

The Unconventional Origins of Modern Japan

Mantei Oga and the Politics of Play

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Introduction

Good morning. I am going to talk about Mantei Oga (1818-1890), a late-Tokugawa period popular writer who celebrated the unconventional. In the 1850s and 1860s he was well-known for his witty but often didactic prose style; following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, he used *gesaku* skills to poke holes in arguments seeking to Westernize Japan. In a series of nonsense books, Oga urged his readers to reflect on the influx of new and unfamiliar ideas, including notions of freedom, equality, independence, and international-mindedness that flew in the face of the commonsense inherited from the past. In particular I will look at his parody of Fukuzawa Yukichi's Encouragement of Learning (*Gakumon no susume*, 1872-76). Entitled The Sparrows of Learning (*Gakumon suzume*) published in 1875, it took the form of a debate between two sparrows, one representing Fukuzawa's position and the other, the Japanese sparrow, representing the commonsense of established views of the world. His use of humor and satire was effective in making people in the early Meiji period reflect upon and re-think political and social realities. Oga's playful yet biting criticism of Fukuzawa's

Westernization project also invites us now (in 2013) to re-think the origins of modern Japan. Instead of Tokugawa-period values such as perseverance, diligence and frugality that easily grafted on to Western notions that supported the development of industrial capitalism, including the so-called Protestant ethic, Japan's modernity may equally have more unconventional roots in a Tokugawa parallel world of non-conformity, hedonism, and play.¹

Mantei Oga

Biographical details on Mantei Oga are sparse. He was born in 1818, the son a wealthy merchant from Kazusa province northeast of Edo.² Wealth gave him an excellent education and elite samurai status, but he disappointed parental expectations. Around 1837, at the age of 18, he took up residence in Edo, and became immersed in the playful world of urban popular culture.³

He joined a bohemian group of writers, artists, playwrights, and humorists. He is remembered for mammoth 58 volume biography of the life of the Buddha, a series that appeared between between 1845 and 1871. But he was also the master of so-called "funny books" (*kokkeibon*) and collections of jokes and riddles (*chaban*).

Mantei Oga had an established reputation prior to 1868, but his criticism of the Meiji enlightenment project has contributed to his near invisibility in Japanese literary

and social history. We know a great deal about Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901), Nakamura Masanao (1832-91), Nishi Amane (1829-97) and other Westernizers. But we know far less about their opponents, many of whom, like Mantei Oga, were dismissed as out of step with the times.

John Mertz, writing in 2003, is perhaps the first scholar to take Mantei seriously as someone whose writings are “packed with logical arguments designed to tear at the fabric of Meiji Westernism.”⁴ I profited from reading John Mertz’s book, *Novel Japan: Spaces of Nationhood in Early Meiji Narrative* and recommend it if you have not read it already. This is where I first encountered Manta Oga.

Poking Fun at Fukuzawa

Even before the Meiji Restoration, Fukuzawa Yukichi had begun to publish (and teach) about the West, convinced that Japan’s future could only be secured through the introduction of Western civilization, a process that he termed *bunmei kaika*. In 1872, he began to publish the *Encouragement of Learning*, and introduce new ideas and values such as equality, independence, utility, and rationality, calling them essential if Japan were to succeed in the new world order.

Fukuzawa and his books (so-called *Fukuzawa-bon*) were in high fashion during the early 1870s; but at the same time there were obvious targets for satirical comment. In

1872, Kanagaki Robun published his short story on the virtues of beef-eating: “You won’t get civilized if you don’t eat meat!” His short story “Sitting Cross-Legged at the Beef Pot” (*Aguranabe*, 1871), while seeming to advocate Western style cuisine, in fact strikes a blow at Fukuzawa’s definition of civilization.⁵

In 1872, Robun again used parody to mock Fukuzawa’s understanding of Western science. His “How to Use Cucumbers” (*Kyūri zukai*, 1872) took advantage of a phonetic reading of Fukuzawa’s 1870 work “An Outline of Physics” (*Kyūri zukai*). Robun’s *Fukuzawa-bon* was filled with nonsense, having nothing to do whatsoever with Western science.⁶

