

Ariyoshi Sawako, Mukoda Kuniko and Can Xue: Three Modern Women Writers of Japan and China

by
Francis J. BOSHA

Summary

As modern Japanese women writers, Ariyoshi Sawako and Mukoda Kuniko reveal at least as much about themselves as they do about society, as Kawabata Yasunari suggested was generally the case with women writers in Japan. Kawabata's view seems valid for writers outside Japan as well. As a postmodern writer in China who emerged a generation after Ariyoshi and Mukoda, Can Xue also reveals much of herself, but through the veil of surrealistic allegory.

Key Words: Ariyoshi Sawako, Mukoda Kuniko, Can Xue, Women Writers of Japan and China, *The River Ki*, *The Doctor's Wife*, *Kabuki Dancer*, *The Name of the Flower*, *Dialogues in Paradise*, *Old Floating Cloud*

Japan's first Nobel laureate in literature, Kawabata Yasunari, once observed that Japanese women writers reveal more of themselves in their work than do their male counterparts, and that this holds true even among women writers who did not ostensibly write about their own lives or personal experiences. This does indeed seem to be the case with many women writers, not only in Japan, but throughout Asia and beyond. It is also true that with the increased educational and career opportunities afforded women since World War II, more female writers have emerged, and their work provides a unique vantage from which to view their world.

It seems useful, then, to consider representative writing from the postwar era of three modern women writers of fiction: two from Japan who lived at almost the same time, Ariyoshi Sawako (1931–1984) and Mukoda Kuniko (1929–1981), and one Chinese author from the following generation, Can Xue, who was born in 1953. Their works selected for discussion here span the second half of this century: Ariyoshi's *The River Ki* (1959), *The Doctor's Wife* (1966), and *Kabuki Dancer* (1972); Mukoda's *The Name of the Flower* (1980); and Can Xue's *Dialogues in Paradise* (1989) and *Old Floating Cloud* (1991).

In her relatively short but prolific career, Ariyoshi Sawako, who won the Mainichi Cultural Prize in 1979, distinguished herself as a popular fiction writer whose work has been widely adapted for the theatre, film, and television. Her subject matter ranged from the traditional Japanese arts to more timely topics that included social, racial and

even environmental issues.

Her career as a writer began with the publication of the story "Jiuta," in 1956, which was nominated for the Akutagawa Prize. However, she emerged as a major novelist in 1959, with the publication of *The River Ki* (*Ki no kawa*), the first novel of her River Trilogy, which would include *Arita-gawa* (1963) and *Hidaka-gawa* (1965).

The River Ki is set in the author's native Wakayama prefecture, and chronicles three generations of the Matani family. Her concern is with the women of this family as she follows the course of the life of her central character, Hana, from the mid-Meiji era through World War II to the present. In the process this novel reveals much of what Ariyoshi saw to be the gradually evolving role of women in modern Japan.

The author is effective at dramatizing this change through the recurrent conflict that exists between Hana and her headstrong daughter, Fumio. Despite the daughter's modern viewpoint, however, Ariyoshi makes it clear that the principles by which Hana has lived have not become so easily outmoded. Furthermore, Hana is presented as calm yet indomitable and Fumio is surprised "that a woman who spent her days in such a quietly civilized way possessed so much strength."¹

The third generation is represented by Fumio's far weaker daughter, Hanako, thus bringing the novel up to the 1950s and suggesting that with the passage of time something valuable in the character of women has been lost in the process of seeming to make so many strides forward.

The Doctor's Wife, which was first published in 1967, is an historical novel that traces (with considerable authorial license) the life of Hanaoka Seishu (1760-1835), the Wakayama physician who first developed the technique of general anesthesia. He used this in surgery in 1805, more than three decades before something similar was accomplished in the West.

Despite the importance to the novel's plot line of the rise to fame and wealth of Hanaoka, it is the stormy relationship between his wife Kae and his mother Otsugi—an almost archetypal Japanese struggle for the spoiled and self-centered doctor's attention and affection by the two women in his life—that impels *The Doctor's Wife*.

