

Living in Japan

The Japanese once had a reputation for being hardworking. I wonder if that is still true to this day.

Most of the books selected for this list were written from the 1990s through the 2010s, during the Heisei era that started in 1989 when the current Emperor Akihito succeeded to the throne. The unprecedented boom of the bubble economy was soon followed by repeated economic slowdowns. Even so, such daily necessities as food, clothing, and shelter remain abundant, and there are very few characters in these books who work themselves into the ground.

Heisei has been an era of many changes. The drive toward rising in life that was an inextricable part of modernization since the Meiji era (1868–1912) is a thing of the past, and more young people—in the real world as well as in fiction—are living separately from company organizations. There is no guarantee that elites with superior academic records will enjoy high earning power. In the 2000s men started actively sharing the housework, raising children, and preparing packed lunches for their families. At the same time, there has been no end to the graying of the population. The works in this collection feature young single mothers, vexed by the difficulties of looking after children; households consisting of a divorced father and children; middle-aged women hoping for the death of parents with long-term illnesses; and retired people who do not have enough money to get by. They richly detail such shadows of contemporary society.

There are no longer any fixed family structures or standard lifestyles in Japan. Blood and community ties have weakened to the point where people began talking about a “society without bonds,” a period followed soon afterward by the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, and the ensuing Fukushima nuclear accident. The unprecedented shock sent the Japanese people in a new direction. A recent work from an author who lives in the affected area in Tōhoku is presented here as an example.

Even so, it bears repeating that this country has enjoyed 70 years of peace since the end of World War II; most people live comfortably without being troubled by life-and-death concerns in their everyday routine. The venerable poet Tanikawa Shuntarō describes this leeway as “a space or gap in which to touch others’ hearts.” Perhaps the writers of this period are the kind to peer intently through these everyday gaps to perceive the squirming *somebings* that lie deep below the surface of the familiar, seeking to imagine the stealthily approaching crises to come.

Since ancient times, the Japanese people have lived while contemplating the beauty of nature found in the sky and the land. This peaceful observation, unconnected to diligence at work, appears to have provided a nurturing environment for the country’s literature and poetic sentiment.

Ozaki Mariko, Editor, Culture News Department, Yomiuri Shimbun
December 2015

日本の生活

日本人は勤勉だと言われてきた。果たして、いまもそうだろうか。

このリストにあるのは主に1990～2010年代、年号なら平成生まれの作品で、バブルと呼ばれた空前の好景気を経て、経済の失速が続いた時代を背景としている。それでも衣食住はそれなりに満たされ、身を粉にして働く作中人物はほとんど登場しない。

「立身出世」という明治以来の近代化につきものの上昇志向は過去のものとなり、会社組織から離れて生きる若者が実社会でも増えている。学歴の高いエリートが生活力も高いという保証はない。男性が家事を分担し、育児や弁当作りに積極的に関わり始めたのも、2000年代になってのこと。一方で、少子高齢化はいやおうなく進む。独りきりで不慣れな子育てに苛立つ若い母親、離婚した父子家庭、長く病む親の死を願う熟年女性、定年後、生活費にも事欠く人びと……。現代社会が抱える光と影を、収録作はそれぞれ色濃く映し出す。

家族の形態やライフスタイルに典型、模範はすでにない。血縁も地域の絆も細り、「無縁社会」などという言葉が出現した、まさにその直後、2011年3月11日に発生したのが東日本大震災、続く福島原発事故である。未曾有のこの出来事が、その後の日本人を新たな方向へ向かわせている。一つの例として、東北の被災地に暮らす作家の近作もここに挙げた。

とはいえ、繰り返すが、第二次大戦後、70年にわたる平和が続くこの国では、生死に直結する切迫した不安は日常から遠く、概ねゆとりに満たされている。ゆとりとは「心を動かすことのできる空間、あるいは隙間」だと述べるのは、長老詩人の谷川俊太郎氏だ。日常の隙間から、日々の営みの奥にうごめく何ものかに、じっと目を凝らす。しのび寄る危機を想像してみる……。そうした資質こそ、この時代の作家の条件かもしれない。

振り返れば、古代から花鳥風月を、空に、山に、眺め暮らしてきた日本人。勤勉さのみに流されない、その静穏なまなざしにこそ、この国の文学と詩情は宿ってきたのではないだろうか。

2015年12月

尾崎 真理子（読売新聞東京本社文化部長）