

The Power of Place: Pathways from Awaji Island

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One of the pleasures of Japan, both as a research topic and as a place to visit, is the many extraordinarily distinctive people I meet there. Two particularly inventive individuals are Ōuchi Hyōe (1886–1980) and Tomiyama Taeko (b. 1921), both of whom hailed from Awaji Island, a place with a rich local history. It is the largest of the islands in Japan's Inland Sea although it is only 30 miles long and 13 miles wide and was accessible only by boat until 1998. Ōuchi, a professor of economics at Tokyo Imperial University and later President of Hōsei University, was a prominent critic of Japan's war and concurrent domestic oppression. Tomiyama, exactly one generation younger, shared Ōuchi's politics and worked as a journalist and professional artist. Both had a difficult war: Ōuchi spent eighteen months in prison while Tomiyama had to leave art school and struggled to find work as an unmarried mother. Both led enormously creative and productive lives and both firmly believed that Awaji provided them with imaginative resources that helped them do so.

This is not unusual: many Japanese people put great emphasis on the power of local place in forming their characters. Japan established its modern national identity in the mid-nineteenth century, the high age of imperialism, when doing so was an especially intensive and fraught task. And in the mutually constitutive process that is so common in eras of rapid social change, establishing a strong national identity both intensified and reshaped local identities, throughout the archipelago and then, in later decades, throughout the Japanese empire. Again not unusually, Japan's national identity has long been associated with its venerable cultural and aesthetic heritage. As Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan pointed out in 2001, while art history throughout the

globe was thought of as “a coherent history of civilization,” “linked to nation and ethnicity,” “what stands out in the history of art history in Japan is the tenacity of this nineteenth-century conceptual framework.”¹ Moreover, when national cultural authenticity is perceived to be at stake, all aspects of culture are political.

Indeed, for Japan, as Eiko Ikegami has shown, aesthetic and cultural activities were already well-established before the nineteenth century at local levels in ways that produced a “culture of civility” that helped transit from a society based on hereditary status to a more egalitarian one. These local identities served both as an infinitely variegated platform and a foil for the increasingly rigid and homogenous national one. As Ikegami explains, “Bonds of civility had connected Tokugawa people, loosely but definitely, in a symbolic plane of commonality in spite of the meticulously segmented nature of the Tokugawa polity.” The central animating quality of this “civility” was a commitment to an artistic pursuit. This “tradition of an aesthetic Japan inherited from the Tokugawa period” helped in “creating an image of Japan that connected the people to their own past in a distinctive way,” and so became the basis for a shared modern culture that predated the modern state.²

These people were not just appreciative of the arts but themselves became adept at their chosen poetry or painting style, performance or musical mode, or flower arranging, tea, bonsai, or calligraphy practice, or their perusal of the Chinese philosophical classical canon, or some other aesthetic pursuit. “The appearance of images of Japan as a country defined by aesthetic excellence was not the result of political initiatives on the part of rulers but was rather the product of people’s networking and market forces.”³ While this emerging sense of Japan as an aesthetically sophisticated nation could be and was mobilized by the government in the late nineteenth century, it was from the very beginning equally accessible to individuals who could do with it as they chose. Importantly, many of these cultural circles, even early on, included women among their midst, as Anne Walthall has shown for one talented woman from another

¹ Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan “Japanese Art History 2001: The State and Stakes of Research,” *Art Bulletin* March 2001 Vol 83.1 pp.105–122, quotes, p. 113.

² Eiko Ikegami, *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 364.

³ Ikegami, p. 374.

small community.⁴ These aesthetic and cultural local identities were—and remain—powerfully felt, widely shared, and completely legible to outsiders.

More precisely, as Ikegami argues, “the distinctive vitality of these pre-modern associations lies in the fact that group activities led participants to a conscious awareness of the multiplicity of their identities. These sites of aesthetic sociability developed a number of ritual technologies over the course of history that made it easier for participants to decouple themselves for brief intervals of time from feudal network constraints . . . [and] also encouraged them to switch their identities intentionally in different communicative settings.” These voluntary associations . . . and the possibility of multiple affiliational identities made on the basis of individual choice seems to be an important index of modernity.⁵ Equally importantly, the pursuit of aesthetic practices created a range of overlapping local communities that gave people the inner strength to forge their own paths even at moments when that was very hard to do.

