

REVIEWS



Japan



Tomoko Aoyama, *Reading Food in Modern Japanese Literature*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008. viii + 273 pages, b/w figure, notes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, US\$52.00; ISBN 978-0-8248-3285-8.

FOOD pervades every aspect of life in contemporary Japan. Next to the most obvious places where one encounters food—supermarkets, restaurants, convenience stores, kiosks, and vending machines—it is also omnipresent in the media. Food populates ubiquitous cooking programs and food-focused talk and quiz shows on television, features in cookery columns and entertainment and travel sections of popular magazines, as well as occupying the bulk of shelf space in bookstores. Along with recipe books and pseudo-scientific treatises on Japanese and foreign cuisines, food also permeates modern Japanese literature, as Tomoko Aoyama demonstrates in her fascinating and expertly researched volume.

The book covers a wide range of twentieth-century novels and other literary forms, in which in one way or another food plays a prominent role. The material is divided thematically, except for chapter 1, which focuses on a specific genre of diaries. Chapters 2 and 3 analyze what Aoyama labels “down-to-earth eating and writing”—realistic descriptions of the hand-to-mouth existence of Japanese peasants and the working classes involved in the production and distribution of food. The former concentrates on food as a signifier of poverty and marker of social inequality, while the latter deals specifically with the body and “polluted” food, as well as hunger (in both a literal and figurative sense) in women’s writing. The connection between food and gender reappears in chapter 6, where contemporary texts by Japanese female writers are examined, including the bestselling novel by Yoshimoto Banana, *Kitchin* (Kitchen, 1988), and a celebrated collection of Tawara Machi’s poetry, *Sarada kinenbi* (Salad Anniversary, 1987). Chapter 4 covers cannibalism, from *Ningen sōsēji* (Human Sausage, 1936) set at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, to the futuristic *Kachikujin*

yap (Yapoo, the Human Cattle, 1970–1999), in which the distant descendants of the Japanese are raised to be consumed by the “white” aristocracy of the Empire of Hundred Suns, aka the British Universal Empire. Chapter 5 looks at the gastronomic novel—fiction that depicts some sort of gastronomic quest, including bestsellers such as Murai Gensai’s *Kuidōraku* (Gourmandism, 1903), and lesser-known works like the comic-satirical riposte to it written by K da Rohan.

Although food is the superseding theme in Aoyama’s book, the culinary culture of modern Japan is not on the menu. As the title indicates, *reading*—not the food itself—remains the focus of the analysis. Food in chapter 2 serves as a potent signifier of the ordinary, and eating human flesh in chapter 4 represents a displacement, an encounter with the unfamiliar—crossing a frontier into the Other. Food in literature is rarely just food, perhaps with the exception of gastronomic novels. Rather, food in literature is a code, often with complex and ambiguous meanings. As the author explains in the conclusion, “[r]eading with the focus on food enables, encourages, and demands multiple interpretations, many of which destabilize our understanding of how literary work depends on and creates its conventions” (205).

The rich feast cooked by Aoyama is not always easily digestible, especially to a reader not accustomed to literary analysis. Yet, as a scholar of Japanese culinary history, I find this book extremely important for everyone interested in Japanese food culture.

There is usually a high degree of correlation between the dietary reality and the depictions of food in literature. Literature can often serve as an ethnographic source in the study of (historical development of) food and eating. For example, detailed sketches of restaurant and home meals depicted as the backdrop of narratives not infrequently reveal important information for culinary historians. Aoyama’s volume beams with such examples. Nagatsuka Takashi’s novel *Tsuchi* (The Soil, 1910) and Kobayashi Takiji’s *Kani kōsen* (Crab Cannery Boat, 1929), testify to the dietary deprivation that the underprivileged social classes experienced in early twentieth-century Japan. Ibuse Masuji’s *Kuroi Ame* (Black Rain, 1966) provides us with details of the food supply situation in Hiroshima during World War II. The line between fantasy and fiction appears particularly thin in the case of modern diaries, which as Aoyama points out, are different from the classical *nikki*, being a kind of a hybrid between a diary and other literary forms. They are often written in retrospect, incorporating much of historical reality into the narrative. For example, Inoue Hisashi’s *Tōkyō Sebun Rōzu* (Tokyo Seven Roses, 1999), which is the story of women feeding their families and rescuing the Japanese language at the time of the Allied occupation includes a real-life character, Chief of the Education Sub-Section of SCAP, Lit. Comdr. Robert King Hall Jr. Even in the cannibalism chapter the connection with reality remains strong. Ōoka Shōhei’s *Nobi* (Fires on the Plane, 1952), which is a novel that takes the form of a journal, refers to wartime cannibalism committed by Japanese soldiers in South Pacific, and Kara Jūrō’s *Sagawa-kun no tegami* (Letters from Sagawa, 1983) is loosely based on the widely publicized 1981 incident of a Japanese student in Paris who killed and ate his Dutch girlfriend.

In 2010 the Prize Committee of the Asian Studies Association of Australia awarded *Reading Food in Modern Japanese Literature* with the Mid-Career Researcher Prize

for Excellence in Asian Studies justified its decision by praising “clarity of exposition,” “the profound knowledge of modern Japanese literature,” and “the assurance of the author’s voice” (http://asaa.asn.au/Announce/midcareer_prize_2010.php; accessed 26 September 2010). Along with these qualities, Tomoko Aoyama’s work has also contributed to the scholarship on Japanese food history, clearly situating the food-focused media entertainment in Japan as a recent phenomenon. According to Aoyama, the preoccupation with food in Japan was directly inspired by the gourmet boom of the 1980s, which in turn emerged in reaction to “the repression and oppression of appetite” during the war and the immediate postwar period (131). “To talk about food, to desire food, or to be at all interested in food was generally regarded as vulgar” and even at the beginning of the gourmet boom “the pursuit of edible delicacies occupied a very limited place in literature” (131). The fact that only one out of the six chapters in the book deals with gastronomic fiction testifies to this claim. Moreover, as the author points out, Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s *Bishoku kurabu* (The Gourmet Club, 1919), which was to become an exemplar for the gastronomic novel, was only rediscovered during the 1980s after being neglected by critics for nearly six decades.

As I have argued elsewhere, attributing the consumption practices of the past with the characteristics of the present is a persistent tendency in Japan. Publicists inside and outside Japan are eager to drape Japanese cuisine in an aura of exoticism, uniqueness, and traditionalism (CWIERTKA 2006, 179). Tomoko Aoyama’s volume demystifies one more culinary myth, contributing to our understanding of the past as well as the present.

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REFERENCES

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