As Ariyoshi asks and then answers at one point, regarding this steadily increasing "rivalry and mutual hatred": "Was such a relationship unavoidable between any mother and daughter-in-law? Perhaps."²

The novel unfolds in fifteen chapters that are also as many dramatic scenes, spanning some seven decades. The female feud that is at the heart of *The Doctor's Wife* was witnessed by Seishu's sister, Koriku, whose judgements on the relations between the sexes seem to reliably reflect those of Ariyoshi herself. Consider Koriku's breathlessly delivered speech to Kae, which Ariyoshi has highlighted with a dramatic use of ellipses:

Don't you think men are incredible? It seems . . . that an intelligent person like my brother . . . would have noticed the friction between you and Mother But throughout he shrewdly pretended he didn't see anything . . . which resulted in both

you and Mother drinking the medicine Well, isn't it so? . . . I think this sort of tension among females . . . is . . . of . . . to the advantage . . . every male. And I doubt that any man would volunteer to mediate in their struggles He would probably be considered weak if he did, and I suspect . . . he would perish like an over-fertilized mandarin tree.³

While Ariyoshi's fiction tends to focus on problems besetting women, such as *The Doctor's Wife*, and other social issues, her earliest and abiding interest lay in kabuki. Indeed, soon after college, Ariyoshi wrote for a theatrical magazine before becoming a secretary to the *Azuma Kabuki* troupe.

Kabuki Dancer, James R. Brandon's 1994 translation of *Izumo no Okuni* (1972), must have been the proverbial labor of love for Ariyoshi. Not only does this historical romance feature as its main character a dynamic young woman, but it explores the birth of kabuki in the late sixteenth century. This was subject matter for which its author was unusually well suited to handle, and she does not disappoint us here.

The novel opens in 1588 and spans twenty-one years in the life of its heroine, a seventeen-year-old dancer named Okuni, from the village of Izumo. Okuni soon catches the attention of Baian, the head monk of Tenmangu Shrine and personal attendant to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the "Lord of the Realm." Baian hopes to groom Okuni and her sisters, who had been provincial dancers, into becoming polished professionals. His ultimate plan is to have them, as his "discoveries," entertain Hideyoshi, thus furthering his own ambitious agenda.

The naturally graceful Okuni, though, does not need much direction, as is indicated in Ariyoshi's description of the girls' dancing: "With one foot lifted from the ground, the dancer leaped lightly, her body floating in the air. Legs flashed into view and then into hiding like clumps of white clover blossoms" Baian, we learn, "had never seen this delightful, buoyant"⁴ type of dancing before.

For Okuni, dancing was more than a way of earning a living; it was life itself to her. She would get so caught up in the music and the audience's reaction to her, that she could lose herself: "her whole body seemed intoxicated by the spirit of the crowd. She had no desire to stop. She abandoned herself to the sound of the drum and to the rhythm of her body. She felt glorious."⁵

Since Okuni the historical figure really was one of the original kabuki performers, Ariyoshi details the development of this genre, and offers an explanation of the origin of the term "kabuki" in the context of Okuni's feeling of self-abandonment. The girl had been raised by her grandmother who did not approve of her free style, and so warned Okuni, "Do not grow up to be *kabuki*," meaning, Ariyoshi notes, "strange, indecent, improper."⁶ Yet, Okuni cannot help herself and asks, "Can this bright, happy feeling be bad? Don't be angry, Granny. Perhaps I *am a kabuki* woman."⁷

Kabuki Dancer proceeds to chronicle Okuni's progress as a professional performer, and along the way imparts ample background on how this theatrical genre evolved

into a popular entertainment. Since the novel was written for serialization in thirty-six installments for the woman's magazine *Fujin Koron*, it has an inherently episodic quality. It is consequently full of set-backs for the heroine, her lover and her patron, as well as such complications as Okuni's near-fatal miscarriage and Baian's temporary fall into disfavor with Hideyoshi, all designed to keep the reader looking forward to the next month's installment.

In addition to her illumination of the origin of kabuki which, until 1629, was dominated by female performers until the shogunate banned women from the stage, Ariyoshi convincingly grounds her novel in the details of that turbulent period between the end of the civil wars and the beginning of the nation's closing itself to the outside world. Thus, we are afforded glimpses of daily life under Hideyoshi's iron rule, and a range of other insights, including the local populace's reaction on first seeing foreigners: "My, what huge noses," observes one character. To which another adds: "Look at their bluish eyes. It's frightening. I wonder if they can see with eyes like that."⁸

Through all the episodes the spunky, light-footed dancer emerges as a sympathetic character who remains ingenuous even when she has achieved success. Still, given Ariyoshi Sawako's talent for popular fiction, no one should be surprised at *Kabuki Dancer's* readability, especially in Brandon's smooth translation.