Tomiyama and Ōuchi both participated in this culture of civility through their pursuit of the arts. Tomiyama decided to become a professional artist very young, when that was still an unusual choice for a woman. Ōuchi began to learn calligraphy when he was five years old, after his father took him to buy ink, inkstone, brushes, and an apple-wood box to put them in, and sent him for lessons with the local 70-year old Buddhist priest.⁶ At a class reunion shortly after the war, Ōuchi wrote out a poem from the eighth-century compilation, the *Manyōshū*, in his beautiful calligraphy for each of his former students, celebrating the hopeful moment in spring when ferns sprout even from inhospitable rock. Koike Eiji, who had studied under Ōuchi in the 1930s, was struck by the depth of his knowledge of an enormous repertoire of classical Japanese poems and proverbs while also displaying mastery of modern, Western, scientific learning.⁷

⁴ Anne Walthall, *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman: Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration*, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

⁵ Ikegami, p. 368.

⁶ Ōuchi Hyōe, “Furosato o Omou,” in *Ware, Hito, Hon*, Iwanami 1958, pp. 3–22.

⁷ Koike Eiji “Ōuchi Sensei no Meihitsu” in insert to vol. 2 Ōuchi Hyōe *Chōsakushū*, pp. 7–8. Ōuchi had refreshed his memory of the *Manyōshū* and deepened his calligraphy skills while imprisoned, since he was not allowed reading material on current events. Laura Hein, *Reasonable Men, Powerful Words: Political Culture and Expertise in 20th Century Japan*. University of California Press and Woodrow Wilson Interna-

This longstanding rich cultural life at the local level became a resource to push back against one of the most obvious effects of the process of national integration, a relentless focus on Tokyo, where most of the exciting new educational and professional opportunities were located. By the 1920s, as Louise Young has pointed out, the “age of the city...became a vehicle for the rising power of a new middle class of professionals and intellectuals within urban society and politics. Growth of white collar employment in factories and local government, the proliferation of public and private networks of city services and the expansion of urban commerce and culture industries all swelled the ranks of the new middle class, which grew from an estimated 4 percent of the population in 1915 to 12 percent in 1925.”⁸ Opportunity for the most talented young people usually meant moving to Tokyo while the countryside was the place that people left. Ōuchi and Tomiyama were part of this brain drain, both going “up” to Tokyo for college and then living there essentially for the rest of their lives. Ōuchi arrived in 1908, before the big expansion of the 1920s and exactly twenty years earlier than Tomiyama in 1938.

Ōuchi understood the social effects of this process very clearly, according to one of his students, Suzuki Eiji, a poor farmer’s son from Tohoku. Suzuki was transfixed by Ōuchi’s lecture on local public finance: Ōuchi explained that the central government imposed taxes to pay for elementary schooling as a national good but what that meant for farmers was that they handed over the funds to enable their educated children to leave the village permanently for better urban jobs and so, although everyone shared the tax burden, the benefits were very unequally enjoyed. Ōuchi was describing Suzuki’s own life and its relationship to his larger society in terms he’d never imagined but that guided his thinking for the next thirty years.⁹ Tomiyama had a similar revelation about her own embodiment of larger inequalities when she thought

tional Center for Scholars Press, 2004, p. 70. ローラ・ハイン, 理性ある人びと力ある言葉—大内兵衛グループと行動, 東京: 岩波書店, 2007年7月。

⁸ Louise Young, *Beyond the Metropolis: Second Cities and Modern Life in Interwar Japan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 5. See also pp. 61–82 for her argument about the importance of local culture in regional cities.

⁹ Suzuki Eiji “Ōuchi Sense no Koto,” pp. 226–229, *Sanrokushū* (At the Foot of the Mountain) by Ōuchi Hyōe Sensei Kiju Kinen Zuisō Shūshutsuban Sewaijin Daihyō and Arisawa Hiromi, Privately published 1965.

about her higher-school years spent in Manchuria, where her family lived as part of the urban imperial diaspora, and realized how poorly her Korean classmates had been treated by the school officials.¹⁰

But what did Awaji as a distinctive place offer to these two specific individuals? Already in the Tokugawa period, Awaji was an important stop on the marine trade route known as Kitamaesen, which stretched from Shimonoseki in the south to Hokkaido in the north, and included the sophisticated hub of Osaka, making the island relatively prosperous. As Luke Roberts explains, fishermen on the island's western shore worked throughout the calendar year, focusing on high-quality species that they could sell in Osaka and Kobe at a premium, including octopus, which have been harvested in Awaji waters for at least three thousand years. Awaji also has long been home to black pine coastal forests, which provided lumber, fuel, and fertilizer. These forests have been managed by local authorities at least since 1650, and in the late nineteenth century, one of the people charged with this responsibility was Tomiyama Taeko's grandfather. His contemporary, Ōuchi's father, was a prosperous farmer, whose home was visible from the Tomiyama front door.¹¹

