

# RIVERS and JAPAN

A Magazine on Rivers

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**RIVERS and JAPAN**

"Later Three Year's War"

A picture scroll depicting early 11th-century conflict between Yorie Minamoto and the Kiyohara.

COVER PICTURE



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# TARO BANDO: THE AND THE RIVER





# E SAMURAI

BY KUNIO HOSAKA

**Flowing through the Kanto plain, the Tone River, the largest in Japan, has a nickname, Taro Bando. In Japan Taro is the name often given to the eldest son, while Bando is an old name for the Kanto region. And while the river is undoubtedly magnificent and powerful, making this seem a suitable name, was this the sole reason the river got its nickname, or is there something hidden and forgotten in the local area's history? While I was conducting research, information about a local warrior (samurai) leader famous for his bravery at the beginning of the samurai age in the medieval period, came to my attention. I intend to explore the relationship between this warrior and the Tone River's nickname.**

## WAS THE NAME "TARO BANDO" REALLY GIVEN TO THE RIVER?

**I**t has long been known that the Tone River has another old name, "Taro Bando", but the origin of this name has remained obscure. Taro is a name traditionally given to the eldest son in a family, and since he inherits the family property and becomes head of the family, the name has other meanings and connotations as big, brave, reliable and powerful. People have accepted the name without looking into the historical background because the name suits the river's scale and character. Also, historians have not deemed such a trivial question to be of academic merit and have shown no interest in researching it. I, however, am not a historian and when I noticed that there are only two other similar nicknames for rivers in Japan, namely Jiro Chikushi which literally means second son of the Chikushi region, now

the Chikugo River, and Saburo Shikoku which means third son of the Shikoku region, now the Yoshino River, I became interested and started researching the origins of the name Taro Bando.

The term Bando, which literally means east slope, seems to have first been used as the name for an area in the "Konjaku Monogatari\*", a collection of over a thousand short stories written during the Heian Period (794-1185). In the twelfth tale it says "...so I went down to Bando with some reason.....". In dictionaries, Bando is given as a general term for the region east of the Ashigara and Usui passes in the Kanto mountains, which fits our modern concept of the area we now call Kanto. However, it seems to me to be too easy to accept the common view that it is called Bando Taro simply because it is a large river in the Bando region. If Bando indicates the area, Taro should mean something else. Generally, Taro as a person's name indicates immensi-

ty, courage and strength.

The Tone has the largest mean flow in Japan, gathering most of tributaries in the Bando (Kanoto) area. The river provides with a useful means of transport and a rich source of water, and in this way it can be said to be a great river. However, at the same time, it can be a ferocious river which has sometimes, from medieval to modern times, caused enormous amounts of flood damage. The name of the river has therefore evoked two different emotions: respect and fear. This interpretation of Taro might be correct, although I suspect that the river's true nature lies behind its nickname.

Any river in Japan can be said originally to have provided water and, when roads were very poor, been an important mode of transport. In fact, throughout Japan, villages and towns were located near rivers. Therefore, if a river's ability to look after people was so important when choosing names, there should be many rivers



called Taro.

In Japan there are rivers which are larger than the Tone in scale. Why for example, wasn't the ferocious Tenryu River in Nagano and Shizuoka Prefectures named Taro rather than 'Violent Dragon'? The same could be said about the longest river in Japan, the Shinano, which flows through Nagano and Niigata Prefectures.

I wondered if there might be something more than purely the natural character of the river behind the name, and started looking into a samurai leader who was prominent in Bando during the Kamakura period (1192-1333), and who had the same first name, Taro.

#### **YORITOMO'S CAMPAIGN AND THE EIGHT TAIRA FAMILIES FROM BANDO**

The most famous of the samurai leaders in the Kamakura period was Yoritomo Minamoto (1147-1199). He, by force of arms, centralized adminis-

trative power, which marked an important turning point in Japan's transition from an ancient to medieval society. Few know, however, that there was another influential leader who resisted Yoritomo when he tried to take power. Yoritomo was exiled to the Izu Peninsula after the Heiji Disturbance\*, but in 1180 he started actively campaigning again. At this point his campaign relied on a decree by the Imperial Court to keep order in the Bando region and his own authority as head of the Minamoto family\*, which had already produced a number of famous leaders such as Yoriyoshi, Yorie, and Yoshitomo.

At that time there were two major opposing powers in Bando, the Minamoto and the Taira\*. The areas they controlled were intertwined, and the Minamoto were not always predominant. In particular, eight branches of the Taira family had a great deal of influence over the Musashi area in the western part of Bando. After returning,

Yoritomo only succeeded in persuading a few of the samurai leaders from these families, such as the Miura family based on the Miura peninsula, to ally with him. Soon after, however, Yoritomo suffered from a severe defeat at the hands of the army of the eight families in his first battle of Mt. Ishibashi.

After losing the battle, Yoritomo was forced to flee the Miura peninsula and cross Edo bay (the old name for Tokyo bay) to the Boso peninsula. However, he did not give up and proceeded to launch a propaganda to the various families on and near the Boso Peninsula. This was with the aim of convincing them that he alone had the legitimate right to be the ruler of Bando due to his position as head of the Minamoto family, with its long and noble lineage, and his lengthy relationship with the region. As his campaign progressed, he was joined first by Tsunetane Chiba from Shimofusa, in the northern part of the peninsula, and

then by Hirotune Kamifusa, with his 20,000 men, from Kamifusa in the southern part of the peninsula, who had been carefully watching the situation.

Yoritomo, now with an army of 30,000, began to march toward Edo (the old name for Tokyo) from the east. Soon the various families, such as the Toshima and Kasai, appeared one after another to join him.

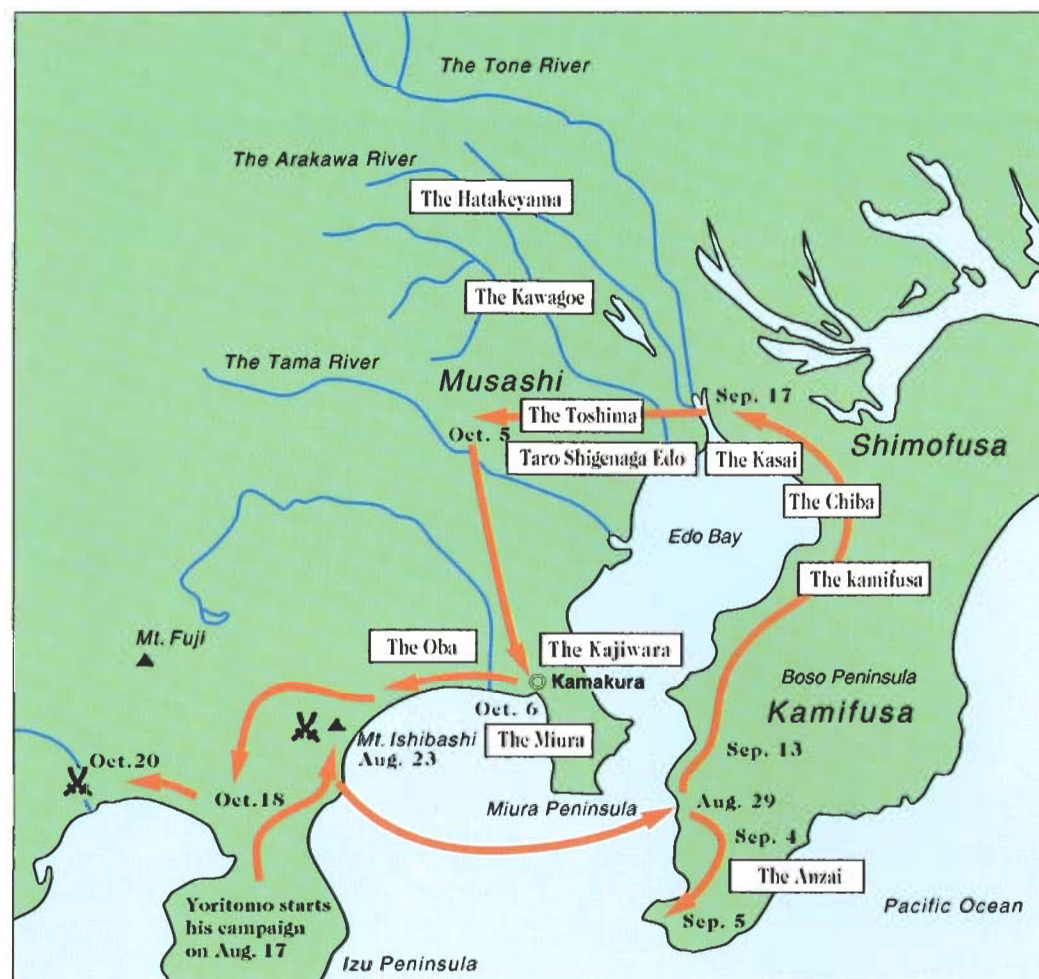
However, of the eight Taira families the Chichibu still held out against him. All the eight Taira families, which included the Chichibu, the Miura, the Oba, the Kajiwara, the Kamifusa, and the Chiba were descendants of Yoshifumi Taira, a great grandson of the Emperor Kammu. Of the eight the Chichibu family, who were horse breeders, were the most powerful. Their influence extended from their base in the Chichibu basin, down the Arakawa, the Iruma and the Tama rivers. Wherever they settled, they changed their names taking local place names as their own. Within the



◀◀  
Yoritomo Minamoto

◀  
A view upstream toward Yatajima,  
where the Tone and Karasu rivers join.