But it was Mantei Oga who engaged Fukuzawa most directly. In the four-year period between 1872 and 1875, he published a remarkable series of over 30 chapbooks, many of them in multiple volumes, marshaling his wit against Fukuzawa and others who sought the destruction of the established social, cultural, and intellectual order.⁷ The booklets covered a variety of topics: beef eating (one story inverted the world order and described a society in which animals relished the taste of human flesh); the equality of the sexes, the importance of agriculture and commerce; Japanese and Western dress and cosmetic practices (in noting that Western women poked holes in their ears to hang ornamentation, he asked “Who is the true barbarian?”); religion; fads for rabbits and

Western dogs: even the emperor was held up to ridicule as an honorable fool convinced of his own self-importance.

But the main target of Oga's brush was the new learning associated with "civilization and enlightenment."

Oga's first jab at Fukuzawa was "A Journey through Heaven and Hell" (*Odontaku shinbun kibun*, 1872, two vols.). "Now is the time," he proclaimed, "for enlightenment and progress (*kaimei shinpō*)" but the new age constantly requires people to choose between heaven and hell. Oga urged "priority to be given to opening hearts to wisdom rather than wasting money in a vain attempt to understand the science (*kyūri*) of all things."⁸

Oga followed this with two volume series on the importance of agriculture: "New Understandings: The Harvest Festival" (*Rikai shinbun, gokokusai*, 1872, two vols.). At one point the hero, Sekai Dai'ichirō (Mr. Number One in the World) is allowed to vent his anger against the intrusion of "civilization" and education that promotes the understanding of science (*kyūri*). His dream instead is to spread the abundance of agriculture throughout the world.

Oga's next book, *The Thunderstruck Sage*, (*Seijin kimotsubushi*, 1872, two vols.) features Shunji, the young son of a merchant who deals in Chinese goods. As a youth

man he leaves home to study Confucianism under a well-known teacher. He succeeds in becoming a great scholar, but when he returns home, he discovers that he is ill-equipped to deal with the real world. His wife divorces him and his students won't listen to him. In the end he abandons scholarship (*gakumon*), calling it a waste of time, and devotes himself instead to agriculture and commerce.⁹

In *The Scales of Wisdom* (*Chie no hakari*, 3 vols., 1874) a village chief installs scales in his village in order to measure intelligence; scholars (*gakusha*), however are found to be lacking in wisdom whereas farmers and merchants have it in abundance.

Finally, *A Professor of Pleasure* (*Seirō hanka-tsu*, 3 vols., 1874-75) tells the (semi-autobiographical) tale of the son of a samurai family in the countryside who came to Tokyo intent upon studying the West. Instead of devoting himself to scholarship, he began to frequent the Yoshiwara licensed quarters and established himself as the patron of a high-ranking geisha. He made his successful rise in the world as an authority on the pleasure district. In this way, Oga mocked Fukuzawa's contention that only the powers of Western learning could bring about success in life.

The Sparrows of Learning

The Sparrows of Learning (*Gakumon suzume*), published in 1875, was Oga's most sustained critique of Fukuzawa and the new ideas coming in from the West. The series

of three two-part booklets parodied the first three issues of Fukuzawa's Encouragement of Learning.¹⁰ The books looked the same, and the text used a similar style, although each of Oga's booklets included one illustration by Kawanabe Kyōsai as a sort of centerfold. Abandoning the puns and playful irreverence of his earlier "funny books," Oga's language in the Sparrows of Learning adopted Fukuzawa's straightforward style. The similarities invited inspection—and inspection revealed messages that were poles apart.