At her death in a 1981 plane crash, the 52-year-old Mukoda Kuniko had attained a high level of recognition and popularity as a radio and television scriptwriter of domestic dramas. She had also begun extending the range of her writing to include essays and, by 1980, short stories. So promising was her fiction that Mukoda was awarded the 1981 Naoki Prize for Popular Fiction, for her first three stories, which were published between February 1980 and February 1981.

While a few of her stories have already appeared in English translation in the 1980s, Matsumoto Tomone's translation of *The Name of the Flower*, a collection of thirteen stories, provides the English-language reader with the first book-length collection. It is indeed a highly readable body of short fiction.

The title story of this smoothly translated baker's dozen—and one of the three stories for which Mukoda won the Naoki Prize—reveals several of the themes and character types that are recurrent in this volume. The principal male character in "The Name of the Flower," Matsuo, has been married for twenty-five years and is nearing fifty. Before marrying Tsuneko he ingenuously confessed to her that he was "a social dimwit,"⁹ being unable even to identify any but two or three common flowers by name. So, not unlike Eve in the Garden, Tsuneko set out to teach her husband the names of flowers. After each lesson, however, "without fail" Matsuo would demonstrate his own sense of superiority by his "rough and brutal"¹⁰ lovemaking.

When Tsuneko receives a telephone call from a woman who claims to have been having an affair with Matsuo, and whose name is that of a flower, the women arrange to meet. Tsuneko learns that her husband had referred to her as "my teacher" yet

seemed unaware of the flower which was suggested by the woman's name. The story, as most of Mukoda's pieces do, ends indeterminately. The wife confronts her husband and he tells her the affair is now over and then walks off to his room: "His back, broader than ever, seemed to say, 'What about it?'"¹¹ Tsuneko realizes that her "student" has long outgrown his need of her, let alone any obligation to maintain even a polite pretense in their empty relationship.

Such little slices of urban married life comprise the substance of this collection. The men tend to be middle-aged, think little of engaging in a casual love affair and, generally, behave like swine. Their wives and mistresses are usually docile, or at least learn to be so.

Perhaps the most crass of Mukoda's characters is Shoji, who appears in "Small Change." This fifty-year-old company executive agrees with his staff not to hire twenty-year-old Tomiko as an office worker because she was "too big" and had "thick ankles."¹² Yet, Shoji secretly notes her address, later seduces her, and then sets her up in a small apartment as his mistress because "she was obedient."¹³ Further, although she wasn't a beauty, he believed that "keeping a woman gave him a certain status."¹⁴ Whether or not it did, his merely anticipating one of their regular encounters "made him feel younger."¹⁵ The twist that Mukoda introduces to the plot concerns the dull girl's efforts to make herself more attractive. Through dieting and even plastic surgery she gained confidence but, tellingly, "the more her self-esteem increased, the more exhausted Shoji felt."¹⁶

Another such shabby man is Hanzawa in "Beef Shoulder," who seduces a comely "office lady" who is just five years older than his oldest daughter. On their second night together he becomes impotent, and the woman tells him of an embarrassing experience she had in junior high school to make him feel better and, to his surprise, "he felt ten years younger."¹⁷ He is yet another of a long line of Mukoda's characters who find in their philandering a fountain of youth. Such behavior, the author suggests, is virtually endemic to being male. Indeed, Shiozawa, a company executive in "I Doubt It" explains away his "safe little love affairs" by thinking: "That's how we men are. Everyone does it some time or other."¹⁸

What they also do is advance themselves at all costs, even if it means making anonymous phone calls to one's company chairman to slander a superior and thus replace him, as Shiozawa does. Yet such acts gnaw away at these men, despite their rationalizations. While never having to face the full consequences of their self-indulgence, many of these characters tend to suffer the slow punishments of self-doubt and fear of discovery.

