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ULTIMAS NOTICIAS DEL JAPON

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L I T E R A R Y P R I Z E S I N J A P A N

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Literary prizes have recently proliferated in Japan like mushrooms after rain. The Saishin bungakusho jiten (Up-to-date Dictionary of Literary Prizes) (Nichigai Associates, 1989) reports that there are now 345 active literary prizes. Including those subsequently founded, some 360-70 literary awards are regularly presented, an average of nearly one each day throughout the year.

Many of the newer ones were established by local governments, as was the Botchan Literary Prize, sponsored by the city of Matsuyama, Ehime prefecture. Matsuyama is the setting for Natsume Soseki's novel Botchan (translated into English under the same title) about a Tokyo-bred teacher posted to a school there in the early 1900s. Another is the Ito Sei Literary Prize, launched by the city of Otaru, Hokkaido in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the death of the native-born critic, novelist, and translator (1905-69). The city of Uji, Kyoto prefecture, likewise named a prize after Murasaki Shikubu, author of the Tale of Genji, the last ten chapters of which are called "Uji jujo" (The Ten Uji Chapters). In most cases the funds behind these prizes come from the grant of ¥100 million each distributed to local governments for the purpose of reinvigorating economy and culture. In terms of the amount and exploitable local resources, establishing a literary prize seemed the most suitable way to utilize these windfall gifts.

A number of very generous prizes, many offering as much as ¥10 million yen (such as the Period Novels Grand Prize - Kodansha and Asahi Broadcasting Corporation), and the Japan Mysteries Grand Prize (Nippon Television and Shinchosha), have been created and co-sponsored by television stations and publishing companies in the attempt to remedy the shortage of original works upon which TV dramas can be produced. There is even a new computer-network literature prize, called the "Pascal New Short Story Writers Prize" which solicits entries, presents screening procedures, and provides access to works submitted through a special computer network.

Despite this remarkable flowering, the best-known and most highly respected are still the oldest: the Akutagawa and Naoki prizes, both founded in 1935 by the Bungei Shunju publishing house. The Akutagawa Prize recognizes outstanding novels and short stories of pure literature by new writers published in literary journals. The Naoki Prize is aimed at works appearing in popular entertainment books and periodicals. Their screening committees meet twice yearly and awards have been presented 109 times.

The recipients of the Akutagawa Prize include many names well known even outside Japan, Oe Kenzaburo, Endo Shusaku, the recently deceased Abe Kobo, Inoue Yasushi, and others mentioned as candidates for the Nobel Prize in foreign wire services. From about ten or so years ago, however, the number of cases when this prestigious award passed over outstanding talent has become conspicuous. Important female writers, Tsushima Yuko, Tomioka Taeko, and Masuda Mizuko were not chosen, nor was the young and upcoming Yamada Eimi.

It has not been bestowed on Tatematsu Wahei, known for his ENRAI (Distant Thunder), which depicts the problems of borderline urban-rural areas, Murakami Haruki, whose best-selling *Noruei no mori* (Norwegian Woods) was taken up even in the American press, or Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen*, vastly popular not only in Japan but the United States and Italy.

One leading writer of the younger generation, Shimada Masahiko, made a splash recently when he staged an "anti-literary prize" show in which the nominees participated in the screening process. Like Shimada who was nominated for the Akutagawa Prize six times but not selected, many fine writers who have been recipients of other important prizes would seem well deserving of its honors. While the winners have of course included outstanding authors, among them Ikezawa Natsuki and Murata Kiyoko, the fact that others were overlooked can hardly go unnoticed.

While there are usually members within the screening committee that enthusiastically support particular entries, it often proves difficult for writings with a very strong individual style to gain acceptance among the ten-member strong committee, and authors capable of pleasing a wider critical spectrum tend to be chosen.

The case of the Akutagawa Prize does not necessarily directly reflect on trends in Japan's literary prizes as a whole. But some people in Japan, even if they do not ordinarily read fiction, make a point of perusing at least the Akutagawa Prize-winning works in order to gain a grasp of contemporary trends in fiction writing. In that sense the Akutagawa Prize's responsibility to society, and its role in encouraging writers whose work reflects the trends of the times is by no means small.

It would be unfair, of course, not to mention the good side of Japan's literary prizes. During a return visit in Japan in April 1993, Akutagawa Prize-winner and writer now living in California, Kometani Fumiko, known chiefly for her *Sugikoshi no matsuri* (Passover), applauded the system whereby Japanese literary journals solicit submission of manuscripts from the public and award prizes for promising new writers.