▶  
A map of the Bando region at that time,  
the location of each of the families,  
and the route of  
Yoritomo's campaign in 1180.



Chichibu the most powerful three branches were the Hatakeyama, the Kawagoe and the Edo, with the latter having their fort in Edo on the site of the present Imperial Palace.

All of the eight Taira families in the Bando region were separated from the prosperous main branch in Kyoto, the then capital of Japan, and were practically an independent group of provincial warriors, without any loyalty nor obligations toward the main branch. However, they were too proud to submit to Yoritomo, whom they felt was abusing his authority, noble lineage and relationship with the region.

#### YORITOMO FINDS A MAN BLOCKING HIS WAY

On September 17th, 1180, Yoritomo's army arrived at the capital town of the Shimofusa area. This was only one month after he had lost the battle of Mt. Ishibashi, but he was in such a good position that it was as if the

defeat had never occurred. However, at this point his advance was suddenly blocked and the army halted for more than two weeks.

Though Yoritomo had a huge army of 30,000 men and a guarantee from the Emperor's second son, Mochihito-o, giving him control of Bando, he hesitated for two reasons. Firstly, at this point the army found it faced two large rivers; the Edo and the Sumida, and secondly, ahead lay one of the three main branches of the Chichibu family, the Edo, which had a reputation for bravery, especially under its leader Taro-Shigenaga.

At that time the border between Shimofusa (now Chiba Prefecture) and Musashi (now a western suburb of Tokyo) was very different from today. The geographical features themselves have changed. The Sumida River was actually the old Tone River, which joined the Arakawa River and flowed directly into Edo bay. The present course of the Tone River is the result

of a number of large-scale river improvement projects, which were carried out during the Edo period (1600-1868) to artificially move its course east so that it flowed directly into the Pacific Ocean. The two rivers that blocked Yoritomo's advance were large natural obstacles which sometimes flooded as no adequate river management techniques had been developed by that period.

Although it is easy to understand that Yoritomo feared a natural disaster, why did he hesitate to advance toward Taro-Shigenaga, resisting with his small army of only a few thousand men while the other family were gradually submitting? According to one account, other important leaders from the eight Taira families who had already joined Yoritomo, such as Toshima and Kasai, advised him not to advance by force, as they were familiar with Taro-Shigenaga's abilities and character. Currently this is the only account available which details the sequence of

events.

There is another clue, however, which proves Taro's power. That is a letter sent from Yoritomo to Taro, which is referred in the "Azuma Kagami", a historical account in the Kamakura period. The letter seems amazingly polite and tolerant in light of the fact that it is from the head of the most powerful of the Minamoto families to a disobeying head of a mere provincial family.

Minamoto stated that he would forgive Taro for taking the side of the Taira and 'drawing a bow at Yoritomo in the past'. Moreover, he praised Taro's leadership abilities, using the highest possible Japanese honorific term, despite his position as the head of all the Minamoto families. The use of this term clearly shows how Yoritomo respected and feared Taro's ability to command the Chichibu families' army in battle.

Yoritomo was determined to win Taro over and was willing to use any means





available. Even though he was the main leader of the Minamoto, it would be impossible for him to control Bando without the fealty of all eight of the Taira families. And if he failed to take Bando, he would not be the paramount samurai leader in either name or reality.

Taro, however, did not immediately cede to Yoritomo's demands. Yoritomo tried to persuade him, even using Taro's relatives to petition him. After blocking Yoritomo's path for more than two weeks, Taro-Shigenaga finally, after a number of desperate petitions from his relatives, accepted and visited Yoritomo's military camp where all of his family and followers waited.

Delighted, Yoritomo immediately appointed him chief governor of the Musashi area, a very important position giving Taro complete control of the area. This appointment meant that Taro was promoted over the head of Hatakeyama, who had previously held

the position and who came from the main part of the three Chichibu families. This event also helps prove how highly Yoritomo regarded Taro.

### TARO BANDO, THE LEGENDARY HERO

Yoritomo, therefore, was able to increase his power with the aid of Taro-Shigenaga Edo, his most reliable chief vassal. This eventually led to Yoritomo creating the Kamakura Shogunate in Kamakura, which signaled the beginning of the Samurai age.

Taro's fame and popularity also rose and the Edo family became prosperous. The general populace at that time might secretly have felt that Taro was the true leader of the Bando region though in reality the actual leader was the Shogun, Yoritomo. Therefore, the people might have called Taro-Shigenaga, 'Taro of Bando' meaning he was the strongest samurai in Bando

and thus in effect ranking him with the Shogun.

Subsequently, it might not have taken much time before this nickname also became the nickname of Taro's beloved Tone River, which was magnificent, ferocious and the source of much of the water in Bando. As time passed, even though people forgot the samurai, the name of the river remained.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that while his direct descendants became prosperous in Edo, various branches of his family settled by the Tama River and took their names from places along the river, such as Saburo Maruko which literally means third son of Maruko or Shiro Rokugo which means fourth son of Rokugo). ■

### THE AUTHOR'S PROFILE KUNIO HOSAKA

Kunio Hosaka was born in 1943 in Tokyo and graduated from the law department of Hosei University. After working as the editor of a magazine specializing literary criticism, he is presently a freelance non-fiction writer. He has a wide knowledge of contemporary social history and writes for various magazines such as "Weekly Hoseki" and "Weekly Post" as well as being the author of many books.

### NAMES AND TERMS

#### AZUMA KAGAMI

(Mirror of Eastern Japan) A historical account of the Kamakura Shogunate. Its 52 chapters cover the 86 years from 1180, the beginning of the Taira-Minamoto war, to 1266. It includes records of military families, religious institutions, diaries, letters and travel accounts.

#### THE HEIJI DISTURBANCE

A clash between Yoshitomo Minamoto and Kiyomori Taira in January 1160. They had shared in the victory after the Hogen Disturbance of 1156, but Kiyomori had received greater rewards and exerted greater influence over the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa. While Kiyomori was on pilgrimage, Yoshitomo seized power and imprisoned Go-Shirakawa and the Emperor Nijo (1143-1165). Kiyomori returned to crush the uprising and Yoshitomo was killed. Minamoto influence was swept from the court, leaving the Taira family in control. Kiyomori, however, spared Yoshitomo's sons of whom Yoritomo was the third.

