

〈翻 訳〉

Yoshinaga Michiko: 'My Mother's Photograph' & Two Other Essays

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'My Mother's Photograph'¹ by Yoshinaga Michiko²

During the last few months my way of leaving home to go to work has changed. Before that my mother, who lived so close by that we were practically living together grabbed me as I was bustling about the house and forced me to drink some green tea. Mother firmly believed that I would avoid mishaps by drinking tea as I was about to leave the house and when I didn't drink it because I really had no time she would worry about me until I returned home.

"Are you going to have a busy today?"

"About what time do you think you will be home?"

"Take care not to damage your health."

"Can't you try to take things a bit easier?"

She would for ever shoot such kinds of questions at me while running after me. Now I think of it, since I have recollections, dating back to my junior high school days, of mother's voice coming at me from behind as I was leaving the house to go to school or my part-time job, she must have continued saying such things to me for about 30 years.

And my replies to her questions were always brusque. "All right!" "Dunno." "O.K. O.K."

However when I talk to my mother now, I say,

"Today I'm going to be terribly busy, you know."

"I may not be back until the early morning."

"I'm in a daze. Probably I'm overtired. Next month I'd like to have a little more free time."

However mother maintains a stubborn silence. The reason is that it is not my

mother running behind me whom I'm addressing, but her photograph.

Mother died suddenly last autumn. She was in good health when she attended her grandchild's sports day and went on from there with her younger sister and her younger brother and his wife on a three-day trip. She never returned.

I lost my father at an early age, when I was nine years old. It was thoughtless of me but I hadn't considered rushing to the hospital to which mother had been taken while she was on her trip to say my final goodbye to her. I had so little time to think about her death that it felt like we were still bound closely together.

The fact is for the forty-two years since I was born, I had never lived apart from my mother. After father left me behind to take over, he promptly departed this life and mother and I lived together for twice the time that Miyazawa Rie³ lived with her mother.

My mother, who did not have the strength of Miyazawa Rie's mother, tried unsuccessfully to get over the loss of her husband by complaining to me, her daughter, about her anxiety and hopelessness.

"There truly is no such thing as God or Buddha, I believe. If the tile of a roof of a house belonging to a family as hard up as us was blown off by a typhoon, what do you think you would do?" At the end she demanded my prompt decision.

I, who was still an elementary school student, would quickly chase after the tile and pick it up. If I found out that it could not be used, I would think carefully how to fix vinyl to the missing area on the roof.

At that time, when it came to single mothers, there were still certain obstacles to gaining employment. Mother was so sensitive to what other people thought of us that it made her nervous. The most effective way for a single mother, like mine to lessen her feeling of inferiority was to show that I could beat the child of a family having both a father and mother. I regret to say that I, who had not been blessed with good looks like Miyazawa Rie, had only the means to get first prize by studying.

My exam results, report card and diplomas all made my mother pleased and were like a pay packet so that we could live for a while in peace and quiet. She was in a good mood whether there was a little or a lot inside the packet. When my grades steadily improved she was able to hold her head higher.

In due course when I began to go out to work, mother's wifely role expanded. She got up early, diligently made breakfast, asked me every morning what time I would return home, and got supper ready to serve at that time.

Once in a while when I didn't return on time, she telephoned my company. The fish served when I came home at midnight, several hours late, had been repeatedly baked. It was hard, dry, burnt jet-black and gave off hardly any smoke when it was baked for the final time.

In spite of being the useless kind of 'husband' who only ever has three things to say to his wife, 'I'm hungry, where's my food?', 'I want to take a bath now' (i.e. 'Run my bath!') and 'I'm tired. I want to get to bed.' (i.e. 'Lay out my futon!') afterwards I looked back fondly at this time when mother and I spent our days living together by ourselves. For mother it was probably our honeymoon period, when I belonged to her alone. However when I married, mother's honeymoon ended and I found myself in the tricky position of having to perform the feat of playing the role of wife and mother, while continuing to play the role of my mother's husband.

We were truly an unfortunate mother and daughter. With mother, appearing in turn as mother then wife, and myself gasping for breath between playing first the role of daughter and then my mother's husband, I felt that every day the situation changed from love then to hate just like a coin being flipped over⁴.