The screening committees of the literary magazines' new writer awards routinely review between several hundred and 1,500 works submitted from the general public. Since any work in Japanese is eligible, quite a few entries are from Japanese living abroad. Some years ago, Kometani Herself sent in stories to different awards for new writers from the United States and won the Bungakukai New Writer's Prize (Bungei Shunju) and the Shincho New Writer's Prize (Shinchosha). Subsequently she also won the Akutagawa Prize. Oba Minako was living in Alaska when she won the Gunzo New Writer's Prize (Kodansha) for "*Sanbiki no Kani*" (The Tale of Three Crabs) and shortly thereafter, the Akutagawa Prize. Oba later became one of Japan's leading contemporary female writers. She now serves on the screening committee of the Akutagawa Prize. A more recent example is Tawada Yoko, a resident of Hamburg, Germany, who won the Gunzo prize in 1991 and the Akutagawa Prize in 1993. Many now successful writers, in fact, made their debut in the literary world through works submitted to these prizes.

Kometani believes that the new writers awards, which are completely open, requiring no special connections with an editor, and which offer a chance to anyone who can write well, are more rational than comparable prizes in the United States.

While the most-coveted prize among new writers is the Akutagawa Prize, the Tanizaki Jun'ichiro Prize (established by Chuo Koronsha in 1965) is sought after by those already established in the profession. It is awarded to the best full-length novel published during the previous year. This prize became the center of controversy when it passed over Nakagami Kenji, who had been nominated five times and whose works had won widespread attention overseas before his early death at age 46 last year. In 1989, novelist Maruya Saiichi caused an uproar with his criticism of Nakagami's novel *Kiseki* (The Miracle). Because opinion was too divided among the members of the selection committee no award was made for two years. This incident sparked considerable debate over literary prizes. Since that time, when press conferences are held by Tanizaki Jun'ichiro Prize screening committee members upon announcement of the winners, only questions regarding works selected are accepted, suggesting an unfortunate tendency to close the doors on the screening process.

Part of the prestige these leading prizes have always held derived from the openness of the screening process. In the case of both the Akutagawa-Naoki pair and the Tanizaki Award, the nominees are announced before the selection committee meets, and after the winners are chosen, the press is given a detailed explanation of how the decision was made by members of the screening committee.

Bungei Shunju's rival publisher Shinchosha inaugurated the Mishima Yukio Prize and the Yamamoto Shugoro Prize only six years ago, but these relatively new awards receive wide coverage in the press because they too announce the nominees in advance and give screening members free rein to express their views after the winners are chosen. It can only be hoped that the former openness of the Tanizaki prize will be restored.

Two other important prizes are the Noma Prize for outstanding works by veteran writers and critics (sponsored by the Kodansha publishing house) and the Kawabata Yasunari Prize named after the Nobel-prize winning novelist (1899-1972) presented for the best short story published during the previous year. Among literary prizes sponsored by newspaper companies, only the Yomiuri Literary Prize is well established among literary circles. There are also many prizes for fiction, plays, essays, travel writing, criticism, biographies, poetry, haiku, academic research, translation, and other genres. The national government recognizes outstanding literary talent with its Geijutsu Sensho, Minister of Education Prize, and Academy of Arts Prize. The first is awarded for fiction by mid-career writers, and winning the Academy of Arts Prize is considered the first step to eventual appointment to the Japan Academy of Arts, considered by some the highest honor accorded to artistic achievement.

Two drawbacks of Japan's literary prizes seem to me to be of particular concern. One is that there is far too much overlap in the membership of the screening committees of different prizes for a healthy selection process. It is not unusual for one person to be serving simultaneously on the committees of three or four prizes. However conscientious they may be, it is inevitable that they would be inclined to favor works of a similar type. A little more variety on the committees would go far in ensuring that different types of works and authors are given due recognition in the world of literature.

The other drawback is the stratification of the literary world reflected in the prizes introduced here. There are separate awards for newcomers, for established authors, and for veteran writers, but there is no prize in Japan for the best work encompassing all these categories together. It seems that there has been a reluctance from the very start of the history of literary prizes in Japan to choose the definitive "best one". It goes back to the very first attempt to award the Bungei Sensho prize in 1912. The final nominees included many famous titles: Natsume Soseki's *Mon* (The Gate), Shimazaki Toson's *Ie* (The Family), Nagai Kafu's *Sumidagawa* (The Sumida River), Masamune Hakucho's *Biko* (Faint Light), Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's *Shisei* (The Tattoo), Yosano Akiko's collection of poetry, *Shundeishu*, Tsubouchi Shoyo for his translations of Shakespeare, and Kimura Takataro as translator of *The Complete Works of Plato*. On the screening committee were more famous names, including Mori Ogai, Ueda Bin, and Koda Rohan. On the day of the selection meeting, they voted eight times, but finally adjourned without picking a winner.

Later, a proposal was made that Tsubouchi be presented the award for his achievements in literature, and despite the Shakespearean scholar's protests, the committee persuaded him to accept.

That may have been unavoidable eighty years ago, but certainly we have come a long way since that time. In the recent proliferation of literary prizes, there ought to be at least one with a truly open selection process for the single best work of literature each year. (Koyama Tetsuro is a culture section reporter at Kyodo News Service).

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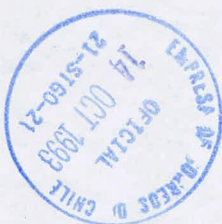
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