had just come back from America. The star of this film was Hayama Michiko, a younger sister of Tanizaki's wife, with whom Tanizaki probably had sexual relations. Tanizaki also had his daughter, Ayuko, star in another film. In the magazine *Katsudo Kurabu* (Movie Club) (December 1920), he wrote about American comedies by Chaplin and others, and said:

Those films are noisy but full of young energy and vitality, the characteristics of the American spirit, which makes me feel the same kind of exhilaration that I feel when I watch children making mischief.

For a while, he even moved to Yokohama, the largest port-city in Japan, where he hoped he could more intimately feel the atmosphere of modern culture imported directly from the West.

In *Chijin no Ai* (痴人の愛 A Fool's Love, 1924-1925), regarded

as the masterpiece of his modernist period, Tanizaki revealed his adoration for Western culture by writing about a man's love and lust for Naomi, a lively and unrestrained girl. The object of his adoration can be taken as a personification of America as represented by Hollywood. The hero of the novel lives in a *bunka jutaku* (culture house), which meant in those days a Western-style house, in Omori (one of the suburban towns of Tokyo, situated halfway between Tokyo and Yokohama), and while trying to bring Naomi up to be "a fashionable modern lady whom he can proudly take anywhere," he lavishes his love upon her, calling her "Naomi, oh Naomi, my Mary Pickford." In the long run, Naomi makes a fool of him with her "Yankee-girl" wantonness, and the hero is betrayed over and over again. But he is happy with her, and he can never liberate himself from her ever-growing "mysterious charm." Here the "modern" urban life that was thought by the Japanese to be "American" is portrayed as a beautiful bottomless pool which allures men into its depths.

Several years later, in 1932, Tanizaki wrote in an essay that he detested *Chijin no Ai* and other works of that period. The reason he gave was that "they were not really cut off from Japanese tradition" and that "the Western influence on them was rather shallow." In other words, Tanizaki wished that he had been more deeply Westernized, i.e. modernized, than he actually was.

### III. Tanizaki's Relish for China

There was, however, an element — an important element — in Tanizaki that did not allow him to devote himself to Western, or American, culture as completely as he consciously wished. Deep within him, he had nourished a love for Eastern, i.e. traditional, culture and literature. Probably I do not need here to emphasize his appreciation of things Japanese. To some extent, this was very natural for him as a Japanese. What is to be particularly emphasized is his strong attraction to traditional Chinese culture.

At about 14 years old, while he was still in primary school, Tanizaki attended an additional private school, where he studied the Chinese classics. One of his friends testifies in admiration that Tanizaki there easily mastered not only *Ta hsüeh* (大學 Great Learning), *Chung yung* (中庸 Center), *Lun yü* (論語 The Discourses of Confucius), and *Meng-tzu* (孟子 The Discourses of Mencius), but also *Shih-pa shih-lüeh* (十八史略 Extracts from Eighteen Histories) and *Wên-chang kuei-fan* (文章規範 Models for

Writing). The following year, while a first-year student at a middle school, he published five poems in Chinese in the school magazine. After this, his appreciation of Chinese culture and literature repeatedly appeared in his various writings. In "*Ningyo no Nageki*" (人魚の嘆き Lamentations of a Mermaid, January 1917), for instance, he even created as his persona a rich and sensitive noble of China who has drained the cup of pleasure of this world to the dregs, and through him he expressed his own longing for the exotic Western world where women are supposed to be as bewitchingly beautiful as the mermaid.

In 1918, already a well-known writer of modernistic tendency, he made a two-month tour of China; he visited Peking, Hankow, Nanking, Soochow, and Shanghai. Parts of his observations can be seen in his travel sketches which were published after his return to Japan, but particularly noteworthy is a fictionalized piece entitled "*Seiko no Tsuki*" (西湖の月 The Moon at Hsi-hu, June 1919). The story is rather simple: the narrator meets a lovely young Chinese girl on his way from Shanghai to Hangchow, but later, at night, while boating at Hsi-hu, he sees her beautiful corpse. She seems to have despaired of her weak body and drowned herself. However, the narration is extremely poetic, full of literary associations. And at one place, the narrator says in praise of the Hangchow area:

To those who are vain enough to say that Japan is the poetic country of the Orient, I wanted to show the scenery and customs and manners of the people of this area, even if for just a moment.

Soon after this, Tanizaki also wrote a drama *So To-ba* (蘇東坡 Su Tung-p'o, August 1920), in which he depicted the great Chinese poet's artistic life at Hsi-hu.

Tanizaki, in this way, had a strong inclination toward Chinese culture. So even while he was trying to be as Western as possible, he made an interesting confession in an essay entitled "*Shina Shumi to Yukoto*" (支那趣味と云ふこと A Relish for China, January 1922). According to this essay, he had on the book-shelf in his Western-style house in Yokohama American movie magazines and books of poems by Kao Ch'ing-ch'iu (高青邱) and Wu Mei-ts'un (吳梅村). When he opened the movie magazines, he says, his imagination happily flew to the "cinema kingdom of Hollywood." But he continues to say:

When I open the book by Kao Ch'ing-ch'iu, I am drawn into a state of tranquility by a mere line of a five-word quatrain, and my ambitions and active imagination are chilled as if by cold water. I feel as if I were being told, "Is it so important to be new? Is it so important to be creative? Isn't the ultimate mental state that a human being can attain contained, after all, in this five-word quatrain?" Afraid to be thus persuaded, I am trying as hard as possible to resist my relish for Chinese culture.