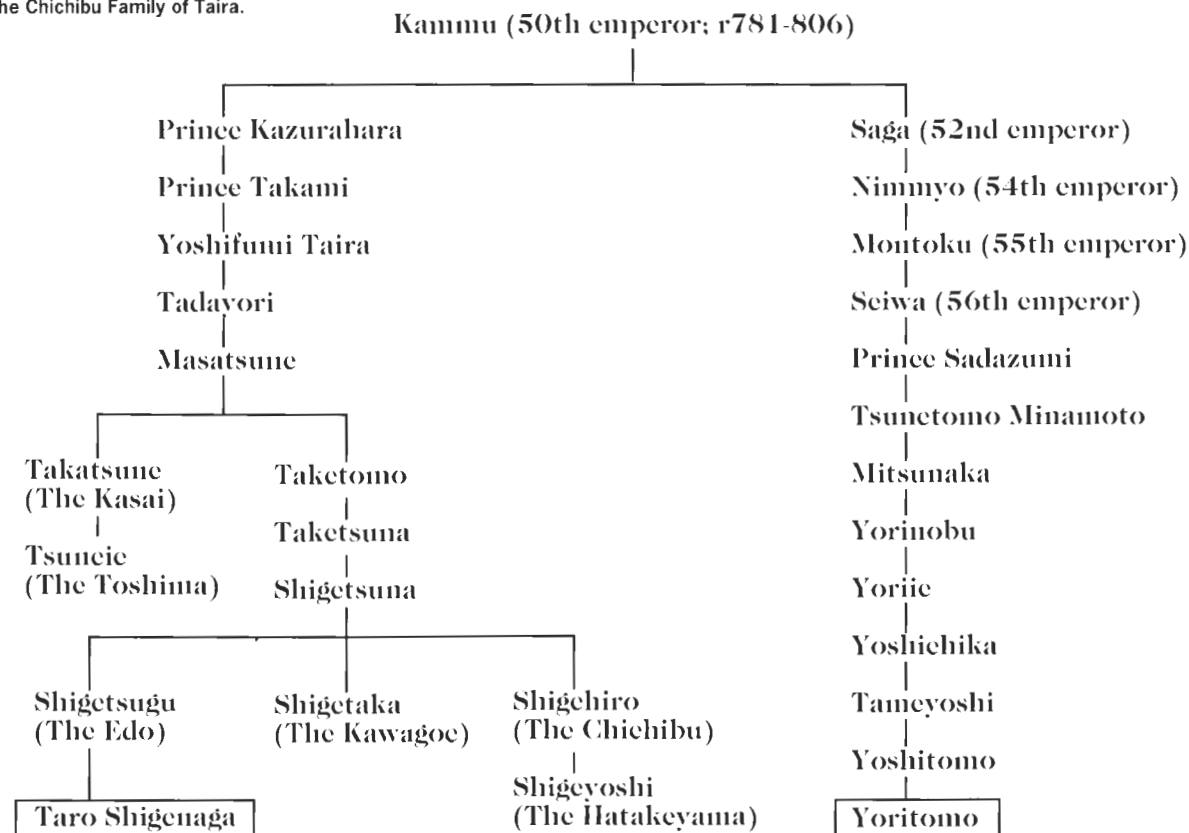
#### KONJAKU MONOGATARI

(Tales of Times Now Past) A collection of more





Genealogy of the Minamoto Family and the Chichibu Family of Taira.



than 1,000 short tales said to have been written in the late Heian period (794-1185). Many of the tales are evidently based upon an oral tradition, while others are derived from literary sources including Buddhist scriptures, Chinese histories and secular Japanese works, but not including myths. The title is derived from the opening words of each story which use the same "Once-upon-a-time" formula. The modern writer, Ryunosuke Akutagawa who was very attracted to this collection, used some materials from it in several of his stories, such as Rashomon.

#### MINAMOTO FAMILY

Also known as the Genji. One of the four great families, the others being the Taira, Fujiwara and Tachibana, that dominated court politics during the Heian period (794-1185); its descendants remained a central part of the Japanese government until the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Like the Taira, the Minamoto family was an offshoot of the imperial family. Between 1087 and 1093, as political power passed from the Fujiwara regents to the retired emperors, the Minamoto came to control many of the highest official posts. After a series of wars between the Minamoto and the Taira, centered on seizing political power, the influence of the Minamoto in the capital waned while Kiyomori Taira seized absolute power. After the Heiji Disturbance in 1180, Yoritomo (1147-1199) mounted a full scale rebellion against Taira rule (the Taira-Minamoto war). Within five years he had destroyed the Taira, subjugated all of eastern Japan, and established a military government (the Kamakura Shogunate 1192-1333).

#### TAIRA FAMILY

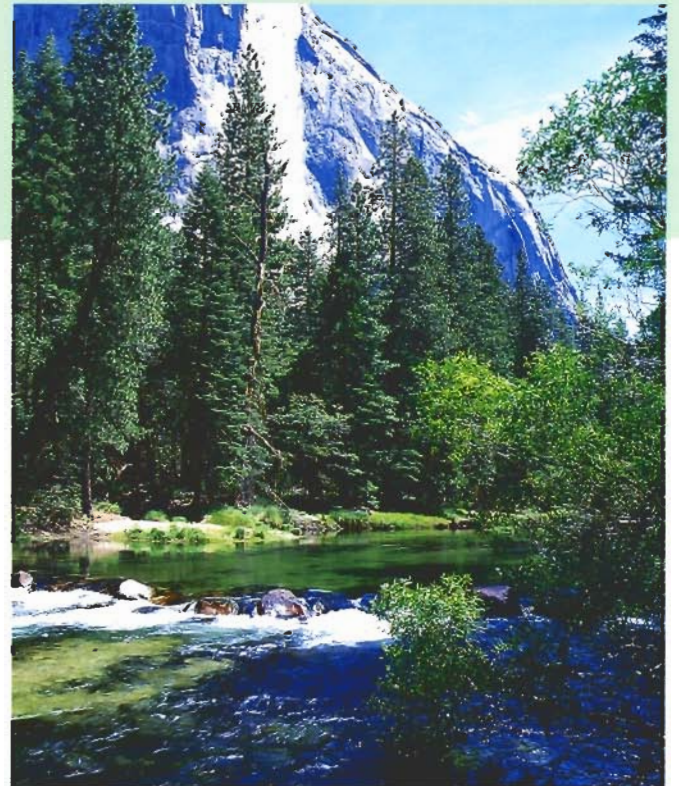
Also known as the Heike or Heishi, depending on the pronunciation of Kanji character. One of the

four great families and an offshoot of the imperial family, like the Minamoto. In 825 Emperor Kammu's grandson, Takamune (804-867), was awarded the surname Taira and his descendants held provincial posts in eastern Japan. A number of these families, such as the Oba, Miura, Kajiwara and Hatakeyama families would play major roles in the late 12th century Taira-Minamoto War. These provincial warriors came to be known as the EIGHT TAIRA FAMILIES FROM THE EAST. The high point of Taira influence came in the late Heian period under Kiyomori Taira (1118-1181), victor over the Minamoto in the two major disturbances, who rose to the position of grand minister of state. In 1180, Yoritomo Minamoto rebelled against and crushed the Taira, and established a warrior government in Japan (the Kamakura Shogunate). All the major Taira leaders were killed during the Taira-Minamoto War, and the family never again achieved prominence. The story of the Taira is recounted in The Tale of the Heike.

An account states that Yoritomo's army, in order to cross the Tone River when they marched from Shimofusa to Musashi, built a temporary bridge by placing several boats side by side.



# AND THE BEST SUPPORTING RIVER IS...





**What separated the fate of The Shining Princess\* and The Peach Boy\*, two best-loved Japanese fairy tales, was the fact that one was born in a river and the other was not. Momotaro (Peach Boy) began by coming down a river and ended living happily ever after with not only his foster grandparents, but also a lot of money. Compare this with the fate of Kaguya-hime (the Shining Princess) who, born out of bamboo, was forced to go back to the moon, separated from her beloved foster grandparents in tears. Although some might find my interpretation far-fetched, I stand by my belief that rivers are of paramount importance in story-telling.**

**And this is not limited to fairy tales. Look at the world of films. In the end of that famous movie, "The River Of No Return", Marilyn Monroe and Robert Mitchum miraculously make their way down river to the town, escaping the attacks of the persistent Native American Indians. In this and other films, travelling or drifting down a river always lead you to the ocean or sea that is full of hope and salvation. Coincidence? I do not think so.**

**Even animated films are not immune to using this convention. In Disney's classic, Peter Pan, one of the most memorable scenes is when Peter and Wendy fly out into the London night, hand in hand. When they do so, we are treated to a lingering look at the Thames. But why? They are flying, not swimming, so what is the river doing in this story?**

**What rivers seem to be doing in most stories is acting as more than scenery. Although beautiful and captivating to look at, the rivers we find often serve another purpose. This is nowhere more apparent than in the cinema. The film industry long ago recognized the usefulness of rivers in story-telling. With this in mind, I would like to look at the use of rivers in some recent - and some not-so-recent-films.**

## A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

**P**roduced and directed by Robert Redford, "A River Runs Through It" is one of the finest river films made last year. An Oscar winner for cinematography, this adaptation of Norman McLean's story owes much of its prize to Montana's cinematic Big Blackfoot River, which is featured strongly throughout the film. It is the story of two brothers in a family that draws "no clear line between religion and fly-fishing". The elder brother envies the younger brother's formidable talent for fly-fishing. As the brothers grow from childhood into adulthood, they remain connected to each other only through fishing, so we are treated to many scenes on the banks of the Big Blackfoot River. Yet the river is not merely scenery. Instead, it is at once both backdrop and metaphor for the growth of two brothers from innocence to experience. While there are episodic incidents that take us away from the river, such as the elder brother's departure for college, it is the river that is the key to the story, literally and symbolically, so it captures my attention. Through the river, and their fishing, the brothers manage to remain connected across the chasm of time. And while it connects them, the river also symbolizes the brothers. As they grow from innocence to adulthood, the river grows with them, moving from a small stream into a torrent. As life grows more turbulent and complicated, so does the river.

