

BOOK REVIEW

The Uses of Literature in Modern Japan: Histories and Cultures of the Book

By Sari Kawana

Bloomsbury Academic, 2018
ix + 280 pages.

Reviewed by Andrew T. KAMEI-DYCHE



Anyone who has taught literature has likely wrestled with the conundrum of explaining the afterlife of books. Why do some works stand the test of time, enduring through generations, while others, even if heralded as masterpieces in the past, become forgotten? In *The Uses of Literature in Modern Japan*, Sari Kawana explains that the persistence of a work in the public consciousness often comes down to what uses—whether ideological, economic, or social—the work serves. Works that can be put to a range of uses and transformations across context, media, and language have a higher “use value,” contributing to their longevity. However, Kawana points out that it is still difficult to discuss literature from this perspective: “[I]n most formal literary criticism, the potential of literary works to be ‘useful’ has been neglected—or even discouraged—as a frame of reference in favor of artistic quality or even sheer entertainment value” (p. 3). Her point is a pertinent one. While among philosophers the “use” of philosophical systems is a long-standing concern, and one explicitly articulated since at least Nietzsche, among literary circles the notion of “using” literature still seems somehow unsavory. Yet the use value factors into which books are republished, chosen for translation, or selected for educational curricula. From this starting point, Kawana sets out to demonstrate the importance of considering the use value of literature, as seen in the life and afterlife of various works of modern Japanese literature.

She does so through a range of examples drawn from the early twentieth century, with each chapter of the study constituting an aspect of Japanese literary production, reproduction, and consumption. Chapter 1 looks at the *enpon* (one-yen book) boom in the late 1920s, considering the context, causes, and agents involved. Kawana asks why people sought to buy books even when their economic circumstances did not appear conducive to that decision, and finds the answer in the cultural capital accorded to the reading of literature by the intellectual context at the time, as well as how shrewd publishers marketed to precisely that concern. Kawana’s examination of the rivalry between advertising agencies Dentsū and Hakuōdō (pp. 41–44) is especially salient because it illustrates the impact business and market concerns among non-book agents can have on the book trade. Given the significance of the *enpon* boom not only for Japanese publishing but the entire intellectual culture of the era, this solidly researched chapter is a welcome addition to the scholarship. Whereas chapter 1 focuses more on publishing, chapter 2 turns to consider

the readers. The topic here is the wartime practices of young readers. Kawana seeks to problematize the view of wartime youth as possessing little in the way of literature and occupying a passive role in uncritically swallowing propaganda. Through retrospectives written by wartime youth, she shows how young readers had a degree of access to prewar children's literature, and how to some extent they idealized the prewar era with its material and literary wealth. Moreover, she argues, particularly through considering the works of Unno Jūza, that children read between the lines to interpret wartime literature in a variety of ways, including some entirely antithetical to the objectives of the state. The chapter is therefore a reception history, revealing what material was available to young wartime readers and how they read it.

Chapter 3 is in a different vein, focusing on one particular work—Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro*. Kawana explains that the work, while ambiguous, has suffered from a prescribed reading imposed upon it by the education curriculum. However, by drawing upon a range of adaptations of the work, and the historical context, she shows how an entirely different reading is possible. Fittingly for an authority on Japanese detective fiction, she approaches the work as a whodunnit and seeks to solve the crime she believes lies at the heart of the novel.¹ The chapter differs from the earlier ones in two ways: first, in its orientation around a single work, and second in its character as a work of literary interpretation, deploying historical material in the service of cracking a fictional case. It makes for fascinating reading, although it does not mesh well with the other chapters.

Chapters 4 and 5 return to a focus on the production and consumption of works, though with a wider chronological coverage than the earlier chapters, considering the uses of literature into the late twentieth century. The first considers the involvement of authors (primarily Ozaki Kōyō and Yokomizo Seishi) and publishers in visual depictions of works, covering everything from illustrations to theater and film adaptations. Here Kawana employs the notion of media mix, whereby a novel plus other renditions of the fictional universe such as films or games, are orchestrated together—a common phenomenon in modern pop culture. Finally, chapter 5 discusses literary tourism, the phenomenon of readers visiting sites associated with authors and their works, and the purposes served by such activities and related institutions such as literary museums. Kawana discusses the dynamics of what she calls *hodoku*, or literary ambulation: readers enhancing their experience of the text by encountering sites that pertain to the fictional world depicted within it and/or the historical world of the author who created it.

Kawana's study makes two significant contributions. First, it offers a rethinking of literary canons in light of use value. In the ongoing debates over the hows and whys of canon formation, Kawana's portrayal of canons as dynamic, fluid constructs rather than enduring monuments or oppressive but arbitrary inventions is a breath of fresh air. She clearly illustrates how we—authors, publishers and readers across generations—assemble and reassemble canons based on the uses to which we put literature. Second, the work demonstrates the value of tackling literature anew from the insights offered from book history, studies of reception, and other areas of analysis.²

1 See especially Kawana 2008.

2 In this regard, the work dovetails with Edward Mack's *Manufacturing Modern Japanese Literature* (2010).

If the study has a drawback, it is in the limited degree of cohesion among the chapters. Each feels like an independent work knitted together under the theme of use value, a framing concept that occupies a more significant role in some chapters than in others. However, from another perspective the relative independence of each chapter is a strength, because each could be readily assigned to students. Chapter 1 belongs in any course on Japanese publishing and print culture, for instance, while chapter 3 would prompt fruitful discussion in a modern literature seminar among students used to conventional readings of *Kokoro*. The work is also remarkably free of errors, and employs refreshingly readable prose, making it an accessible text for students. A thoughtful and well-researched study, it belongs in the library of any scholar of modern Japanese literature or print culture.

REFERENCES

Kawana 2008

Sari Kawana. *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Mack 2010

Edward Mack. *Manufacturing Modern Japanese Literature: Publishing, Prizes, and the Ascription of Literary Value*. Duke University Press, 2010.