The first time I thought that I would not like to grow up to be like my mother was when I was still in junior high school, I think. When I did what I wanted to do, mother became angry over how it would look to other people, and I became a little sad and found it unpleasant when mother belittled herself, bowing and apologizing, when I got myself a part-time job. As a result, the times when I felt most displeased were when someone said to me, "You're just like your mother, aren't you?"

I want to have a different way of life to my mother's. I feel that I have been fighting with my mother throughout my life but still neither of us has the courage to separate nor to let the other one go.

If no one were to say any longer that I resembled my mother, I am aware that there are many aspects of me, which may be thought to resemble her. I think that maybe the one I have been fighting hard against all along is not my mother's shadow but in fact my own.

I realize that I may have willfully caused the parts of me, which I do not like to acknowledge as my known to be reflected onto my mother, which then became the object of my disgust. When my mother died many things became reflected back onto me and my feelings towards my mother became simply those of a daughter.

Long ago I recollect reading a theory that children will either choose the opposite way of life to their parents while fighting their shadow or choose the same way of life while opposing them. It seems that there is no advantageous way of adopting only the good parts of your parents.

With respect to myself, I became increasingly heavy-hearted, however towards my mother in the photo I became meek.

The photo was of mother smiling. When I brought her back from where she had traveled to on her trip, I had desperately searched for a photo of her smiling. Henceforth I, who will have to continue to live in the shadow of my mother, burdened with her expectations of me, would wish for her to at least be attempting to smile.

- 1) Originally published as 「母の写真」 in *Seishun to Dokusho* in March 1993.
- 2) Yoshinaga Michiko (吉永みちこ) (1950～) Non-fiction writer, TV commentator, previously horse-racing journalist
- 3) Miyazawa Rie (1973～) Actress
- 4) The actual word that the writer uses *toita gaeshi* (戸板返し) refers to a technique in kabuki whereby one actor appears simultaneously as two different characters. This is done by means of a wooden door (*toita* is literally a rain shutter), on either side of which are different costumes, whilst the actor's face appears through a hole in the door.

‘My syndrome of wanting to get married’¹ by Kishimoto Yoko²

“I have by slow degrees come to want to marry”, I said sitting up straight in front of my fellow company employees. After becoming a writer, I had nominally become a company employee, holding consultations about this and that regarding work, but things had completely changed as this had now become a consultation about my marriage.

“Is that right? Did you find someone nice?”

“No, there’s nobody.”

My thirtieth birthday is just around the corner. Amongst my friends of around the

same age there is an increase in those who, until now weren't interested in looking at photos of prospective partners for an arranged marriage even if they were brought around to their house, but now deck themselves out in kimono and frequently go out. Whenever we meet, we say, "Say, aren't there any nice men out there?"

When we were 22 or 23 there was a trend towards women not marrying. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law³ had been passed and it was a period when it would have been shameful to mention such a thing as settling down with a partner.

My 24 or 25 year-old self nodded in agreement, when I heard the words, "Marriage is not such a big deal. If you want to get hitched, go ahead. There's no longer any such thing as a marriageable age."

When I reached 27 or 28, as might be expected, I did things like signing up for insurance, buying an apartment and started to prepare for a life alone, saying, "As things stand now I will probably never get married."

And now, after all, I hate life alone and I long to be married. You could almost say that I'm suffering from a syndrome of wanting to get married.

Like many other women in my position, it is not that I have never had a steady boyfriend. Throughout my university days everyone thought of my boyfriend and I as a couple who, if things had gone on as they had been, would get married.

When I became of marriageable age, of course we talked about it. For a man it is in the third year of his working life that he thinks he is old enough to be married.

On the other hand, for a woman, this is the time when she feels most discontented. She says to herself that even though women are told that this is an age in which they can do anything, she herself has not done anything.

I wondered myself whether there weren't things, which I was still able to do and if so, I thought I'd like to have a go at them. Marriage is not such a big deal. I can do it anytime. Thinking that, I broke up with him and went to study abroad in China. That was when I was 25.

Even after that, there wasn't a total lack of men asking me to marry them. But I had just changed my job to become a writer so when I got such a proposal, I thought to myself, if I had wanted to get married, I would have got married back then, when I was 25, before I became a writer.

Having said that, from my present perspective, the question of when to marry has completely lost its importance.

When I turned 30 I could more or less see those things, which I ought to be able to do. Perhaps I would soon have to abandon these things.