In giving "A River Runs Through It" four stars, I admit I am being indulgent. However, I think that the Big Blackfoot River deserves it for helping Robert Redford to symbolically depict the passage of time and the evolution of the two brothers. While it would have been easy to simply use the river for its breathtaking beauty, this film takes it a step further and makes the river an integral part of this very human story. A river does not just run through this film: it is a part of this film.

## MURPHY'S WAR

As easily as a river can be used to symbolize the passage of time, it can as easily be used to suggest other things. "Murphy's War" is a testament to this flexibility of the river as a symbol. Instead of using the river to represent time's passage, the river in "Murphy's War" is emblematic of stagnation. All alone on a Southern Island, a mentally

BY  
YUJI KOUTARI

unhinged soldier (Peter O'Toole) is determined to hit and sink a German U-boat on the Island's river. To this end, the lone soldier struggles with a seaplane, a crane, and even resorts to trying to mend a torpedo discarded by his enemy. As a child, watching this movie which has only one actor and a submarine, I remember telling my father that it was "sort of boring". And I remember being surprised that he disagreed. He thought it was a masterpiece.

Yet now, all these years later, I can see that my father was right: it is a masterpiece. Whereas a river usually appears to wash everything away, the river in Murphy's War seems to stay completely still throughout. It becomes more than a prop as it comes to represent the futility of Murphy's obsession with his former enemy, who, like the river, has become inactive. So the movie is stunning because of the intensity that the river is able to convey. As intensely irritating as the static river may be, the audience is riveted by its stillness. Just as Robert Redford was able to use the river for more than mere scenery, "Murphy's War" uses its river as both scenery and symbol. And for that, I give it two stars.

### CAN HOLLYWOOD STARS SURVIVE WITHOUT JUMPING INTO WATER ANYMORE?

The basin of a waterfall has been a classic device for portraying rest since the days of Johnny Weissmuller's Tarzan. Even today, it is widely used. In "Cocktail", the American film about trying to get ahead in the modern world, Tom Cruise makes love with his girlfriend for the first time by a waterfall pool deep inside the Southern forest.

But could it be that the basin of a waterfall symbolizes more than a simply a scenic rest area? Am I being too Freudian if I suggest that the waterfall basin is a place with which the male population associates with security and protection? Is it too much, or too sexist, to suggest that such a soothing and calm area symbolizes something vaguely female? How else can you explain the fact that these scenes are rife in modern films?

However, that does not mean that waterfalls and rivers are used symbolically in all of these movies. Sometimes water is an exciting plot device, nothing less and nothing more. And some of it is indeed memorable. In George Roy Hill's "Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid", for example, everyone remembers when Butch (Paul Newman) and Sundance (Robert Redford) are chased to the edge of a cliff and are forced to jump into the water far below. And is there anyone who did not laugh when Sundance finally confessed that he could not swim, only to be told by Butch that the fall would probably kill him anyway? Since then, "jump" scenes have become de rigueur in American films. One of the most exciting sequences in "Midnight Run" is Robert De Niro and Charles Grodin's dangerous plunge into the perilous rapids of a fast-flowing river. And between "The Fugitive" and the Indiana Jones series, I cannot count how many times Harrison Ford makes flamboyant dives into rivers. Is he a mama's boy who cannot resist the safety and security of a river? Probably not. More likely, the Hollywood film industry realizes that jump scenes are indispensable devices for successful action adventures. Along with car chases and explosions, jump scenes are

a necessary part of escapist fare. Now I like excitement as much as anyone, but I find this use of waterfalls and rivers too simplistic. As effective as this machismo may be in producing excitement, these films fail to make full use of rivers as either plot devices or symbols. Consequently, I could only award one star to these films.

### LES AMANTS DU PONT-NEUF

Rivers also offer another symbol with their bridges. Since where there is a river there is often a bridge, bridges are used as effectively as rivers in many films. Of such films, David Lean's "The Bridge On The River Kwai" immediately comes to mind. In this film, British soldiers in a Japanese prison camp must build a bridge as a futile exercise. However, this purposeless task soon comes to unite both sides in a common goal. Thus, the bridge becomes a bridge both literally and symbolically.

While that is the most obvious symbolic use for a bridge, bridges have also been used to effectively convey a character's personal anguish. In Akira Kurosawa's "Red Beard", for example, a promising young doctor (Yuzo Kayama) faces his torment and indecision on a bridge. However, the most memorable is the use of the bridge in the French film "Les Amants Du Pont Neuf" which best illustrates the use of the bridge as a stage upon which to act out suffering. It is a sad story of a homeless man (Denis Lavant), who actually lives on a bridge, and a young woman (Juliette Binoche), partially blinded, who has run away from home. Whereas "The Bridge On The River Kwai" uses the bridge as a symbol of unity and progress, this French film uses the bridge as a symbol of nothing-

ness and indecision. Stranded above the Seine in a sort of no-man's-land, the characters are acting out the ultimate irony: on the bridge between two worlds, they are part of neither. While the Seine flows under them, they are on a bridge that is both the symbol of, and a stage for, their predicament. For that duality, I give it three stars.



Pont-Neuf on the Seine







## RIVERS BRING CHANGE

Looking at the use of rivers in all of these films, I cannot help but marvel at their sheer flexibility. Whether they are used to convey the ceaseless passage of time, the immobility of a character, or are simply used for that exciting escape scene, rivers are an invaluable asset to story-telling. And filmmakers are clearly aware of this value. Knowing that, I feel assured that we have many more fine river films to look forward to in the years to come.

Further, outside of the world of films, we should be aware of the value of rivers in the world of reality. As in films, rivers serve innumerable purposes in our lives. At times, I can think of no better reminder of the passage of time than to look at some of the rivers flowing through Tokyo. At other times, I can think of no better reminder of the passage of time than to stop and smell the roses along the side of these same rivers. In either case, rivers give me pause for thought. So you see, even in the real world, these exquisitely beautiful rivers are more than just scenery. They are as active a part of life as they are an active part of film. In both worlds, rivers play the best supporting role. ■

### THE AUTHOR'S PROFILE YUJI KOUTARI

Born in Hiroshima in 1957. Graduated from Keio University's Law department. He co-wrote the best selling "Kin-Kon-Kan" (1984) with Kazuhiro Watanabe, the illustrator and also wrote "Maru-Kin, Maru-Bi" (meaning "The Rich & The Poor") the title of which instantly became popular slang. With his unusual ideas and his unique writing style, he is currently a columnist with "SPA!" and "Asahi Weekly Magazine".

### NOTES THE SHINING PRINCESS

A heroine from a Japanese fairy tale, based on an old prose work entitled "Taketori Monogatari" (The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter), probably written between 850 and 950. It is about a supernatural being found by an old bamboo cutter and brought up as his daughter under the name Kaguya-hime (The Shining Princess). He becomes rich and urges her to marry one of five noble suitors but she refuses. Eventually, she explains that she is from the Palace of the Moon, and she returns to the moon with some messengers from heaven.

### THE PEACH BOY

A Japanese popular folk tale recounting the adventures of Momotaro (Peach Boy). Born from a peach and then found by an elderly woman washing clothes on a riverbank, Momotaro is adopted by the woman and her husband. When he grows up, he fights monsters and, accompanied by a dog, a pheasant, and a monkey, conquers Oni Island. He returns home with treasure for his foster parents and lives happily ever after.







# **BUDDHISM IN WATER MANAGEMENT**

**Kukai's Use Of Esoteric Buddhism In Politics  
And In The Development Of Natural Resources**

BY  
SHUHEI MAKI



**Once upon a time a humble, traveling Buddhist priest came to a village that had an abundance of water. He asked the people for a cup of water but was turned away. He then traveled on to another village where there was a drought and made the same request. Here the people immediately offered him all the water he could drink. Since then the first village has had a constant water shortage while in the other water has been in abundance.' The mysterious priest was Kukai\*.**

**These kinds of stories which still remain in many farming villages throughout Japan were spread years later by traveling monks who wanted to praise the virtues of Kukai while sharing his teachings with the local people.**

**The legendary Kukai, born in 772, was the Buddhist priest who founded the Shingon sect of Buddhism in Japan. In addition to teaching Buddhist doctrine, he became especially renowned for his outstanding work in flood prevention, civil engineering, rain making and even in curing diseases. However, there were others whose work excelled that of Kukai's. The priest, Gyogi\*, was a recognized master of civil engineering and water control and the village shamans were long revered for their skills in healing and rain making.**

**So why has only Kukai received such wide acclaim among ascetics and historians in these areas? In this article, I intend to explore the conditions of that time in order to explain the special position that Kukai has achieved in Japanese culture.**