Awaji was a distinctive node in the early modern national commercial network in other ways as well. When urban commoners became more fashion-conscious in the late Tokugawa period, as both Ikegami and Amy Stanley have shown, they popularized blue and brown woven kimono patterns made from indigo-dyed cotton, leading to a major expansion of indigo production, particularly in places famous for the high

¹⁰ Laura Hein, "Postcolonial Conscience: Making Moral Sense of Japan's Modern World," in Laura Hein and Rebecca Jennison eds, *Imagination without Borders: Feminist Artist Tomiyama Taeko and Social Responsibility*, Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan Press, 2010, pp. 1–28. Open access edition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

<https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/sx61dp068> Accessed September 13, 2020.

¹¹ Michiro Fujihara, Mariko Ohnishi, Hiroyuki Miura, and Yoshihiro Sawada, "Conservation and management of the Coastal Pine Forest as a Cultural Landscape, in Jae-Eun Kim, Jianguo Wu, Nobukazu Nakagoshi eds. *Landscape Ecology in Asian Cultures*, Springer, 2010, pp. 235–248. Luke Roberts, "Fishing Villages in Northern Awaji," in Sharon Sadako Takeda and Luke Roberts, *Japanese Fishermen's Coats from Awaji Island*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2001, pp. 11–31. The indigo-dyed coats were expensive: the materials cost thirty yen and the sewing was 5–6 yen, at a time when a day's wages for a sailor were 80 sen, so the total cost was about two month's salary.

quality of dye, such as Awaji.¹² According to Sharon Sadako Takeda, “Indigo dye workshops (konya) were part of the commercial landscape of every fishing village on Awaji Island.” So were the beautiful ceremonial coats made with indigo-dyed cloth and white decorative stitching that marked the wearer as a prosperous fisherman.¹³ By the early twentieth-century, Awaji was also a vacation home for wealthy mainlanders and a favorite painting spot for visual artists.

Thus, Awaji in the early nineteenth-century was already a cosmopolitan place, with a more well-travelled population than was typical of rural sites of the era. One hundred years later, travel meant a great deal to Tomiyama and Ōuchi, both of whom not only experienced it as tremendously intellectually and emotionally generative, but also routinely published accounts of their journeys, appointing themselves as guides to their readers. For both, international travel resolved anxieties and self-doubts that had hindered their self-expression. Tomiyama has said that her first overseas trips, to Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia helped her realize that culture is always on the move, meaning that she had no need to worry that her own artistic production was derivative of Western models and therefore inauthentic. This insight unlocked her creativity in ways that made her art suddenly more prolific and more profound. Similarly Ōuchi’s first overseas trip, a year spent in New York City in 1916 at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, was where “I had my first taste of the psychology of democracy . . . and I drank in American culture.”¹⁴ His journey helped Ōuchi conclude that Japan was already a fully modern society, just as it did for Tomiyama, similarly giving him enormous confidence both in the power of social scientific dynamics rather than Japanese exceptionalism and in his own chosen path forward in life. He too felt free to borrow elements from around the world and creatively rearrange them, without either a gnawing anxiety about the state of Japan’s modernity or

¹² Ikegami p. 284. Amy Stanley, *Stranger in the Shogun’s City: A Japanese Woman and Her World*, New York: Scribner, 2020.

¹³ Sharon Sadako Takeda, “Waves and Folds: The Life of Fishermen’s Coats,” in Sharon Sadako Takeda and Luke Roberts, *Japanese Fishermen’s Coats from Awaji Island*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History: 2001, pp. 33–53, quote p. 44.

¹⁴ Ōuchi Hyōe, *Keizaigaku Gojūnen*, Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1951, p. 60. His two older brothers, one who joined the Navy and another who became an executive of a railroad company, similarly chose careers that encouraged travel.

the insistence that Japan's superiority was divinely bestowed, stances that were characteristic of so many social scientists of his generation.¹⁵

Ōuchi's earlier journey, to Tokyo Imperial University did not fully provide that kind of certainty, although he was already at least tentatively moving toward blazing his own trail, as he recounted in a 1947 essay. Ōuchi wrote there that his move to Tokyo perfectly matched that of Natsume Sōseki's protagonist Sanshirō, without, he hurried to reassure his readers, the traumatic encounter with the woman on the train to Tokyo that blighted Sanshirō's life. In 1909, the same year Sōseki published the novel *Sanshirō* (serially, 1908, in book form 1909), Ōuchi journeyed from Awaji to start university.¹⁶ On his first day in the capital, he bought the peaked cap that marked him as a fashionable student, which, he still remembered, had cost almost three yen. In his memory, the Tokyo Imperial University buildings were just as Sōseki described them, and he too felt at times like a "stray sheep" in the metropolis, intellectually and emotionally challenged by the requirement that he absorb so much that was new.¹⁷ As Sōseki's translator, Jay Rubin, tells us, Sōseki repeatedly used this image of lost lambs in the novel to describe the plight of young people "as long as they fail to find a way that will enable them to be true to themselves."¹⁸ As Ōuchi was well aware, Sōseki thought that the most important task facing young adults was to discover their own paths through life. Sanshirō was just one of his protagonists who vainly struggled to accomplish that goal.