The preface described the origin of the debate between the two groups of sparrows. Oga noted with alarm that a flock of Western sparrows were beginning to twitter the words of Fukuzawa words incessantly. A group of eastern sparrows decided that the time had come to confront the ringleader (Fukuzawa) head-on in spirited debate. The preface concludes: "The [eastern sparrows] are worried over the noisy twittering of these Western birds. They fear that their growing numbers and their mediocrity will destroy the very lifeblood of the country. They have decided to speak out against this fashionable chatter spreading so wildly. In order to decisively confront the raging waves of the current fashion, they feel it necessary to engage the ringleader [of the Western sparrows] in spirited debate, even resorting to the use of disrespectful language.

The debate began with Fukuzawa's famous words: "It is said that heaven did not

create people above other people nor below other people.” The Western sparrow went on mindlessly repeating the master’s words: “Heaven's aim is that all people are equal at birth without distinction of high and low or noble and mean. People should exert their body and soul in a manner worthy of lords of creation and freely use the myriad things of the world to fulfill the needs of clothing, food, and dwelling. So long as they do not obstruct others, each may thereby pass their life in happiness.” True to their word, the Eastern sparrows did not shirk from direct speech: “Shut your bill! Such nonsense! Heaven does create some people above and others below. Just take a look at the world today, and not just in Japan, either.” Equality, they claimed, is a sham. How could anyone claim that children of the rich and children of the poor had any chance of equal opportunity? The Eastern sparrows also mocked the contention that humans deserved to be called “the lord of creation.” How many people in the world, past and present, deserve such an accolade? “And yet, the number of fools is beyond reckoning.” The birds could only conclude: “The sincere eyes of heaven inform us that in all creation there are few as brutish as human beings.”

Freedom, autonomy, and happiness were similarly dismissed. Right from birth, freedom was restrained; how could it be otherwise? “When children seek freedom from the constraints placed upon them by parents, the parents react with angry words and the

children shriek in agony, throwing the house into unbearable confusion. But this denial of freedom is common to parents and children in societies everywhere.” Adults similarly were constrained by law in order to guarantee social order. The Eastern sparrows boldly proclaimed that constraint rather than freedom was the true mark of human society. “The ropes that restrain freedom are ropes made by people. Human-made laws are necessary to temper the principles of heaven in order to produce a world in which human life is protected.

And as to happiness, this too was an impossible dream. The Eastern birds were realists: “There is no place in the world characterized by freedom; climates are harsh, harvests are poor, subject to frequent floods and famine. In is into this land that humans are born. So, if even the emperor ... is unable to live in happiness, how much more difficult it is for commoners?”

The Western sparrows opened up another topic for debate, contending that standing in society depends upon education. The Eastern birds rejected this claim. “There are many rich merchants and farmers in Japan, but who among them has excelled in education?” They quoted a popular saying: “if you bring together ten rich men, nine of them will be illiterate.” And, in an obvious reference to Fukuzawa, the Eastern birds claimed “except for those who make great profit by translating foreign books, the work

of scholars, in ages past and present, rarely makes them rich.”

The Western birds countered, renewing their attack on learning that fails to serve people’s everyday needs: “Learning does not mean knowing difficult words or reading ancient literature or writing poetry or other accomplishments which are of no real use in the world.”

The attack on poetry angered the Eastern sparrows. “When you open your beaks, such senseless noise! How can you possibly think that poetry has no real use? How could poetry possibly bring on the ruin of anyone?” They defended the long poetic tradition of Japan: “from the times of the gods, waka have succeeded in softening the hearts of people; even in the cosmic realm of heaven and earth, waka is known to have the power to move the hearts of devils and gods.” They were especially concerned to defend the playful, including underground verse, crazy poems, funny rhymes, and satirical verse: “They may be crazy poems, but with just a just a few characters they critique the usefulness of various enterprises and have the ability to inquire deeply into people’s secret thoughts, warning of the choice between good and bad. Just one verse is often able move a person in the direction of either wisdom or folly.” Again, striking out at Fukuzawa, the Eastern birds thought the real danger was caused by “half-baked scholars who steal this and that, paste it all together, and get rich by publishing fat

books.”