## KUKAI'S ERA

**K**ukai lived from the late 8th to the early 9th century. During this period the cultivation of rice increased dramatically throughout Japan and as a result the population rose proportionately. According to Prof. Shuzo Koyama of the National Museum of Ethnology, the population of Japan during the Jomon\* period, 10,000BC-300BC, is estimated to have been as little as 200,000 whereas during the Yayoi period, 300BC-300AD, it rose to one million and by the Nara period, 710-794, it was up to nearly eight million. This dramatic population growth has been attributed to the surge in rice production brought on by a great increase of cultivated acreage. To do this the government devised strategies for land reclamation. One of the most successful plans was called, 'Hyakuman Chobu Kaikon Keikaku' in which a million acres were to be developed by local peasants. The key to this plan's success was a law written in 722AD, "Konden Eisei Shizai Ho", giving ownership of these lands to the peasants for the next three generations after the development. Later, in 743, another law was passed allowing ownership forever to those workers who could cultivate land for rice production. As a result there was a demand of technological evolution which could be utilized to build the vast number of irrigation ditches, canals and reservoirs that were needed to make the new farms productive. These changes brought Japanese society to a new frontier of innovative engineering. Politics was a second arena of change during Kukai's time. Until then the dominant form of government was the 'Ritsuryo System'\* under which Buddhism was given special protection. This system, together with that of the Imperial court, was undergoing substantial reformation. At the same time two new movements emerged to bring about these changes. The first was aimed at diminishing the unwel-

comed effects of providing over-patronage of Buddhism and the second, which helped the first, was an attempt to move the capital from Nara, the Buddhist stronghold, to Kyoto. By moving the capital, reformists hoped that politics could be restructured from the bottom up more easily in a new place removed from the influences of Buddhist authority.

## EMPEROR KAMMU

The first Emperor of the Heian period, Kammu (737-806), was the first reformer to have enough power to enact these changes. His first move was to relocate the capital to Kyoto. Then, in order to demonstrate his authority over the priesthood and aristocracy, he built a special altar and introduced savage blood sacrifices to the Gods, rituals that were then being practiced by the Chinese emperors. These ceremonies were highly offensive to Japanese Shintoists who viewed flesh sacrifice as abominable and impure. It was rumored that one of Emperor Kammu's ancestors was Korean and that he may have been trying to create a Chinese style dynasty in defiance of Shintoism and other traditional religions of the time.

Radical policies became common throughout Kammu's rule. In his attempt to reform the usually stagnant, nationalistic mentality, he often went too far in initiating radical changes that caused instability and unrest. For instance, moving the capital first from Nara, where the influence of his predecessor Emperor Temmu still remained, to Nagaoka, then again from Nagaoka to Kyoto irritated the people in both regions. Kammu also engaged in military campaigns against the more primitive people living in the east. This strategy further upset his own supporters who were neglected in his absence. So while trying to improve conditions Kammu only increased social tension and unrest.

Emperor Saga (786-842), son of

Emperor Kammu, was also known as a ruler with strong leadership and intelligence. However, social conditions were still unstable so that despite his efforts to relieve tension by removing taxes, famines and epidemics continued, which led to a series of revolts that placed society in even further chaos.

## THE EMERGENCE OF KUKAI

Kukai was born in 772 in Sanuki province (now Kagawa Prefecture). He came from a wealthy family and showed an extraordinary genius as a child. At fifteen he was sent with all his family's hopes and expectations to Kyoto to become a bureaucrat. He entered the national university but left school without completing the course. Instead, he retreated into the mountains in search of spiritual knowledge. Why did this happen?

Kukai may have seen the dramatic changes taking place under Emperor Kammu and found that college study of endless exegesis was meaningless in view of the urgent social needs of his time. He may have also realized that work as a bureaucrat would not be sufficient to achieve the results that he wanted. His dream was to find a system of philosophy that would address the spiritual, material and social needs of the whole nation, and in order to develop this philosophy he needed to go into the mountains to practice asceticism and meditate apart from society.

Kukai's dream finally came true in 804, at the age of 30, when he decided to join an envoy to Tang Dynasty China to study an esoteric form of Buddhism recently brought to China from India. Even though he had already established himself as a well known monk and leading philosopher in Japan, he chose to take the trip using his own money and facing the dangers of crossing the treacherous Sea of Japan.

The new esoteric form of Buddhism



◀ Spreading paddy field

that Kukai wanted to master centered on the attainment of enlightenment and secular well being through secrets, individual prayer and rituals. Until that time the way to Enlightenment had been restricted to a chosen few who had to read numerous volumes of Sutra and undergo years of rigorous ascetic practice. These requirements excluded the vast majority of the common people. Kukai hoped that by introducing a more accessible form of Buddhism more people could share the material benefits of the faith which would lead to a healthier and more stable society. This principle also happened to satisfy the needs of those newly in power who tried to secure their wealth and health through rituals and chants. Kukai believed this could open a new era of peace and prosperity for Japan.

In China the foremost authority in esoteric Buddhism was the monk, Huiguo. Kukai wanted to study under this master but knew that because of Huiguo's fame, it would be extremely difficult for him to meet him. To overcome this obstacle Kukai devised a way that demonstrated his acumen in social and interpersonal relations. On arriving in China he went to the capital of Sian where Huiguo was living. Instead of trying to see him immediately, he first established his own reputation by inviting the noblemen and high ranking officials to parties for the exchange of poems. Through these gatherings his name as a learned and wise monk spread rapidly. As a result, Huiguo longed for meeting with this new monk from Japan and granted Kukai a meeting. When Kukai met Huiguo, he was immediately admitted. Because of Kukai's exceptional talent at language and learning, he was soon initiated into the secrets of esoteric Buddhism directly from him. When Kukai returned to Japan, he used this knowledge to form the basis of a new Buddhism order called the Shingon sect.

Esoteric Buddhism, however, was not the only learning that Kukai brought back from China. In addition to

advanced forms of religion, Sian was also the most culturally developed city in the East having the same status as Rome in the areas of science, technology, medicine and art. In the fertile area between the Yangtze River and the Hwang Ho (Yellow River) advanced cultivation of rice, tea, sugar, cotton and silk were thriving along with the production of lacquerware, ceramics and dye works. In addition, civil engineering reached new levels as water transportation systems were built to carry these products to the city. As a part of learning about personal, earthly salvation through Buddhism, Kukai also studied these new technologies. Within two years he had acquired enough practical knowledge to return to Japan ready to revolutionize his country's own culture. Kukai's success in China was a testimony to his extraordinary personal charm and ability to interact with people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

On returning to Japan Emperor Saga appointed Kukai Abbot of Toji Temple\* (East Temple) in Kyoto. The temple's work was so valued that it was called Kyo-o Gokokuji meaning 'Temple which teaches Buddhism to the Emperor and protects the country'.

#### RESISTANCE TO DEVELOPMENT BY GROUPS OPPOSING TO INNOVATIVE RICE CULTIVATION

Emperor Saga gave this important position to Kukai for several reasons due to the political climate of their time.

One of the basic principles in establishing government was the implementation of effective and reliable rice cultivation. Thus, the most urgent objective of the government was to help the people settle down to their work of producing rice. If this could be accomplished, ruling would be a relatively smooth process of overseeing the production and distribution of food. Unfortunately, the people were highly

skeptical of change. As it was, they already had enough to worry about frequent extremes in weather, flooding or drought. For many the new technologies presented one more danger of failure, meaning famine and great suffering. Also some part of the population still relied on hunting and gathering methods left over from the Jomon period. In addition to rice they also ate a variety of vegetables and so did not want to become totally dependent on the new staple food. They viewed the mountains, lakes and rivers as sacred places inhabited by ancient gods fearing that any disturbance of those places would bring divine vengeance. These attitudes fused together to generate the greatest opposition to innovative rice production. For this reason Emperor Kammu carried out a campaign partly to suppress and conquer these 'backward' people in northeastern Japan.

There are two recorded examples of opposition to irrigation efforts at that time. The first occurred in 811 when engineers had to cut down part of a mountain to construct canals. The local peasants were greatly distressed and refused to assist with the construction because they believed the gods would punish them for destroying the sacred mountain. A similar event occurred in 827 when a local shaman warned the people that if they repaired the banks of a nearby river, they would be struck with divine revenge. The peasants believed her and refused to go anywhere near the river. Only after an official, Takafusa of Fujiwara, came to enforce the construction and arrest and severely punish the shaman could the work continue. Such episodes as these demonstrated the people's resistance to new technology, though their dissatisfaction over forced labor works and tax increase underlay the resistance. On another front there was still much opposition from the old monks and bureaucrats. They had been living peacefully under the old "Ritsuryo System", and had doubts about any religious reformation or political

change since the time of Emperors Kammu and Saga.

