

Revenge of the Mutsugoro

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By Umehara Takeshi

Umehara Takeshi, born in Aichi prefecture in 1925, is among Japan's preeminent philosophers and an ancient historian. Since graduating from the philosophy department of Kyoto University in 1948, he has taught at Ritsumeikan University, City University of Art in Kyoto and the International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

His research may be traced to his prolonged interest in ancient tombs. Seeing an old tomb in Kumamoto, where he visited to see a play right after his retirement, he was attracted by the magical beauty of the tomb and made up his mind to immerse himself in ancient studies. In search of the origin of beauty, he was drawn to the Kojiki and Nihonshoki, which contain myths on the birth of Japan and the Japanese people. Known for his bold hypotheses on ancient Japanese history and religion, he established the so-called 'Umehara School of History', which has deeply influenced numerous scholars. His works include Kamigami no ryuzan (Exile of the gods, 1970), Kakusareta jujika: Horyujiron (The hidden cross: on Horyuji, 1972), Minasoko no uta: Kakinomoto no Hiromaro ron (Underwater poems: on Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, 1973), Yomi no daio: shiken Takamatsuzuka (The great king of the underworld: a personal view of the Takamatsuzuka remains, 1973), Nihon boken (Japan adventures 1988).

The Shigeyama is a family of the Okura school kyogen actors, dating from the late Edo period. The ninth generation master (1810-86) became

Shigeyama Sengoro I. The present Sengoro, so titled since 1994, is the thirteenth generation by that name. The name Sensaku began as the retired name of the ninth generation Sengoro (1810-86). The present Sensaku (1919-) is the fourth generation who succeeded to the title in 1994.

Mutsugoro, also known as "Mudskipper," is a fish that lives in an area of both water and land. Favoring muddy regions, they spend most of their time out of the water, but they must keep their skin moist. They can move much faster on land than in water. They are known for their fossil-like appearance as an amphibian, reminding us of the evolutionary process in which animals originated from fish, amphibians, reptiles, and eventually became mammals. Mutsugoro have retained their shape and form over more than several hundred million years. However, due to recent reconstruction in Japan of draining a bay in order to create land, the number of mutsugoro has been decreasing rapidly.



“Mutsugoro” (mudskipper), the first of what was to become my original “super kyogen” series featuring the Shigeyama family, was performed at the National Noh Theatre in December of 2002. This kyogen had the following plot.

The land created by the reclamation of Isahaya bay could not be used for farming in the era when the acreage reduction policy was enforced, and was turned into a golf course instead. One day, a chairman and a salary man come to play golf. That day, every ball that is hit is sucked into the hole and ends up being a hole in one. When the two peer into the hole puzzled, a family of seven mutsugoro appear, criticize humans for torturing and killing mutsugoro and other living creatures of the tideland, and announce that they will kill the two men because of their anger against humans. Because the two men show feelings of remorse, the mutsugoro let them go after changing their human faces to those of mutsugoro so that they will never forget their anger, and let them go.

It was three years before that I first became obsessed with mutsugoro. The Japan Pen Club, which I then served as president, issued a protest against closing the dykes blocking the tides of Isahaya bay. The following year I went to the bay and saw the traces of the tideland. The tideland, which was gradually becoming part of the land, was very expansive, and there were innumerable remains of cockle, that is to say their shells, telling signs of the holocaust committed by human beings against trillions of living things of the sea like mustugoro.

Many Japanese are followers of Buddhism. Buddhism's first commandment is sesshokai, or “Do not kill.” The No-Killing Principle is an admonition not only against killing humans, but also against killing any living creature. Of course it is not that human beings must never deprive a living creature of its life, but Buddhism strictly prohibits the needless taking

of life. However, drainage projects neither create more farmland nor provide flood prevention. It is becoming clear that these large construction projects exist so that general contractors will profit from them and political parties or individual politicians in that region receive a share of the profits in the form of kickbacks.

Why are Buddhists able to allow the holocaust of creatures on a scale that may even invite comparison with the Nazi holocaust of the Jews and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? If I remember correctly, it was at the time of my third visit to Isahaya. There was a small pool of water in the former tidelands, which had nearly all become dry land, and there I found a mutsugoro. The Isahaya Tidelands Emergency Relief Headquarters Representative, the late Mr. Yamashita Hirobumi, who had accompanied me, said, “The mutsugoro can’t be expected to be in such a place.” But as we drew closer, we indeed saw that it was a mutsugoro. As Mr. Yamashita picked it up, it died in his hands. I thought the mutsugoro must have wanted to ask Mr. Yamashita and myself to assuage the resentment, and so I tried to write a novel entitled I am a Mutsugoro [1], but being unable to write that novel, I wrote instead the play “Mutsugoro.”

In January the following year, or 2001 (the 13th year of the Heisei era), the problem of the poor harvest of seaweed in the Ariake Sea surfaced, throwing Isahaya into turmoil. Charging that the seaweed dearth was due to the drainage of Isahaya Bay, the fishermen exploded in anger. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries was compelled to conduct a survey. However, the “survey” had no effect. The government did not discontinue reclamation, 95% of which had already been completed.

I could not contain my disappointment, but on last August 26th, in response to the demand by fishermen, the Saga District Court handed

down a decision ordering construction to stop. I read the text and found that the decision, while strictly pointing out the unreasonable portions of the fishermen's demand, discussed in detail on the basis of accurate scientific data how the Isahaya Bay reclamation project had destroyed Ariake-kai, the "Sea of Fertility," [2] and pointed out that this land reclamation project was a major cause for the destruction of the fertile sea. I consider this a conscientious court ruling that tries to prevent the government from running wild.

Immediately, the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries made a statement objecting to the decision. This project originated in the idea of former Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's On the Remodeling of the Japanese Archipelago. The objection raised by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries reveals that today's Liberal Democratic Party has the same remodeling agenda, one which claims the unconditionally right of humans to govern nature.

We are facing an age in which humans must coexist with all other living creatures. While these objections cause the Liberal Democratic Party to reveal the fact that, as a political party, it is incapable of adapting to the upcoming era,

the Democratic Party, which was initially keenly concerned about this issue, too has lost most of its interest. Under conditions like these, it is difficult to place one's hopes for the future in the Democratic Party.

I believe that the mutsugoro will surely have their revenge. The demise of the human race, which came about just 650,000 years ago and which now displays a haughty arrogance, may not be too far away. Whether it will be five hundred years from now, a thousand years from now, or even ten thousand years from now, I believe that the day will eventually come when the current fate of the mutsugoro becomes the fate of the human race.

[1] Pun on Natsume Soseki's *I am a Cat*.

[2] *The Sea of Fertility*, the title of Mishima Yukio's tetralogy (1965-71).

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For more on Isahaya Bay and the struggle to save it see Gavan McCormack, Tide Change in Saga Japan. <http://japanfocus.org/150.html>