Pushed into a corner, the Western sparrows sought to bring the first debate to a close. “Reason,” they were willing to admit, “will not suffice as a means to rule over foolish people, that being the reason why government is harsh.” Hearing the admission that harsh government is necessary to rule over following people, the “sparrows of learning” announced their agreement: “For the first time we have heard something that makes sense.”

Oga took advantage of his *gesaku* skills to craft arguments against Fukuzawa’s ideas. He employed allegories, puns, references to Chinese, Japanese, and even Western classics, and the full force of satire in getting his message across. But, and most importantly, he was a critical thinker able to marshal serious and intelligent arguments against his opponents.

Throughout the debate Fukuzawa was criticized for his own lack of independent thought; he copied Western ideas and presented them as his own. It was Oga, rather than Fukuzawa, who championed universalism. As he has the Japanese birds proclaim: “You don’t seem to understand that people’s abilities should be known by what they can do and not by what country they come from. ... Shit from the West does not suddenly become miso when it travels to the East. If to twitter on foreign ideas makes you a

scholar, then a professional storyteller can become a professor at a university.”

Conclusion

Parody was Oga Mantei’s most powerful weapon. The Western sparrows were reduced to mere ciphers, parroting the words of the great master of civilization and enlightenment. They were themselves clear evidence of Fukuzawa’s failure to cultivate independent minds. Parody, by its very nature, invites reflection. Which was the authentic text: the “Encouragement of Learning” or the “Sparrows of Learning”? With texts to compare, the message of each would be all the more scrutinized. As Linda Hutcheon notes, parody makes demands on the readers own knowledge and experience.^{1 1} She refers to the Greek origins of the word, *parodia*, meaning “counter song,” and shows how it had contributed to the standard definition of parody as “an opposition or contrast between texts.” Hutcheon maintains that humor or ridicule is not necessary for parody; it may contribute to its impact, but more important is “repetition with a critical difference.” The power of parody derives from the degree of engagement of the reader who is forced to “bounce” between the two texts.^{1 2} The Japanese terms that are often used to translate parody *mitate* and *yatsushi*, include similar demands for reflection or taking a second look at a text or performance. In the hands of Oga and other *gesaku* writers and artists active well into the era of Meiji modernization, parody

similarly has the potential to ridicule, re-evaluate, and teach. Its message to some may be conservative, to others revolutionary.^{1 3}

Oga and his eccentric friends, a group of artists, humorists, and writers, and thinkers, saw it their role to “poke holes” in conventional institutions and views. They drew upon a long *gesaku* tradition centering around the *kibyōshi* comic book, which, according to Adam Kern, utilized puns, puzzles, and parodies to “put readers in a skeptical frame of mind, encouraging them to question authority and to regard social reality as a text that is constructed and, consequently, that can be deconstructed.”^{1 4} In Oga’s case, readers were invited to reflect upon, doubt, and criticize Fukuzawa’s vision of a brave new world, and at same time, think twice about the broader direction the Meiji modernizers were pushing Japan. He invited no less than a national debate on the future of Japan.

Peter has asked us here to re-think late-Edo period values and individuality and evaluate areas of continuity and discontinuity into the Meiji period of modernization/Westernization. Confucian and Buddhist teachings can be construed into a functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic, but one can equally see in play, consumption, non-conformity and irreverent disobedience what may be called the unconventional origins of modern Japan. And while formally and informally the individuality displayed by Mantei Oga and his bohemian friends were suppressed,

challenges to the demand of homogeneity and conventional thinking were not completely eradicated. The commonsense view that “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down” well describes Meiji modernity, but an equal part of that modernity are those very nails that continue, even today, to challenge established views of state and society.