I thought that I understood my friend when she said, “At that time sitting at my word processor in the company each time I yawned and sighed, stretching my body with raised hands, the words ‘I want to get married’ rushed to my lips.” Continuing my present job will not get me anywhere. It occurred to me that marriage is the final goal to be attained after changing jobs.

Although there was nothing which only I could do, rather than going out into the hustle and bustle of a working life, I wanted to be with a man, who had asked me alone to be his wife and stay at home, turning over the pages of a cookery book. It is said that this is the age of women and since our lives are more stressful, I wonder whether we get tired quicker?

These days my eyes are drawn towards any person who seems to be living a comfortable life. The expression ‘to settle down’ which ought to be obsolete unexpectedly sounds full of life and involuntarily I find myself listening to the song entitled ‘Me in our room with his shirts’⁴ which describes the feelings of a wife-to-be. When I was 24 or 25 and my friend showed me her frilly-apron-style married life, I did not envy her then.

There was also considerable pressure from people around you. If, at this age, you said you weren’t married, the first thing people would say is ‘Why?’

When I heard this word I keenly realized that, after all, in present-day Japan, if one is still unmarried at age 30, one needs to give a reason. You will be seen by others as having some problem or other so that the person you are seeing is probably unable to marry you.

There is also the pressure of time. In your twenties you would marry the person who you were going out with. These days when I think of my own marriage, I have come to calculate backwards from my old age to find out what I should do now. Old age has all of a sudden become real to me for example there are times when I can think of nothing else when I happen to wake up in the middle of the night in my apartment.

What if I remain single? It’s fine at the moment. However what about when I’m 50 or 60? I may have to leave my apartment. I may be unable to get about. I want a husband and children too. So I have to get married sometime soon. It might not be possible.

If I get married these kinds of problems relating to my being single will completely

vanish and I even have a feeling that everything will go well. This is in spite of hearing any number of stories of people getting divorced, being separated from their children and such like.

“If you want to get married so much, why not try to find out about the single men around you?”

I nodded in agreement at the suggestion of my fellow employee and attempted to do just that. However there were none. All of them were already married. Now I come to think of it, at that time I became vaguely aware that I had ceased to receive much attention from the opposite sex.

When I was 23 or 24, the men I knew were all unmarried. I thought that even if I let one or two potentials slip past me, there would be any number of others in the future. However I was mistaken.

I read headlines such as “There’s no such thing as a suitable age for marriage” but if they had asked me, I would have told them that after all, for me, there was indeed such an age. Thinking about it I should not have avoided the truth that at that time it was precisely the suitable age for me to marry. Those of us saying, “When we want to marry, there are no suitable men” were single women over 30.

And when I was asked what kind of man I was looking for, I replied,

“Let’s see. Since I’m no longer of an age when I can make extravagant demands, I would not expect my partner to have a high income, a high educational background or even to be of high stature⁵. However since I’ve made it by myself up until now, if I’m going to marry, I would like to be able to enjoy a more comfortable life than now. I would not ask for an annual income of ¥10,000,000 but it would be preferable if he earned sufficient for me to be able to stay at home and I would also like him to earn enough for us to be able to take out loans as well as put aside money for our old age. Also it is not essential that he has a good academic background, however since I happen to be a college graduate, if my husband also had a university degree, neither of us would need to worry about any problems arising from differences in educational achievement. It wouldn’t matter whether he was less than 180 centimetres tall, however neither of us will be young and so as not to be thought of as having married each other because both of us were evidently leftovers in the marriage stakes, nothing could be better than him being tall. I would also like him to be tolerably good-looking.”

“In other words, that means high salary, high academic background and tall, doesn’t

it,” one of my company colleagues remarked.

No doubt the older one gets, the more one’s demands regarding the attributes of a marriage partner increase. I can no longer accept as the starting point for marriage that outlined in the following proposal, “So long as I have you, I don’t need anything else. Let’s eat noodles together in a cheap flat.”

“If that’s the case, maybe your only option is to attend a party for singles looking for marriage partners or something like that.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

It’s a strange thing to say but in spite of the fact that I myself am over 30 and one of the leftovers in the marriage stakes, I cannot help thinking that there might be a reason that a man, attending a party for singles looking for a marriage partner, should be left unmarried. At such an age it might be safer to look for a partner amongst divorced men.

In this way the people I should have been meeting were never met and I turned 31.

When one of my fellow employees took me to another company, he said to the people there, “She says that she wants to get married soon. Is there any good person in your company?”