Their group wanted to return to a centralized autocracy designed to give maximum economic and social control to the reigning sovereign.

This was the world into which Kukai entered as Emperor Saga's most prominent religious/government reformer, the new thinker/monk/technocrat just back from China.

#### KUKAI'S LEADERSHIP DISPLAYED IN RIVERBANK CONSTRUCTION

Kukai responded to Emperor Saga's expectations by using his practical abilities to build a new social foundation and his spiritual abilities to calm the people's anxieties. One of Kukai's most industrious efforts was the construction of a temple on Mt. Koya in 819 which became the new center for the Shingon sect. The construction required the movement of large quantities of food and materials through dark forests to the precipitous summit of Mt. Koya. None of this could have been accomplished without not only Kukai's great skill in civil engineering but the ardent devotion he received from the people who labored in mass to complete the project.

Another example of Kukai's expertise in water and manpower management was his repair of the Manno-ike Reservoir in the Sanuki district (now Kagawa Prefecture in Shikoku). Built between 701 and 703, the old man-made lake was so poorly constructed that the banks often collapsed when water levels rose, endangering all surrounding areas. When, in 818, it fell apart completely, the government sent an official to oversee its repair. However, even after three years, the work had still not been successfully completed, so the official requested the government to send Kukai. In April, 821, Kukai was assigned to the project. He arrived in June and completed the work by August of the same year, an



River improvement during the Heian Period

Kukai (owned by Kongobuji Temple)





amazing feat in those times. The new lake, 20 miles in circumference and 60 feet deep and still functioning today, can provide water to 4500 hectares of farmland. It is surrounded by mountains on three sides and is fed by rivers from 36 different valleys. Even today it is one of the largest reservoirs in Japan. According to the latest research by Prof. Maeda of Kansai University, the supporting arch that Kukai used to disperse the water pressure evenly is a structure that is still used in dam construction today. The surprising fact is that Kukai knew this technique over a thousand years ago. However, even more notable than his technological knowledge was his great charisma in mobilizing people to do major work so quickly.

### THE THOUGHT THAT ONE WORLD CONSISTS OF TWO REALMS

Kukai has gained his charisma through display of his incantation power. He maintained that his power came from his practice of incantations and chanting. Readers might wonder why Kukai, who possessed rational thinking and scientific excellence, had to claim his magical chants to gain the people's worship and support. To understand this it is necessary to look at the existing mentality of the people during his time.

The most popular literature during the eighth and ninth centuries were mythologies and the Manyo-shu, a collection of Japanese poetry. Only a very few intellectuals could understand Kukai's new teachings. As there was no way to communicate his knowledge to the common people, Kukai had to show them by offering some proof of mental/spiritual power that they could experience for themselves. To do this Kukai used chanting and incantations as a vehicle to teach the wisdom of his new sect. One example was Kukai's attempt to use Chinese medical treatments back in Japan. Initially it was

not possible for the people to have faith in the healing without having first learned the power of chanting and incantation. Fortunately, the new Buddhist doctrine allowed chanting and permitted the ancient Shinto/mountain rituals that were left over from the Jomon period. It even encouraged a cooperation between Buddhism and Shintoism which made it more easily acceptable to all Japanese people.

In general, Buddhism acknowledges and respects the natural co-existence of two seemingly antithetic concepts, spirituality as expressed in philosophy and practicality as pursued through scientific study. Esoteric Buddhism believes that these are essentially inseparable and interdependent.

The Shingon faith expresses this relationship as Kongo-kai (Thunderbolt Realm) which preaches principles of the spirit and Taizo-kai (Womb or Matrix Realm) which addresses the principles of materialism. Kukai taught that they exist together in the same kind of relationship as body and soul. The Shingon sect as Kukai established it referred to this concept as 'Ryobu-Fuji', one world consisting of two realms.

### PHILOSOPHY ON THE CO-EXISTENCE OF MAN AND NATURE.

The primary thought of 'Ryobu-Fuji' is that in order to respect the soul, the body should be respected as well. In other words, the development of better agriculture and industry is essential for the growth of culture and stability of life. Consequently, man should take advantage of nature as it is found and make changes whenever it can benefit society. This was the cornerstone of Kukai's thinking regarding the co-existence of man and nature. His method of supervising the Manno-Ike water project was proof of how harmony between man and nature/Gods could be achieved. This was also the reason why

Kukai's work was greater than that of Gyogi's. Without his guiding philosophy Kukai could never have risen to a position of such political and spiritual influence. With this authority he was able to apply his numerous skills to fuse the people's hearts and bodies and lead Japan into a new era.

More than a thousand years have passed since Kukai combined his intellectual and spiritual energy to calm the people and develop Japan's water resources. However, society still faces many of the same conflicts between those who want to protect the environment and those who want to develop it - between groups who stand for change and those who defend the status quo. Despite the progress which has been made and our greater tolerance for different values, these issues remain as difficult to resolve as ever. For this reason it may be useful to take another look at Kukai's thought regarding the co-existence of man and nature so that we continue to ask important questions concerning what we can do to secure a physically healthy, politically stable and spiritually fulfilling existence for all people. ■

### THE AUTHOR'S PROFILE

#### SHUHEI MAKI

Shuhei Maki was born in 1942 and graduated from Kyoto University with a major in Literature. After working as a magazine editor he is now a freelance writer. He wields a powerful pen on subjects ranging from philosophy to social problems.

### NAMES AND TERMS

#### GYOGI (668-749)

Monk from the Hosso sect of Buddhism who devoted his life to the building of temples. He was especially renowned for construction of Todaiji Temple in Nara. In addition he supervised numerous municipal projects including the construction of dams and bridges.

#### THE JOMON PERIOD (ca. 10,000BC - ca 300BC)

The Jomon period received its name from the code-marked (jomon)pottery. It lasted more than 9,000 years witnessing the dawn of Japanese culture. Among the most notable milestones were the birth of Shamanism, views of nature and higher life, fishing and shellfish gathering techniques and the establishment of a fixed language. The Jomon period also showed evidence of some neolithic characteristics that did not use metal and was not an exclusively hunting and gathering society.

#### KUKAI (774-835)

Considered the father of Japanese culture, a Buddhist Priest of the early Heian period (794-1185). Also known as Kobo Daishi, he founded the Shingon sect of Buddhism. He is credited with inventing the Kana syllabary and of being a master poet, sculptor, lexicographer and water engineer. He was also famous as a wandering monk who engaged in severe ascetic practices and originated the pilgrimage circuit of 88 temples in Shikoku.

#### RITSURYO SYSTEM

A system of centralized autocracy derived from a Chinese model. In Japan it emerged as a comprehensive legal code called Ritsuryo which prevailed from the 7th to the late 10th century. It was characterized by a hierarchical bureaucracy in the service of the Emperor.

#### TOJI TEMPLE

A monastery temple officially called Kyo-o Gokokuji founded in 796 in Kyoto. Built by imperial order to protect the capital, it is now the head temple of the Toji branch of Shingon sect.



Manno-ike Reservoir,  
Kagawa Prefecture



Rich harvest of rice plants





BY  
SHUHEI  
MAKI

Some words seem destined to conjure generic images, lacking in specificity or individuality. Words like 'man' or 'woman', for instance, are usually signified for a figure commonly shared by most people. This image is something akin to C.G. Jung's 'collective unconsciousness', or the archetypal images which seem to permeate the consciousness of every strata of society.

