A Postscript

Authors of the various essays that have appeared in the last several issues of EMJ have endeavored to incorporate in their essays the publications that appeared between the conference and the time of publication; of these, I would like to take special note of Marcia Yonemoto’s Mapping Early Modern Japan: Space, Place, and Culture in the Tokugawa Period, 1603-1868. Her work clearly moves in a number of intellectual directions that reflect the desiderata of conference participants. To cite only some of the larger elements: She takes the era on its own terms, liberated from subservience to Tokugawa links to post-Restoration Japan. Comparison with the West plays a role in the study, but it does not become one-sided; it is balanced by comparison with those societies closest to Japan. Yonemoto creatively exploits materials (literary sources and maps most heavily) that have not been widely used by American scholars and, more importantly, often uses them in ways that Japanese scholars have not, expanding their utility beyond the boundaries of the disciplines that typically use these sources. (Literary sources are used to explore mental maps of Japan; maps are explored for what they reveal of elite conceptions of Japan’s place in the world as well as in the context of scientific and technical development.) While not a biographical study, descriptions of her actors’ reveal their polymath intellectual and professional lives. Their activities, and the broader description of her subject heighten awareness of regional and class variation in the way people perceived the Japan in which they lived. The highly literate (and even artistic) individuals Yonemoto analyzes clearly rank as members of the elite, yet the study focuses on their more everyday perceptions of their world, not their role in governance and generation of artifacts of “high” culture.


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In The Chrysanthemum and the Fish, Howard Hibbett argues that the Japanese sense of humor has been unappreciated by both Japanese and Westerners, citing authorities as disparate as Arthur Koestler, who described Japanese humor as “astonishingly mild and poetical, like weak, mint-flavored tea” (p. 11) and Inoue Hisashi, who claimed that "on the whole Japanese people are serious" (p. 13). Hibbett challenges this assessment, arguing that Japan actually possesses a rich and varied comic tradition, making "the enormous corpus of Japanese literary humor, and of jokes, comic poetry, [and] recorded vestiges of oral storytelling" (p. 13) the subject of a book which is both amusing and informative.

The title is a parody of Ruth Benedict's famous 1946 study of Japanese cultural patterns, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword. Here, Hibbett pairs the chrysanthemum – Benedict's emblem of elite, aristocratic culture – with the fish, which he uses as an emblem of earthy, low culture, or in other words the comic. (The joke works in Japanese too: sakana [fish], though different semantically, has the same vowels as katana [sword], and hence is worth a bit of a chuckle.) He notes that the comic side of Japanese literary culture has been largely overlooked by scholars and excluded from the canon as well. Without attempting to offer a complex theoretical conceptualization of "humor" or facile generalizations about the Japanese "national character," Hibbett observes that the comic tradition in Japan is diverse and shaped by many forces, including regional and class differences, the interaction of literacy and orality, and changing social mores. His purpose is not to define Japanese humor, but to give readers some sense of its variety. While he does make frequent reference to humor in drama, rakugo storytelling, and other forms of performance, most of the discussion focuses on literary humor.

The first chapter presents an overview of Japanese humor from its earliest sources to its pre-
sent-day forms, making brief reference to major developments in the historical and social backgrounds of the periods it covers. This chapter is useful as a foundation for the more in-depth discussion that follows in later chapters, but it could also stand on its own as an introduction to the varieties of Japanese humor. Hibbett traces the earliest origins of literary humor to *Kojiki*, and takes note of the comic aspects of *Genji monogatari* and *Makura no sōshi*. Reference to the humor of the medieval period includes mention of kyōgen and popular tales. These early sources are discussed briefly, prefatory to the more detailed introduction that follows to the cultural landscape of the early modern period. Here he lists the major forms and genres of early modern humor, both written and oral, some of its celebrities and their works: Anrakuan Sakuden's *Seisuishō* (Laughs to Banish Sleep), Hokusai, Hiraga Gennai, and Jippensha Ikku all put in brief appearances. The last two are discussed more deeply in later chapters.

The balance of the book is a generally chronological survey: Chapter 2 has as its primary topic Saikaku's haikai and fiction but also discusses the cultural environment of Osaka in the Genroku period. Chapter 3 centers its discussion on eighteenth century Edo. It sifts through the varieties of fictional works and joke books that emerged from the milieu of the Yoshiwara quarter, highlighting the work of Gennai, Ōta Nanpo, and Santō Kyōden as well as some lesser-known "wits." Chapter 4 explores the interaction between *bakumatsu* period fiction and *rakugo* anchored around several major figures, Shikitei Samba and Ikku. Chapter 5 describes the developments of comic literature in the Meiji period as it confronted imported ideas of propriety, especially in literature. It explores Fukuzawa Yukichi's views on humor, the remarkable success of the British *rakugo* entertainer Henry Black, and offers a detailed analysis of humor in the work of Natsume Sōseki. The last chapter discusses the uneasy position of humor in the modern period – unacceptable as "pure literature" but nevertheless irresistible to writers such as Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, and Inoue Hisashi, as well as stars of stage and screen like Kitano Takeshi and Tamori. The book also features a large number of images, including many illustrations from early modern fictional works.

The *Chrysanthemum and the Fish* is most notable for its comprehensiveness. It covers a wide range of genres over four centuries of development, and manages to accomplish this in a way that informs as well as entertains. Broad descriptions of historical context and biographical details of individual authors mesh neatly with literary analysis. Best of all, Hibbett is able to convey a sense of the variety of the works he discusses by including a generous amount of translations. That most of these succeed in being funny is a testimony to the skill of the translator.

Still, the book leaves some questions open. Given the its impressive range of coverage, more thorough exploration of the Japanese concepts of humor would have been useful, especially as they were framed by terms such as *kokkei* (滑稽), *warai* (笑い), *okashimi* (おかしみ), and so on. Also, there is no discussion of the role of women in the history of humor's development in the early modern and modern periods. With the exception of some *kyōka* poets and *rakugo* performers, it appears that women were never the creators of humor in the centuries following the Heian period, only its object. The reason for this is worth discussing. Another concern is that the prose style might sometimes present problems for non-specialist readers, especially in the opening chapter. While its casual tone is inviting, in places it veers so rapidly through historical periods, names, and terms that it occasionally becomes hard to follow. Elsewhere, the specialist might be frustrated in the few places where the English titles of tales are given, but not the Japanese.

On the whole, however, the book is very readable and will be valuable for both non-specialists and specialists, particularly those interested in the literary and cultural history of early modern Japan. Erudite yet accessible, *The Chrysanthemum and the Fish* is a study of Japanese humor that is not merely finny, but funny.