

**Donald Keene, *Frog in the Well: Portraits of Japan by Watanabe Kazan, 1793–1841*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xiv + 289 pages.**

Donald Keene has always skillfully employed depictions of people that assist readers both to realistically envision an individual's life and to gain a better understanding of Japan's history. His acclaimed *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World, 1852–1912* (Columbia University Press, 2002) and his lesser-noted but fine work, *Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion: The Creation of the Soul of Japan* (Columbia University Press, 2003), are but two excellent examples of the historically meaningful biographies Keene has produced. Keene's biography of Watanabe Kazan 渡邊華山 (1793–1841), samurai, Confucian, advocate of foreign learning, patriot, and—most important of all—painter, is valuable as a portrait of an exceptional man and as a work that depicts the politics and society of Tokugawa 徳川 Japan (1603–1868) in its declining years.

Kazan, born to an impoverished samurai family from the poor domain of Tahara in present-day Aichi Prefecture, grew up in Edo. As a young boy, he aspired to be a Confucian scholar, but his family's situation was so desperate that the leisure of full-time study was economically impossible for Kazan, the oldest of eight children. Kazan witnessed younger brothers placed in Buddhist orders and a sister sent away for employment with a retainer for the shogun in order that his family might survive. Despite poverty, Kazan educated himself in the Chinese Confucian classics as well as Chinese and Japanese literature. Early in his life, Kazan showed talent as a painter and was apprenticed to learn the craft to supplement family income. As a boy Kazan also served as the playmate of the son of the *daimyō* 大名 (feudal lord) to whom the family was pledged.

Kazan came of age in a time when Dutch and foreign learning were becoming increasingly difficult for Japanese intellectuals and policymakers to ignore. Reluctantly accepting his role of domain administrator, Kazan returned to Tahara as a young adult to assume bureaucratic duties and faithfully carried out routine tasks such as managing domain finances while continuing to be a part of Japanese literati circles that were absorbing more and more Dutch and foreign learning. Although the time constraints imposed by his administrative work and his efforts to produce and sell art to support his family never provided Kazan with the time to become a *Ran-gakusha* 蘭学者, or scholar of Dutch learning, he read voluminous amounts of accounts of life in the West in translation and interacted with like-minded Japanese intellectuals and Dutch visitors in his domestic travels. Most importantly of all, he became renowned in his lifetime as a painter of portraits that increasingly were affected by Western influences. Keene contends that Kazan was the first Japanese portrait artist to depict the individuality of his subjects. Keene's biography includes beautiful reproductions

of some of Kazan's greatest paintings. As an adult, Kazan first painted traditional *bunjin* 文人 (literati-style) landscape paintings with diminutive humans included in the scenery, a style he never entirely abandoned; but he later moved to portrait paintings, including two of the famous writer and calligrapher Ichikawa Beian 市河米庵 (1779–1858) that are striking in their realism.

Kazan is fascinating precisely because he had deep affinities for Confucian-influenced cultural and intellectual traditions yet also intensely sought knowledge of Western ways. Kazan, a patriot who was given the task of supervising coastal defenses in his domain, was imbued with filial piety and went to great lengths to praise and support his mother. At the same time, he looked down upon hide-bound Confucian traditionalists who spurned all Western influences. The title of the volume, "Frog in the Well," is taken from Kazan's writing where he asserted that devotees to blind tradition were like frogs stuck in a well that had no notion of the ocean.

Late Tokugawa Japan was not a society that tolerated open or revealed perpetrators of criticism of the regime. In the wake of the 1837 Morrison Incident, where the Tokugawa government repulsed an American merchant ship seeking trade by cannon fire, Kazan became more critical of government-seclusion policies. Eventually, partially due to the efforts of intellectual opponents who leaked one of his unpublished essays to government officials, Kazan was taken to Edo, imprisoned, tried, and found guilty of treason in 1839. Only the intercession of influential supporters prevented a beheading, and Kazan was sentenced to house arrest in Tahara. In 1840, ashamed that he had disgraced his family and fearful that his banned sale of portraits would bring further troubles, Kazan committed suicide in traditional samurai fashion in a shed adjacent to his home.

Today Kazan has been embraced by numbers of different Japanese because of his filial piety, his patriotism, his devotion to duty, and his fascinating art. Keene somewhat wistfully writes that it was a shame that Kazan was born about twenty or so years too soon, since his approach to learning from the West while retaining core Japanese and East Asian cultural values would have been valued in Meiji 明治 Japan (1861–1912). Be that as it may, scholars and teachers who read Keene's biography of Kazan are certain to gain a realistic feel for this complex and admirable individual—and for late Tokugawa Japan, with all its contradictions.

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