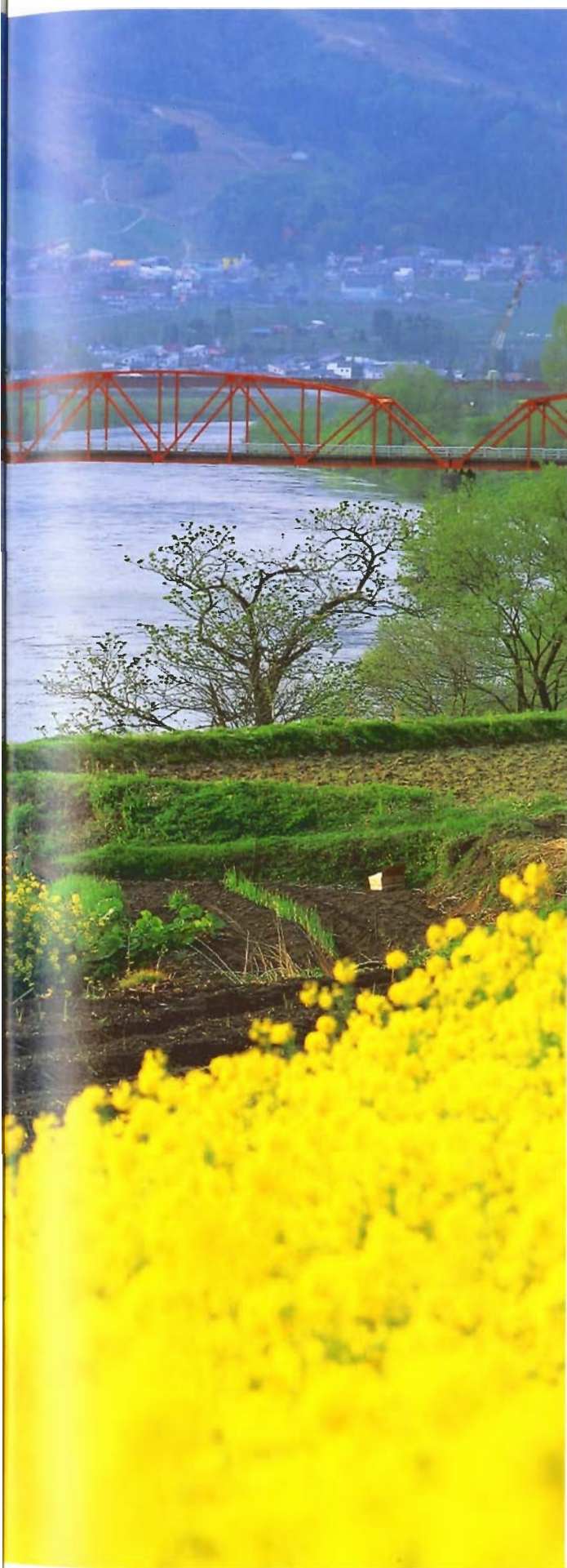
'River' is one such word. Although there are infinite possibilities and variations that this word can signify – everything from a beautiful brook in a valley to a filthy canal – there seems to be one standard image that persists in representing this word. In its purest form, the archetypal river lies somewhere in between beautiful and bland, passive and aggressive, and meaningful and meaningless. In other words, a river is viewed as scenery, neither one thing nor another. Yet can this be accurate? Can rivers be as neutral as generic images would suggest?

Perhaps a good place to find the answer to this question is in our purest form of expression: art. More than anything else, art seems to be the best representative of societal opinions. In literature, as well as films, images of rivers abound. As a result, cinematic adaptations of literature seem the best place to look into. Japanese films, which offer a plethora of river images, must certainly attest to the fact that rivers are more complex than the archetypal image would lead us to believe.

The Chikuma River in Spring







**THROUGH  
A  
LOOKING  
GLASS:  
RIVERS  
IN  
JAPANESE  
FILM  
ADAPTA-  
TIONS**

## A RIVER OF FORGIVENESS

A river forms the central motif familiar in director Keisuke Kinoshita's 1954 film "My First Love Affair". Although the film is based on Sachio Ito (1864-1913)'s popular classic, "Grave Amid Aster", the film deviates from the novel somewhat and uses a river to expand upon its theme. Despite the fact that the basic story remains the same, the film devotes further attention to points raised in the novel.

"Grave Amid Aster" is the story of unfulfilled love. As a young man, Masao falls in love with his beautiful cousin Tamiko. Unfortunately, they are forbidden to marry by their families. Giving up, Masao goes to Tokyo to study. In Tokyo, he finds professional success yet remains romantically unfulfilled. In turn, Tamiko is forced into a marriage of her family's choosing and, soon afterwards, dies in depression. Finally 10 years later, Masao returns to visit her grave, bearing the asters she so loved.

In his adaptation, Kinoshita remains faithful to the basic story, yet chooses to elaborate on some themes. Firstly, the film heightens the sense of Masao's loss by increasing the time span between his departure for Tokyo and his return to Tamiko's grave. In the novel, only 10 years elapse; in the film, Masao's return takes place a full 60 years later. In doing so, Kinoshita's film deepens the magnitude not only of Masao's loss, but also of the significance of his return to Tamiko's grave. Since film is almost a purely visual medium, successful filmmakers choose visuals that reinforce the story. Kinoshita is no exception: he uses a river to visually illustrate Masao's state of mind. Yet this visual reinforcement necessitates a change in the story's setting. The novel is set in suburban Tokyo, "in Yagiri village, two miles from Matsudo city", near the Edo River. Yet the Edo River is a relatively small and largely urbanized river. Since Kinoshita's film places more significance upon the river, the film's setting is changed from Tokyo to the far more rural area of Nagano, and the banks of the Chikuma River. Larger and more remote than the Edo, the Chikuma River serves as a suitable symbol for Masao's sizable and lonely regret.

The film begins on the Chikuma, in the present day, with a ferry moving along the river, which visually suggests what the novel is able to directly explain: Masao's state of mind. Returning to the past, he feels as overwhelmed as he looks. Hence, on screen, form and content are working in tandem.

In addition, the sprawling Chikuma River is also more suitable than the Edo River in as much it is better able to suggest the 60 year time span. As a standard symbol of the passage of time, the river needs to be long enough to suggest the passage of 60 years. When Masao begins his journey in the film, he is not just going home; he is moving back along 60 years of pain and regret. The enormity of this act calls for an equally immense river.

Yet Kinoshita's film uses the river as much more than an emblem of Masao's regret and the passage of time. Indeed, the river appears at every significant point in the film's story. When Tamiko moves to Masao's village from her home on the opposite side of the river, they meet for the first time at the ferry port on the river bank. Later, when Masao leaves the village for Tokyo, this is the same place from which Tamiko sees him off, never to see him again. And still later, trapped in the mire of her disastrous marriage, it is at the river bank where Tamiko stands and cries her own tears of loss. More than simply a picturesque setting, the river seems to act as a boundary not just between the village and the rest of the world, but between this world and another world. After suffering the tyranny of her conservative world, Tamiko escapes these chains by leaving this world and crossing into another. While we are never sure of whether she succeeds in transmigrating into another form, we can be assured that she finds peace and release from her agony. And finally, by returning home and crossing a boundary, Masao is able to release himself from his own agony and regret. Therefore, Kinoshita's river becomes far more than our collective image of a river. An emblem of not only time and memory, but also a symbol of forgiveness.

## TWO RIVERS OF LIFE

A fine example of the fluidity of rivers, both literally and figuratively, can be found in the works of Teru Miyamoto.



▲ A Scene from "My First Love Affair"





▲ A Scene from "River of Fireflies"

▲ A Scene from "Muddy River"

a novelist. Rivers have been central to most of his work. In fact, he has published three books which feature rivers in their titles: "Doro no kawa" (Muddy River), for which he received the Osamu Dazai Prize in 1977, "Hotarugawa" (River Of Fireflies), winner of the 1977 Akutagawa Prize, and "Dotonborigawa" (The Dotonbori River) in 1978. All three have been made into movies. Of the three, "River Of Fireflies" and "Muddy River" make for an interesting comparison of Miyamoto's use of rivers.

Set in Toyama City in 1962, "River Of Fireflies", directed by Eizo Sugawa in 1987, is the story of a 15 year-old boy named Tatsuo who, following the death of his father, learns some lessons about life. According to a legend told by his deceased father, if an unusually heavy snow falls in April, the early summer will bring an inordinate number of fireflies to the upper Joganji River, deep among the mountains, amid the river's clearest water. When the April following his father's death does in fact bring an extraordinary amount of snow, Tatsuo, his mother and his girl friend, Eriko, decide to embark upon an early summer excursion upstream, with the assistance of Ginzo, the best friend of Tatsuo's father's.

During their journey upstream, Ginzo likens the course of the river to the different stages of life with a vivid metaphor.

"If life is expressed by a river," he says, "then young Tatsuo and Eriko are now upstream, where the two mountain brooks join and become bigger. Tatsuo's mother, in middle age, is here, in the mid-point, where we are walking right now."

"Then where are you, Ginzo?" Tatsuo asks.

"Perhaps somewhere in the lower reaches, near the end, close to Toyama Bay."

"And my father?" asks Tatsuo.

"Your father is gone. He went out to sea through Toyama Bay and evaporated into the air. Now, soon he will come back from the heavens and snow down upon us."

And so the river represents the cycle of life in its four stages. The rapid water at the river's upper course, coming from the snow of the mountain, is fresh and pure, like youth. As it moves on, it becomes slower and warmer until, at

the lower end, it is a mixture of purities and impurities caught up along the way. At the end of this journey, the water moves out to the sea, from where it will evaporate into the heavens. And finally, this same water will be renewed as it snows upon the mountain to begin the journey again.