But even when Ōuchi and Tomiyama were far from home, they also took Awaji with them wherever they went. Awaji boasts a rich cultural heritage, including its distinctive puppet theater tradition and significant Shinto, Buddhist, and folk-religion sites, all of which were intimately familiar to Ōuchi, whose father took him to see

¹⁵ Miriam Kingsberg Kadia, *Into the Field: Human Scientists of Transwar Japan*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020 and Reto Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915-1952*, Cornell University Press, 2015.

¹⁶ Ōuchi Hyōe, *Ōuchi Hyōeshū, Gendai shisei zenshū* (6) "Hyōe no Jokyo" (Hyōe goes to Tokyo) pp. 85-93. Tokyo: Nihon Shobō 1960. Originally published Sept 15, 1947. Natsume Sōseki, *Sanshirō: A Novel*, Penguin, 2009.

¹⁷ Hyōe no Jokyo p. 92.

¹⁸ Jay Rubin, "Sanshirō and Sōseki" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, v. 36, 1976, pp. 147-180, quote on p. 162.

puppet shows and sumo matches at the Awaji shrines on every festival day.¹⁹ Tomiyama, of course, made these puppets the central figures of her 2007–2009 series on Ebisu and the Sea Wanderers, focusing on their important religious role, serving to manage the relationship between humans and gods. As Jane Law explains, the puppets traditionally acted “to mediate the dichotomies of order and chaos, purity and pollution, danger and safety, good and evil, the human and the divine, and in recent years, the ordinary and the exotic.”²⁰ The puppets were manipulated by itinerant artists who travelled around the Inland Sea and elsewhere, called *kugutsu*, the term Tomiyama uses for the puppets themselves in *Sea Wanderers*.²¹ In her narrative series—as in Awaji tradition—the puppets travelled with Ebisu, the folk god who watches over fishermen but is capable of causing epidemics, shipwrecks, and earthquakes as well as averting them, and whose home shrine is on the mainland very close to Awaji island. “Ritual puppeteers were understood to mediate and transform the spiritual powers of this enigmatic and dangerous deity into a deity of luck (*fukushin*) as Ebisu is commonly understood today.”²² The puppets serve to contain Ebisu’s destructive potential. Ebisu is also a sojourner and protector of people at the margins of society, and so is capable of disruption in yet other ways. Indeed, the puppeteers themselves were outcasts in the early modern social order because their work, negotiating with the gods, caused them to become ritually polluted.

Both Tomiyama and Ōuchi made use of folk-religious motifs in their cultural production, particularly as they grew older, using the passage of time to make another sort of intellectual journey. They did so for exactly the same reason: both had been repelled by the aesthetics of fascism and its glorification of violence and sacrifice, its insistence on celebrating the abstract nation above human happiness, and its harsh inequalities. Every aspect of wartime society was reconceived to express those val-

¹⁹ Ōuchi Hyōe, “Furosato o Omou,” in *Ware, Hito, Hon*, Iwanami 1958, pp. 3–22.

²⁰ Jane Law, *Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of the Japanese Awaji Ningyō Tradition*, Princeton University Press: 1997, p. 4.

²¹ See the permanent website maintained by Northwestern University for images from this series and others mentioned here.

<https://imaginationwithoutborders.northwestern.edu/collections/hiruko/>

Accessed September 13, 2020.

²² Law, pages 12, 112–115.

ues, with, for example, the delicate downward drift of cherry blossoms now signifying the early death of a conscripted soldier in what Ōuchi already knew at the time was an unwinnable war.

Ōuchi and Tomiyama, like all artists and other producers of culture who wished to distance themselves from the policies of the Japanese government, faced the difficult challenge of doing so in ways that felt honest. For this reason, ALL of their aesthetic choices were carefully considered. These creative individuals went back to their own childhoods on Awaji before the high-water mark of fascism in Japan for inspiration, braiding their local memories into personal philosophies that made use of ideas gleaned from a variety of traditions. They each ranged across their chosen sources very purposefully, mixing high art and folklore, Japanese, Asian, and western culture, and images, poetry and prose, in order to make connections in ways that undercut as many international and domestic hierarchies as possible.