“Yes, there is. He’s also over 30 and says that he wishes to get married. I’ll introduce him. If she is serious about getting married.”

I was shocked to hear this. I backed out saying, “Yes, please do so on another occasion” and left. I wonder why. Considering that I had said repeatedly that I wished to marry, when it came to being introduced, I recoiled. I recalled a friend who had gone to meet a different man on different occasions with a view to getting married but had turned each of them down in turn. For her as well as for me I wonder whether after all we had a serious intention to get married.

After I turned 31, I began to date again. I wanted the man to say to me, “I want to marry you.” By my age men had already told me many hundreds of times that they loved me, but I thought now that those words were just a lie unless the man also said “I want to marry you”.

However if a man said this to me right now, I don’t know what I’d do.

My friend said, “However much you may love your boyfriend, don’t you feel relieved in some way after he goes back home?” I couldn’t help but nod in assent at some truth in what she said. On the one hand I am happy when I’m with my boyfriend but on the other hand I’m not yet ready to give up my single life.

When all is said and done I wonder if I am not someone who wants to get married but rather no more than someone who wants a man who loves me enough to say “I want to marry you.”

The hurt from the mild setbacks throughout my twenties, does not seem likely to be healed by something like marriage. As a worker I did not count for much, but being able to become one man's wife is something that only one woman does in this society.

The aftershock, which women feel, when they realize that they haven't achieved what in their twenties, they thought they could, manifests itself in this syndrome of wanting to get married, or more accurately wanting a man to tell you that he wishes to marry you, which is appearing in the present generation of women, including me.

- 1) Originally published as 「私における『結婚したい症候群』」 in *Fujin Kouron* in November 1993.
- 2) Kishimoto Yoko (岸本葉子) (1961~) Essayist
- 3) The Equal Employment Opportunity Law [「男女雇用機会均等法」 or formally 「雇用の分野における男女の均等な機会及び待遇の確保等に関する法律」] took effect in April 1986.
- 4) 'Me in our room with his shirts' (部屋と Y シャツと私) was a single by Hiramatsu Eri (平松愛理) released in 1992.
- 5) The so-called three highs (三高), which some women required as necessary conditions for a man seeking their hand in marriage, was a buzzword of the bubble economy of the late 1980s.

'Recollections of My Father'¹ by Jugaku Akiko²

Day after day, I recall various things. Nearly a month had passed since my father died and I had just begun to recover a little. I felt uneasy about the nameplate 'Jugaku Bunsho'³ on our door. Oh yes, I remember. I had father write one for just me to use and I ferreted out the nameplate with just our family name 'Jugaku' on it. Mother died in

1981 and after father's grief had subsided somewhat, a few repairs were made to our house. The carpenter said, "How about these for the nameplate" and produced three suitable, blocks of wood, one of which had been inscribed. Since the one we had used until now inscribed 'Jugaku Bunsho' was pretty dirty, it had to be replaced for the time being. However compared with the dignified, thick strokes of the dirty one, the calligraphy on the new one was thin and neat but had a somewhat light feel.

Before I knew it I said, "My, my, father. Somehow the characters on this nameplate have a melancholy feel."

Even now I distinctly recall him responding, "Yes, that's absolutely right."

"They express your present state of mind," I remarked carelessly.

"Please write one with just 'Jugaku' on it for me when I'm on my own", I requested. On the remaining block, I attempted myself to inscribe the words 'Jugaku'.

I was unable to say "when I'm left alone" or "after you have died". Father was weak in some respects and since I was unable to use harsh expressions like those, I always made it a rule to use "for me alone" as a phrase with the same meaning.

Finally the time had arrived to use that nameplate made for one person. My heart was full. After losing his beloved wife, who he had loved throughout their whole life together, he appeared hale and hearty and although no doubt strength remained for him to be able to stick it out until he was 91, during father's remaining 11 years, he had various infections, but the main cause was almost certainly his melancholia, like the atmosphere created by that nameplate. However firmly I held out, even if I had lived together with him for 10 long years against the 58 years he spent with mother, it is certain that living with a wife and living with a daughter are considerably different. Sometimes when I complained to father in one way or another, saying, "Mother didn't do that" he ill-temperedly said such things in reply as "Don't compare me with mother."