With this cycle so clearly spelled out for us, both visually and through Ginzo's speech, we realize that their journey has been more than a simple expedition in search of fireflies. Instead, it has been a life-affirming journey towards hope. When they finally reach their destination, the water is clear and fresh, and, as the legend promised, fireflies bath them in a flood of light. And it is this light that represents hope. At the beginning of the cycle of life, the fireflies symbolize the potential of every young life. From the beginning of the river, all life is vibrant, luminous, and ready for its journey through life's tomorrows.

Yet in another story by Miyamoto, a far darker river appears. Instead of a river that represents the cycle of life in the simplest and broadest of terms, the river in director Shohei Oguri's "Muddy River" (1980) does not distinguish between waters of youth and old age. As it is a far darker story than "River Of Fireflies", its river is appropriately darker.

Set in Japan in the grim years following the end of World War II, the film dramatizes the plight of the people trying to pick up the pieces in the post-war world. Through the eyes of 8 year-old Nobuo, we see a world soiled by experience of life. When Nobuo befriends two children who live in an old boat moored on the river bank, he is pulled even closer into this gloominess. On the boat, the children's mother works as a prostitute. And the river upon which the boat is moored is as blackened and soiled as the world around it. When Nobuo gets his sneakers caught in the filthy mud by the side of the river, the river seems to be symbolic of the world in which Nobuo lives. Oppressive and gloomy, this world weighs the boy down.

Yet this does not mean that this river is not a symbol of hope. On the contrary, like the river in "River Of Fireflies", "Muddy River" offers hope in as much as its river is as unbeatable as the human spirit. Like the inhabitants of post World War II Japan, the river con-

tinues to move on. Although filled with the darkness and despair of that strange period, its cycle, like that of the "River Of Fireflies", does not cease. Thus, in very different ways, Miyamoto's rivers make the same statement.

#### A RIVER AS CHARACTER

Yet rivers are not limited to being symbolic references in films. "While My First Love Affair", "River Of Fireflies" and "Muddy River" all use the rivers to visually reinforce the movies' plots or motifs, other films manage to elevate the river in its own right, making it a viable part of the story. One such film is "Nowhere Man", directed by Naoto Takenaka. Based upon a cartoon by Yoshiharu Tsuge, this film received critical acclaim at the 48th Venice Film Festival.

Set in Chofu, by Tokyo's Tama River, "Nowhere Man" focuses on the main character's seeming inability to succeed in life. Though once a somewhat popular cartoonist, his inability to keep up with current trends, not to mention his basic ineptitude, ruined his career. Now, living in poverty with his wife and son, he and his wife are forced to make money any way they can. While his wife tries to make money in practical, albeit uninspired ways, such as distributing handbills and working in a ticket booth, the Nowhere Man embarks upon a series of harebrained money making schemes which are as painfully embarrassing as they are ridiculous. In a classic example of carrying coals to Newcastle, he builds a hut by the river in an attempt to sell stones and pebbles collected from the sides of the river. Naturally this business is a failure. Then, he creates another service in which he carries passengers across the river on his back, like a ferry man, for the measly price of 100 yen (\$1US). Once again, there is no stampede of customers for this strange and futile service, save for a woman who, while on his back, suggests that they have an affair.

And throughout all of this, the Tama River flows coolly by. At first this seems puzzling. After all, the Tama River, which flows through booming and prosperous suburban Tokyo, rings of success and vigor. Surely the old Sumida River or downtown Tokyo's dirty Kanda River would be a more appropriate symbol of the Nowhere

Man's plight.

Yet upon closer scrutiny, we see that there is indeed method in this madness. Rather than acting as a symbol of the Nowhere Man's situation, or as somehow emblematic of his plight, the river acts as a foil for him, or a counterpoint. The contrast between the ineffectual Nowhere Man and the vigorous Tama River adds far more depth to his characterization than a pure symbol could. This convention, which Bertold Brecht referred to as "Verfremdungs Effekt", is a style of using foils, or contrasts, to take that which is familiar and make it strange. The Nowhere Man's uselessness is far more evident to us because it is made strange by its contrast to the Tama. Next to the seemingly competent role in which the Tama River is cast, the pathos of the Nowhere Man's situation is enhanced. And, in increasing this pathos, the Tama River helps us to better understand the Nowhere Man's character.

In fact, the Tama seems to play a substantial role in this film. As a foil, it almost seems to work as a character. The Tama becomes the silent mirror which reflects the Nowhere Man's stupidity and banality back at him. When the man converses with the river, the Tama becomes the ultimate straight man, adding so much by saying nothing.

And so the river becomes an agent for elucidating that which is its opposite. Through the river as character, we come to see the Nowhere Man clearly, flaws and all. Were this the story of a successful modern man, the Tama would have been a perfect symbol of his success. But next to the Nowhere Man, the river takes on yet another role, yet another form.

#### A RIVER AS CAPTOR

Another film that uses a river to dramatize the plight of modern man is "Hai-shi" (Abandoned City), director Nobuhiko Obayashi's 1984 adaptation of Takehiko Fukunaga's novel. Like "Nowhere Man", "Hai-shi" uses a river in an improbable way.

The story involves a student's move to a country town called Yanagawa. Looking for a quiet place in which to write his graduation thesis, Eguchi relocates to a scenic location which, built upon a large calm river, features a



▲  
A Scene from "Nowhere Man"





series of canals running throughout the town. He finds lodgings with a family, in an old house that also has a small harbor for boats. This new environment seems a perfect one in which to write his thesis. In his new room, Eguchi is surrounded by the soothing sounds of the water outside. On the walls, he can even enjoy the reflection of the water.

Yet Eguchi soon begins to see that all do not find the town as picturesque as he does. When talking to the landlord's daughter, Eguchi comments that the town is so lovely, like Venice in Japan. While she agrees, she also suggests, "the beautiful sound of the streams is the sound of the town dying. All sounds in this town are the sounds of death."

Puzzled by her vehemence, Eguchi talks to the girl's brother in law, sounding out his opinion.

"This is a very tasteful town, isn't it, with such beautiful canals"

"They are just artificial and decadent," the brother responds. "They are dull, they lack life, and they are a waste of time."

"But you think they are artistic, don't you?" Eguchi asks.

"I am not sure," he answers. "I don't think there was any artistic purpose when they made them since both the town and its inhabitants are dying now."

This seems puzzling at first since beauty is such a standard symbol of positive, hope-affirming qualities. Yet the river and its canals are not, once again, symbols in their own right. Instead, they are reflections of the people around them. Moreover, the system of canals, albeit beautiful, are man-made. As a result, they flow with an order and calm that is palpably unnatural.

And this unnaturalness is not limited to the canal's appearance. Obayashi's film emphasizes the sounds of the water, which provide a constant background to the characters' lives. Yet while natural sounds, such as waves, waterfalls and raindrops often produce a serene feeling in nature-starved people of today, in this situation they serve only as a constant reminder of their unnaturalness. Flowing around the inhabitants of the town with clock-like precision, the river becomes yet another reminder of human constructs and how they bind and constrain the very people that create them.

In the house in which Eguchi lives, the family is bound by traditions and societal obligations they cannot begin to escape. The river thus becomes a metaphor for their existence. Like the intricate system of canals that surround them, they live an unnatural life. They too are a man-made construct.

## REFLECTING RIVERS

From these five essentially disparate rivers, it is clear that there is no easily identifiable river in Japanese films. In appearance as well as meaning, each river offers something different to the audience. That they can suggest the passage of time, the pain or regret, or the strength or weakness of the human spirit, is a glowing tribute to their malleability.

But beyond this adaptability, rivers in films do share a common essence. Again and again, whether explicitly or implicitly, rivers become a metaphor for the human experience; and understandably so. Like people, rivers exist in a cycle that is tied to a fixed flow of energy. As we see so clearly in "River Of Fireflies", rivers are part of a cycle which has no end. For human beings, what is so alluring about this cycle of energy is that it is so easily discerned by the human eye. Caught up in the joy and pain of our own lives, we may be able to forget, for a time, that we are on a journey, or are part of a cycle. A river, however, offers no respite from this knowledge. The river flows ceaselessly by on its one-way journey. Yet this metaphor is not static. Instead, it is as malleable as the rivers from which it comes. As these five films illustrate, rivers as metaphors can offer hope or suggest despair. This fluidity of meaning stems from the fact that rivers signify no one thing in themselves. Rather, we imbue them with hope or despair as a reflection of ourselves. As an audience we unconsciously understand this because, even when the directors of these films use these rivers as implicit symbols, we share a tacit understanding that enables us to imbue them with the appropriate meaning. And so perhaps rivers are indeed neutral symbols in the collective unconscious. Neutral in meaning, yet far from meaningless. ■

**THE AUTHOR'S PROFILE**  
SHUHEI MAKI. SEE PAGE 16.

We use re-cycled paper for this magazine.