This is certainly the case with Shiomura, in "Mr. Carp," who is forty-two, "a man's most crucial year,"¹⁹ according to a Japanese proverb as Mukoda reminds us. On a pleasant Sunday afternoon someone mysteriously leaves in his kitchen a large, live carp in a plastic bucket. The family is puzzled by this but he recognizes the fish as the pet of

his former lover, whom he has not seen since he abruptly ended the affair a year earlier. "Was this a sign that she was angry or a kind of revenge?"²⁰ he wonders. He never knows but it does shake the placid veneer of Shiomura's family life.

Mukoda Kuniko's achievement in her fiction is in the way she lifts the curtain on small domestic disturbances. Some of these pieces, due to their sparseness and brevity, come off more as treatments for development into scripts for television family dramas than fully developed stories. Nonetheless, her work in *The Name of the Flower* effectively conveys not only the callowness of many of her characters, but also the inner frustrations that lie at the heart of their small, fragilely constructed worlds.

A notable, contemporary female voice from the People's Republic of China is Can Xue (the pseudonym of Deng Xiao-hua), who was born in Hunan Province in 1953. She has been writing seriously since the early 1980s and her work, as her translator Ronald Janssen observes in his Afterword to her *Dialogues in Paradise*, "is the most successful with the young and the disenchanting." He adds: "Love and anger, lyric and satire, not the political commitment of Chinese fiction or the detached irony of much Western modernism, are the twin impulses that power her fiction."²¹

Can Xue's short stories in *Dialogues in Paradise*, which marked her Western debut, are set in contemporary, rural China, and mirror its harsh conditions. But it is not long before she transcends the bleakness and banality of her setting and takes the reader into a world that at times approaches the phantasmagoric.

Indeed, her rural characters seem obsessed by anxieties which are aggravated both by family problems and the severe conditions of daily life. The narrator of "The Gloomy World of Ah Mei," for example, is trying to raise her young son after her husband has abandoned her. The boy "has never called me 'Mother,'"²² the narrator notes, and she feels that he is becoming more and more like his father each day. She must also contend with her elderly, sick mother who blames her for her husband's leaving. The story culminates in an expression of her awareness of just how trapped she feels, and her pessimism is summed up in the story's terse last line: "My house will collapse."²³

Later in *Dialogues in Paradise* we encounter one story that opens on a surreal note, told, aptly enough, by a man losing whatever remains of his sanity: "My mother has melted into a basin of soap bubbles."²⁴ This is followed by a story in which the narrator's mother decides to walk out on her family. "After she left," Can Xue writes, "Father's legs withered into wooden sticks tapping on the cement from morning to night."²⁵ Clearly, something is askew with the traditional vision of a sympathetic family gathered by the hearth. Throughout, Can Xue suggests, this old verity no longer applies. The center no longer holds.

One comes away from these terse short stories with the feeling of having awakened from a disturbing dream. Can Xue's evocative imagery does much to suggest her characters' sense of isolation and frustration. What we are left with is the work of a highly

original author who has emerged from and reflects aspects of a turbulent world which the rest of us can barely glimpse.

The “twin impulses” that Janssen referred to in regard to *Dialogues in Paradise* are more fully realized in her 1991 work, *Old Floating Cloud: Two Novellas*. The surreal elements of her shorter stories are given free rein in these novellas. It should not be surprising that Can Xue has more recently been described, in *Modern Chinese Women Writers*, as “the most non-traditional and modernistic Chinese woman writer.”²⁶

The longer of *Old Floating Cloud's* two novellas, “Yellow Mud Street,” is set in an unreal landscape which the narrator claims to remember even though “everyone says no such street ever existed.”²⁷ But it does exist, and its original cartographers include the likes of Kafka, Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Consider, for example, what Marquez wrote in one of his stories: “the world had been sad since Tuesday . . . and the sands of the beach . . . had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish.”²⁸

For Can Xue, Yellow Mud Street is a similarly unpleasant and unreal place where “the sun hung forever high in the yellow sky,”²⁹ and “every household hung last year’s rotten fish and meat in the sun.”³⁰ When a postal vehicle stops in the street for half an hour, “its tires decomposed . . . [and] the inner tube had turned to a lump of paste.”³¹ The houses’s “low windows [had] the eyes of ghosts.”³²

The inhabitants of this nether world are no better off. Their “favorite activity”³³ is selling rotten fruit; they were “all chicken-hearted,” and “were haunted by nightmares:” they “were always sleeping. Nobody knew how many years they’d been asleep.”³⁴ Can Xue’s denizens also take pride in their “‘S’ Machinery Factory,” though why it produces steel balls is an unchallenged mystery even to them.

