



**Yasunari Kawabata, *The Old Capital*. Translated by J. Martin Holman. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006. xiv + 182 pages.**

Translator J. Martin Holman (coordinator of Japanese Studies at the University of Missouri) exhibited samurai patience to wait almost twenty years after his initial 1987 translation of Kawabata's (1899–1972) novel *The*

*Old Capital* before penning this completely revised version. Why is it so difficult to capture the essence of a Japanese novel or city in an English translation? After the 1987 translation was published, numerous friends, colleagues, and students of Japanese read the English translation of Kawabata's classic city-bound saga of Kyoto (originally published in Japanese in 1962) and wrote to Holman with their suggestions, many of which Holman incorporated into his revision. Among the readers to offer suggestions was Hideki Masaki, who served as the interpreter for Emperor Hirohito from the late 1950s until the Emperor's death in 1989. Like one of the novel's main characters who was devoted to his fabric designs, Holman has returned to the novel and produced a fresh new rendition.

Set in post-War Japan, *The Old Capital* is the story of Chieko, the foundling child of a Kyoto textile merchant family. Kyoto (the "Old Capital") has long stood as the epicenter for everything quintessentially Japanese. Westerners fascinated with the intricacies of traditional Japanese culture continue to flock to the Kansai region of western Honshu, which is regarded as the cultural heart of Japan. The city on the Kamo River is famous for geishas, the tea ceremony, lavishly decorated kimonos, cherry blossoms, architecture, and innumerable Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines. Kyoto abounds with seasonal festivals which provide the backdrop to Kawabata's story, such as the Aoi, the Gion, the Jidai, and the Gozen Fire Festival. "Heian-kyō" 平安京 became the political capital of Japan in 794 C.E. and was known popularly as Miyako 都 or Kyōto 京都. Power shifted to Edo (Tokyo) in the twelfth century, but, ever since, Kyoto has retained its magical hold over the imagination of Westerners and Japanese alike.

Such background is necessary to appreciate Holman's excellent revised translation of Kawabata's *The Old Capital* because Kyoto is as much the protagonist as the young woman named Chieko. Chieko is the daughter of Sada Takichiro, a wholesale dry-goods merchant with an interest in traditional kimono and obi fabric designs, and his wife Shige, who helps him run the slowly declining business. Through a Sophoclean revelation, Chieko learns that Takichiro and Shige are not, in fact, her biological parents. Chieko was stolen or abandoned as an infant, left on the doorstep of one of Kyoto's traditional kimono shops. Takichiro and Shige have related several stories over the years about how they acquired Chieko, but she needs to know the truth. Somewhere on the mysterious Hiei-zan 比叡山 (Mount Hiei) outside of Kyoto amid the straight-growing Kitayama cedars, Chieko's twin sister Naeko works as a rustic village laborer. Chieko and Naeko are physical counterparts, so similar in appearance that Chieko's boyfriend cannot tell them apart. Chieko does not need to consult an oracle to tell her that the truth about her parentage must come out. Such tension provides the narrative framework for *The Old Capital*, but the real achievement of

Holman's revised translation is in the portrayal of the delicate beauty of an obi design or a violet flower. The fact that a middle-aged dry-goods merchant such as Takichiro would spend hours obsessing over his new floral-patterned obi design is just as important as the truth of Chieko's birth.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the translator is to convey the subtle appreciation of beauty in the minds of the novel's characters. In his Nobel Prize-acceptance speech in 1968, Kawabata discussed the Japanese appreciation for art in terms of harmony between nature's seasons and human relationships: "When we see the beauty of the snow, when we see the beauty of the full moon, when we see the beauty of the cherries in bloom, when in short we brush against and are awakened by the beauty of the four seasons, it is then that we think most of those close to us, and want them to share the pleasure."

Such is an apt summary of *The Old Capital*, even though the story itself concerns the Sada family fortunes. For example, the father, Sada Takichiro, secludes himself in a remote Buddhist temple for several days to attain inspiration for a "heavenly [obi fabric] design." Takichiro is something of a dinosaur, an older gentleman in his late 50s living in post-War Kyoto at a time when the average consumer cares more about the latest electronics than new seasonal kimono patterns. Takichiro laments that most family loom-weaving businesses will probably vanish in the next twenty years, but that does not prevent him from an intense, sensitive devotion to beauty. It is one of Kawabata's favorite themes: the clash of traditional and modern values in post-World War II Japan. As a cloth wholesaler, Takichiro does not need to create new patterns to profit from the sale of goods. However, the lure of tradition and a religious devotion to artistic expression drives him to produce a tribute to his adopted daughter Chieko, who proclaims "Father's designs come from the depth of a spiritual wave" (p. 34). Such is the kind of statement at once typical of Kawabata and usually incomprehensible to the non-Japanese reader.

When Takichiro takes his new design to his friend Sosuke for weaving, he discusses secluding himself in a temple and studying the paintings of Swiss modernist Paul Klee (1879-1940) for inspiration. When Sosuke proclaims ignorance about Klee, Takichiro replies that Klee's paintings "have the quality of a dream that speaks to even the heart of an old Japanese like me" (p. 42). Such is the achievement of this new translation by J. Martin Holman: to speak to the heart regardless of the reader's age or nationality. In Holman's new translation of Kawabata's classic novel, though the fate of Chieko is in doubt, the subtle Japanese appreciation for beauty in art and nature is not.