¹ This paper draws extensively upon an earlier article: “Meiji Twitterings: A Parody of Fukuzawa’s *An Encouragement of Learning*,” *Asian Cultural Studies*, Special Issue 18, (March 2010), 55-77. Available online:

http://subsite.icu.ac.jp/iacs/journal_page/PDF/ACSS18.05.Steele.pdf

² Oga’s birth dates are unclear and are usually calculated back from an 1845 (*Kōka* 2) reference to him being 25 years old. Most biographical references conclude he was born in 1818 (Bunsei 1), although, given calendar and age calculation differences, some sources have him born in 1819 (Bunsei 2). He died on August 30, 1890. For details, see Okitsu Kaname, *Tenkanki no bungaku*, (Tokyo: Waseda Daigaku Shuppanbu, 1960), 81-83.

³ Okitsu, *Tenkanki*, has compiled an assortment of sources on Oga’s life and works; see especially 78-85.

⁴ John Mertz, *Novel Japan: Spaces of Nationhood in Early Meiji Narrative*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japan Studies, University of Michigan, 2003), 98.

⁵ See Mertz, *Novel Japan*, 1-30. Donald Keene has translated a section of *Aguranabe* (rendered as “The Beefeater”) in *Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology*, (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 31-33.

⁶ Robun’s parody of Fukuzawa’s primer on Western science has been reprinted in the National Institute of Japanese Literature’s reprint series: *Kappa sōden kyūri zukai*, Tokyo: Kokubungaku Shiryōkan, 2005. Okitsu, *Tenkanki*, summarizes its (nearly non-existent) plotline.

⁷ Oga's impressive publication record was interrupted between 1876 and 1878. In late 1875, he published his parody version of Fukuzawa's *Gakumon no susume: Katsuron Gakumon suzume* (The Sparrows of Learning). The last page of this text promised the series would "be continued," and other works were advertised, including a parody version of journal of Japan's enlightenment, *Meiroke zasshi*, to be titled *Mōroku zasshi* (Journal of the Sixth Darkness). Sickness is the reason usually given. Oga resumed publication in 1878 with his humorous attacks on social conventions, but the number of his publications was much reduced and included re-prints of some of his more popular books. He also began to publish travel guides to pilgrimage sites and hot springs. Finally, in his last years, he produced what may be called the last great work of Edo popular literature: the *Meiryō futabagusa* (Flowers of Wisdom and Goodness), published in eight volumes between 1883 and 1888. This *kibyōshi*-style historical novel recounted the origin and early years of the Tokugawa bakufu, evocative of an age that had clearly passed but was fondly remembered; at the same time, however, Oga invited comparison with the first 20 years of the new Meiji regime. Oga also rejected Western-style binding and typeset text, the format that had become standard in the "modern" publishing industry. His last novel was published in "traditional" Japanese-style binding, woodblock text, and brilliant woodcut illustrations by Kunichika and Chikanobu. Oga died in 1890 at the age of 72. His unmarked grave is in Ryōkanji temple (Toshima-ku, Tokyo).

⁸ A Journey through Heaven and Hell (*Odontaku shinbun kidan*), 1872. On-line edition of vol. 2 accessible from the Digital Library of the Meiji Period, National Diet Library. Illustrations by Kawanabe Kyōsai are included in *Kawanabe Kyōsai sashie*, 55-64.

⁹ *New Understandings: The Thunderstruck Sage* (*Rikai shinbun, seijin kimotsubushi*), 2 vols, 1872. See *Kawanabe Kyōsai sashie*, 83-88.

¹⁰ The titles were homophones; the words *gakumon suzume* (学門雀) translate literally as "sparrows at the gate of the school." This immediately brings to mind the proverb "The sparrows of Kangaku-in can twitter the Mogyū" (*Kangakuin no suzume ga Mogyū o saezuru*), referring to the sparrows (or low-born youth) who gather or work around the gates of the ancient academy of Confucian studies. Their presence at the gates of learning allows them to recite sections of the Mogyū, a Tang period primer.

^{1 1} Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), 2000 (paperback reprint of 1985 edition), 5.

^{1 2} Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 30.

^{1 3} Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 77.

^{1 4} Adam Kern, *Manga from the Floating World: Comicbook Culture and the Kibyoshi of Edo Japan*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006, p. 15.