To sum up, Tanizaki was consciously resisting his own attraction to Chinese culture and trying to advance his modernism. He says in the same essay that "the essence of traditional Chinese thought and art is static and not dynamic," and that "I feel its bewitching power discourages my intrepid artistic spirit and paralyzes my creative energy."

Nevertheless, in 1926, he made a journey to China for the second time. He seems even to have had an intention to settle down in Shanghai. And there he got acquainted and established a life-long friendship with younger Chinese artists such as Tien Han (田漢), Kuo Mo-jo (郭沫若), and Ou-yang Yü-chien (歐陽予倩). He was also glad to see there "some old customary practices . . . that have almost disappeared in Japan" — practices such as New Year's Eve's family gathering. On the whole, however, he found China to have been too much Westernized by that time. In an essay, "*Shanghai Kenbunroku*" (上海見聞錄 Observations at Shanghai, May 1926), he writes:

Manners and customs of the Chinese, too, have been tainted with Westernism, and my impression now is much different from that which I got eight years ago. Although I had a vague idea that I might take up my abode there, I came back home greatly disappointed.

The following year, in a long essay entitled "*Jozetsu-roku*" (饒舌錄 Talking Too Much), Tanizaki, after emphasizing that in Japan Orientalism and Westernism had always been bitterly conflicting with each other, expressed his own growing inner wish that the former should eventually conquer the latter.

#### IV. Tanizaki's Return to Japanese Traditional Culture

After he had experienced these wide sways between his attraction to Western-style modernism and for Chinese traditional culture, Tanizaki finally began to seek after the value of the traditionally Japanese. Many critics point out that Tanizaki's move from the Tokyo and Yokohama area to Kansai after the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 was an impetus to this change. This is probably true in part, but the meandering development of his thought should also be taken into account.

In the novel *Tade Kuu Mushi* (蓼喰ふ蟲 Some Prefer Nettles, 1928-1929), Tanizaki began to show his effort to appreciate traditional Japanese culture. Throughout this novel, the author develops his comparative view of the culture of Tokyo and Kansai, which is actually a comparative view of the modern and the traditional.

The culture of Tokyo is undoubtedly colored by American-style modernism. Kaname, the hero of the novel, now lives in the Kansai district, although he originally came from Tokyo. He is a sort of modernized man and does not like the atmosphere of downtown Osaka, which is symbolized by *gidayu*, a traditional form of ballad drama. Instead, he loves "the clear brightness which characterizes American movies" and "prefers films produced in Los Angeles to Kabuki plays." The narrator tells us that "American pictures, always creating new feminine beauty and devoted to flattering woman, are vulgar, yet closest to his ideal." But because of his modern way of life, his marriage is heading for divorce.

On the contrary, his wife's father, an old man born in Kyoto, "used to like movies" but now inclines towards things Japanese. "What on earth is that jazz band?" he says, "It's just like some loud Western carnival music." He is now living with his young mistress, O-hisa, in a secluded place, and only occasionally comes to Osaka to see traditional puppet plays.

Kaname, contemptuous of the old man at first, becomes fascinated by his way of life when he accompanies the old man and O-hisa on a pilgrimage to Awaji Island to see *yoruri* puppet shows: he sees them indulging in "an easy, total freedom from worldly cares." It seems to him that this may be one way of life that is truly free. And he is also attracted by O-hisa whom he used to despise as being ignorant and too subservient — "an illusion emerging out of the feudal age." Kaname thus finally comes to realize the value of the traditional art and life of Japan and is prepared to reconstruct

his way of living.

After this novel, what the critic Ito Sei (伊藤整) called "the classic-style period" of Tanizaki's literature started. Indeed, Tanizaki treated in his works very "Japanese" characters and used traditional Japanese style, combining narrative parts and conversation without distinction and minimizing punctuation. He had apparently become a uniquely "Japanese" writer.

However, let us examine, for instance, *Shunkin-sho* (春琴抄 An Extract from the Life of Shunkin, 1933), the masterpiece of this genre. Shunkin (O-koto), a beautiful but haughty woman *koto* (harp) player behaves completely as she pleases. Sasuke, her servant and disciple, adores her, all the more when she scolds and strikes him. When Shunkin's face is disfigured by a man whom she despises, Sasuke blinds himself to eternalize the beautiful image of her within his heart. Is this a story of a purely traditional Japanese woman? It may safely be said that Shunkin is more or less a modification of Naomi in *Chijin no Ai*. And Sato Haruo (佐藤春夫), a famous novelist and one of Tanizaki's good friends, suggests that this novelette is an adaptation of Thomas Hardy's short story, "Barbara of the House of Grebe" (1891) which Tanizaki himself translated into Japanese in 1927. As to the style, which seemingly resembles that of *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji), Tanizaki himself admits that he was also influenced by the style of George Moore's *Héloise and Abélard* (1921). Apparently, then, even this most "Japanese" literary work of Tanizaki's is a mixture of Western and Eastern elements, and it seems to me that, precisely because of this fact, it gives us an impression of being very "modern" at the same time as being very traditional.

In this way, through the process of swinging back and forth between Western and Eastern culture, Tanizaki enriched the substance and expression of his literature. Probably many other writers of Japan have gone through a similar process. But Tanizaki's swinging motion was so wide from one extreme to the other that it helped him to develop his "Japanese" character as dynamically as he did.