But as the story develops, the residents awaken and find themselves enmeshed in trivial plots, frittering away their energies not on improving their quite literally decaying environment, but in spouting various mind-numbing slogans and bromides, which the translators Janssen and Jian Zhang have helpfully annotated throughout.

Can Xue has filled her novella with rats, maggots, disease, bats, and corpses, and an ever-present sewer which “blew out big bubbles.” To that she adds such interior monologues as: “When I touched my hair, it cracked dryly as if it were going to burst into flame.”³⁵

Her second, shorter novella, “Old Floating Cloud,” is another series of horrific, disjointed elements. It takes as its focus a married couple and the consequences of the husband’s far from romantic affair with a woman in the neighborhood. Here, too, is the familiar imagery: one of the women feels “so confused,” she says, she doesn’t know where she is, but imagines herself “lying in a swamp, surrounded by muddy, bubbling water.”³⁶

No doubt Can Xue’s grim, hallucinatory vision will leave the reader wondering what to make of all this. Clearly, social realism is not her aim. Indeed, like her literary predecessors in Eastern Europe and Latin America, Can Xue may well be using such

extreme methods to create—to some degree—a modern political allegory. Hers is a provocative voice that seeks to push (to borrow Tom Wolfe’s metaphor) the limits of the envelope of literary discourse, as she faces what she had described elsewhere as “the horrifying abyss.” *Old Floating Cloud* takes the reader on a tour of this abyss. Can Xue is its knowledgeable guide.

As modern, postwar Japanese women writers, Ariyoshi and Mukoda reveal at least as much about themselves as they do about society, be it through contemporary realism or historical fiction. As a postmodern writer in China, Can Xue, too, reveals much of herself, but through the veil of surrealistic allegory. To her, life seems a nightmare that appears in the starlight, “like a big black overcoat.”³⁷ Yet, ultimately it is well to consider what the critic and scholar Charlotte Innes observed about Can Xue in 1990: “though her world may seem nightmarish, remote, and impressionistic, the reader should remember that the people in it behave much as they would anywhere. They scheme, fall in love, irritate each other, deceive themselves, suffer, and still hope for better things.”³⁸

NOTES

1. Sawako Ariyoshi, *The River Ki*. Translated by Mildred Tahara. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1981), p. 122.
2. Ariyoshi, *The Doctor’s Wife*. Translated by Wakako Hironaka and Ann Siller Konstant. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1981), p. 132.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 163–64.
4. Ariyoshi, *Kabuki Dancer*. Translated by James R. Brandon. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1994), p. 15.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
9. Kuniko Mukoda, *The Name of the Flower*. Translated by Tomone Matsumoto. (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1994), p. 11.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
21. Can Xue, *Dialogues in Paradise*. Translated by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989), pp. 164–65.

22. Ibid., p. 20.
23. Ibid., p. 21.
24. Ibid., p. 31.
25. Ibid., p. 40.
26. Can Xue, *Old Floating Cloud: Two Novellas*. Translated by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991), p. ix.
27. Ibid., p. 3.
28. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," in *Leaf Storm and Other Stories*. (New York: Avon, 1973), p. 157.
29. *Old Floating Cloud*, p. 28.
30. Ibid., p. 19.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 11.
33. Ibid., p. 6.
34. Ibid., p. 8.
35. Ibid., p. 173.
36. Ibid., p. 178.
37. Ibid., p. 172.
38. Ibid., p. xvii.

Selected Bibliography

- Ariyoshi, Sawako. *The River Ki*. Translated by Mildred Tahara. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1981.
- . *The Doctor's Wife*. Translated by Wakako Hironaka and Ann Siller Konstant. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1981.
- . *Kabuki Dancer*. Translated by James R. Brandon. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1994.
- Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *Leaf Storm and Other Stories*. New York: Avon, 1973.
- Mukoda, Kuniko. *The Name of the Flower*. Translated by Tomone Matsumoto. Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1994.
- Xue, Can. *Dialogues in Paradise*. Translated by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989.
- . *Old Floating Cloud: Two Novellas*. Translated by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991.