However, to an outsider, father, who was basically being looked after by his daughter, appeared to be pretty happy. As he grew weaker, feeding and dressing father certainly required a fair amount of work. If mother, who only knew father as a person who looked after himself completely, was brought back to life she might thank me very much but father would no doubt continue to say inwardly, "It is entirely different from my saying that I'm happy." The matter of happiness was practically of no matter. I'm sure he was only able to continue to live, after a fashion, when he had made a conscious effort to do so.

At one time my parents had a book of their collected essays published entitled 'The Oak Tree and the Bodhi Tree'⁴. At the beginning was one of mother's writings, which had the feeling of a fairy tale. When an elderly couple, who gave hospitality to a traveler, overtaken by the gathering darkness on the road, were asked what they wished for, the pair calmly replied, "When one of us dies, we hope that the remaining partner will not have to wait long before joining the one who went first." Whether the traveler was God or not, I don't know, but according to the story the couple indeed left this world at almost the same time and were reincarnated as an oak tree and a bodhi tree standing close together and growing luxuriantly.

One time when my mother told me this story she added the following words surreptitiously. "Marriage means that you promise when one of you dies the remaining one will follow his / her partner, doesn't it? Nevertheless in such a situation since your life has been given to you, you should not be so arrogant as to end it when you choose and so even if such a sad time were to come, we decided that the remaining partner should hold firm just to be able to continue to live."

And father made efforts to continue to live for a further eleven years. Finally he heard a voice saying, "It's time to have a good sleep now", and he hurried off to be with mother. I don't know who became the oak and who became the bodhi tree but I'm sure that now the branches are entwined and from somewhere come the strains of two voices singing together, while the wind is rustling.

I requested a postmortem examination of my father. A considerable state of disease was found in the intestines, heart and lungs. He was in a condition in which any further prolongation of life would have been cruel. And the people who saw his bones after he had been cremated all said they made them think of his large-boned, strong, solid build when he was alive. The person in charge at the crematorium said amongst other things, "I guess that he was a strong man".

I not only remembered father when he was old, but also had distinct recollections of him in his prime. Father worked a lot. I don't mean this in financial terms although of course he did a great deal of such work as well. He was a strong man and unstintingly demonstrated his personal capabilities. How hard father worked and handled mother, who was of slender build, prone to sickness and appeared as a true representation of gracefulness, with great care. Amongst other items, a certain antique record case in a corner of our drawing room is heavy with memories of father. He bought it in an antique

shop in Osaka and when he brought it back on the train to our house in Kyoto our family were all speechless with surprise. It was a huge, smooth, flat, oak chest with no handholds or anything else to hold on to. Was father Tajikaraonomikoto⁵? This was a topic of conversation in our house for a long time.

Seeing father's large bones at the crematorium stirred in me many memories of when he was a strong, young man. Father, who loved folk art, wore homespun clothes and returned home with both hands laden with briefcase and shopping bags. He had a carpenter in the neighbourhood of the university where he worked, make him a large dustpan. He got a splendid broom from a broom-maker in Kyoto who he was on good terms with. During and after the war, when we were in need of goods, he got vegetables and the like through the kindness of the people that he knew. Father did not subscribe at all to the common Japanese way of thinking that "Men should only carry certain things" and since nobody in the family mentioned this matter either, father regularly carried a variety of objects. He had a wonderful way of cleaning. I couldn't help spontaneously adding father's many scholarly attainments to this kind of way of life, which he led. This is human existence.

Thought and action. They are truly inseparable. People live doing both. Moreover it was the strength of mother's love, which gave rise to father, who in turn had no choice but to live like this. Such recollections of my father and mother are endless.

- 1) Originally published as 「父の思い出」 in *Seishun to Dokusho* in April 1993.
- 2) Jugaku Akiko (壽岳章子) (1924~2005) Japanese language scholar and essayist.
- 3) Jugaku Bunsho (壽岳文章) (1900~1992) English literature scholar, essayist, bibliographer, researcher into Japanese paper, member of folk art movement.
- 4) The bodhi tree (also known as bo tree) is the tree under which Gautama Buddha achieved enlightenment (or 'bodhi' in Sanskrit).
- 5) When the principal goddess of Shinto, Amaterasu Omikami (the Great Divinity Illuminating Heaven) out of anger, hid herself in a cave, plunging the world in darkness, it was the god with powerful hands, Tajikaraonomikoto 「手力男命」 (also

known as Amanotajikarao) who threw the rock door of the cave aside and pulled Amaterasu Omikami out.

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