Tomiyama and Ōuchi were particularly troubled by claims to divine protection to justify Japan's war and punish dissent. In her 1994 painting, *Sending Off a Soldier*, Tomiyama zeroed in on the extent to which people believed that it was not just proper but also beautiful to accept social norms that in retrospect seem cruel. When Tomiyama painted soldiers and patriotic women's group members as foxes, deceiving young people into a fast marriage and, hopefully, impregnation so that the soldier could accept death joyfully while his bride became a single mother trapped in her in-laws' home, she was bemoaning the ruthlessness and cult of uniformity that had overwhelmed the culture of civility. Ōuchi made his revulsion at this ethos clear in his postwar memoir when he complained that "Japanese economic thinking, especially during World War II, was far more impoverished and pedantic than in Britain or the United States or Germany or Stalin's economy... They were stupid even for fascists... And the bought-and-paid-for economists who served them happily offered up their gift of ideas, which were nothing more than rotten fish." Meanwhile, he had absolutely no respect for his former colleagues and commented with obvious disgust that even within the Ministry of Finance, people argued for "a Japanese-style theory of taxation." He was appalled at the claim that "when the Japanese people offer their taxes to the state, it has the same meaning as when they offer the first fruits of the harvest to

the gods.”²³

Ōuchi had his own disturbing and extremely personal experiences with the concept of ritual pollution during the war. One of the hardest aspects of those years for him was that communication with other people put them in danger, because the Special Higher Police used that contact as a trigger to investigate them for ideological disloyalty. Then, after his arrest, imprisonment, and two trials for sedition, Ōuchi was found innocent by an appeals court but, in a deeply felt blow, neither he nor his two closest colleagues were offered their professorships back. As a university official explained, this was because the three men were “ritually polluted” (*misogi o shite nai*) and a danger to the now “purified” Economics Department.²⁴ The university had no effective ritual—or no desire to stage one—to bring back their lost status.

Tomiyama stands out for her capacity to express regret at the cruelty done to others in her name, and she did so in ways that harked back to Awaji tradition. The theme of averting and deflecting ritual defilement is at the heart of Tomiyama’s work in the 1980s on the “military comfort women.” She reimagined these young girls in “At the Bottom of the Pacific,” (1985) as washed clean by saltwater, provided both by their marine environment and by their unhappy tears. Among the first people in the world to reimagine these individuals as tragic protagonists rather than either “ruined women” or necessary sacrifices for the Japanese Empire, this was a profoundly reparative project.

Just as Tomiyama drew on Awaji’s trickster foxes and travelling puppets, Ōuchi returned to the folklore of his local place in the 1947 essay on his experience of arriving in Tokyo. He explained at the end that Sanshirō’s fictional experiences, recounted in the young man’s own voice, had profoundly affected “the totality of my inner self and that of my generation.”²⁵ But, then he asked himself why he was not trapped in the unhappy stasis that characterized Sanshirō at the end of the novel. In 1947 all of his readers would have known that simply raising this question also evoked the problem of what had compelled Ōuchi to reject the dominant wartime ideology. Ōuchi’s

²³ Ōuchi *Keizai Gojūnen*, pp. 268, 289–290.

²⁴ Wakimura Yoshitarō, “Kaisō no senchū-sengo (ge) sengo to gakusha,” as told to Mitani Taichirō, *Chūō Kōron*, December 1995, pp. 160–175.

²⁵ Hyōe no Jokyo p. 92.

conclusion was that he only differed from Sanshirō by good luck. He too might have had the misfortune to encounter a “Nopperabō,” first in the form of the woman on the train, and then again while stepping through the university’s main gate. This humanoid but eerily faceless folk legend comes from Kagawa Prefecture, just across the Naruto straits from Awaji. Nopperabō, which are sometimes foxes in disguise, delight in discomfiting humans by wiping the features clean from their faces, leaving only a blank slate. They take particular pleasure in freaking people out a second time, when after the first unsettling encounter, the hapless victim describes his experience to a stranger, who then asks “was it like this?” and repeats the self-cancelling gesture.²⁶ The faceless humanoid who led Sanshirō and his generation astray simply let the home-town boy from Awaji pass through Tokyo with his prewar sense of his particular “culture of civility” relatively intact.

²⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nopperab%C5%8D>.

The book *An introduction to Yōkai culture: monsters, ghosts, and outsiders in Japanese history*, Komatsu Kazuhiko, translated by Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt, University of California Press 2015 waiting for me at library.