

Memento libri: New Writings and Translations from the World of Tsushima Yūko (1947~2016)

SPECIAL ISSUE

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Personal and political

We present this dossier on fiction-writer Tsushima Yūko (1947~2016) just as two new volumes of her writings have appeared in print. Two stories came out in *Of Dogs and Walls* in February 2018 in Penguin Classics, followed by *Territory of Light* (光の領分, 1979) in April 2018. Both by Geraldine Harcourt, these new translations build on works originally translated in the 1980s, *Child of Fortune* (寵児, 1982) and *The Shooting Gallery* (1988). These stories, like the works in this dossier, offer different points of entry into Tsushima’s constellation of writings than earlier texts. New translations not only amplify our view of Tsushima’s range. They also commemorate her work two years after her 2016 death, and join

an exciting array of new translations into English of works by other female writers including [Mizumura Minae](#), [Shibasaki Tomoko](#), [Tawada Yōko](#) and [Murata Sayaka](#)—works that Tsushima’s writing helped create an audience for in the 1970s. Our title, recalling Tsushima’s use of classical languages, is meant to suggest the constant connection of memory to textuality that we see in her work: in remembering, reading.

Tsushima’s canvas moved from the personal to the political, and from themes internal to Japan to themes of Japanese empire in Taiwan and elsewhere, engaging with the US-Japan relationship (the bomb), the war experience of women raped by Soviet soldiers, and the legacy of mixed-race children. Earlier works have the strong first-person voice characteristic of “I-fiction,” the dominant story-telling style of Japanese prose fiction. I-fiction is a modernist genre that plays with intimate forms of characterization. It shifts between identifiably real people, places and times, utterly made-up realities, and utterly made-up interpretations of the really real. The skewing and meeting of these two narrative lines through description, reflection, and narration has made I-fiction a powerful organizer of twentieth, and now twenty-first, century writing. In her later works—the critical focus in this dossier—we see her brilliantly experimenting with fiction as a site for rethinking the economies—the lived relations of things exchanged and shared—through which people negotiate their existence in the world.

We begin with Geraldine Harcourt’s new translation of the story “Home Ground” (野辺, 1996) which subtly conveys the indeterminacy of belonging to past and present, solitary and family worlds. It tells the story of a woman who talks in an apostrophe to her mother, describing how the house she grew up in is being rebuilt from ruins all the while other forces intrude—wildlife, vegetation, and memory. We then move to a first-person

account. Nen Ishihara’s piece about Tsushima, “People’s Voices, Mother’s Song” explains the role of song and memory in Tsushima’s writing. Ishihara is a playwright, as we see gestured to in the essay translated by Nicholas Lambrecht, and Tsushima’s daughter. In “People’s Voices, Mother’s Song,” her piece about growing up alongside her mother’s sense of rage and grief, she writes: “Through contact with the world of the epic poem of *Manas* in Kyrgyzstan, she came to sense that songs act as a foundation for people to rebuild their worlds even when they’ve lost their homelands. My mother’s world was woven from and broadened by song.” Tsushima was specifically interested in the encyclopedic oral epics of Ainu and Kyrgyz storytellers who archived the stories that existed “without standard written forms, among people who didn’t depend on settled agriculture.”¹ While literal song is not the subject of essays by Auestad, Shigeto and Wu, each picks up the concern with archiving the experience of people dispossessed from nations and centralizing state powers.

Reiko Abe Auestad’s essay looks at two works, *On Grieving* (悲しみについて, 2017) and *Laughing Wolf* (笑いオオカミ, 2010), to see how kinds of filiation emerge out of forced and found communities. She draws on the writings of Judith Butler to ask how we can, in our own parts of the world, “devise institutions and policies that actively preserve and affirm the nonchosen character of open-ended and plural cohabitation.”² In “Smashing the Great Buddha, Crossing Lines,” Yukiko Shigeto shows how *Nara Report* uses popular song genres with many variations like *sekkyōbushi* to channel dead voices of that former imperial capital: “those subject to Buddhist marginalization” in premodern Nara are “relativized from the world of the dead” and the traces of writing and chant they too leave, that echo to the present. Wu Peichen’s essay “The Remains of the Japanese Empire: Tsushima Yūko’s *All Too Barbarian*; *Reed Boat, Flying*; and *Wildcat Dome*,” looks at precisely these legacies in

three late works. *Barbarian* is concerned with aboriginal ruling policy in colonial Taiwan. *Reed Boat, Flying* connects old seagoing forms with the cadre of women repatriated from Manchuria after Japan’s defeat in the Pacific War, who were raped by Soviet or other soldiers and forced to have abortions upon reaching Japanese shores.

Connecting early and late writings



***The Girls in Books* (Chūō kōron edition, 1994)**

Tsushima Yūko is a writer’s writer—someone with intimate knowledge of written prose, poetry and song from the classical period to the present. She is also someone whose choice of genres and modes changed in topic and style over the course of her life, as it came into

contact with the new writings brought into Japanese through translation.

While still in college, Tsushima entered the world of small-press magazines, and became a member of *Literary Capital* (Bungei shuto, 文藝首都) along with Nakagami Kenji. Nakagami was another writer who used the style of classical *monogatari*—oral narratives with collective protagonists and multiple points of enunciation—as a form of cultural memory. Like Nakagami’s, over time Tsushima’s stories would shift from domestically rooted stories of kinship tensions to more layered texts that drew on collectively authored songs, stories, and moved outside the boundaries of postwar Japan to both past and other countries.

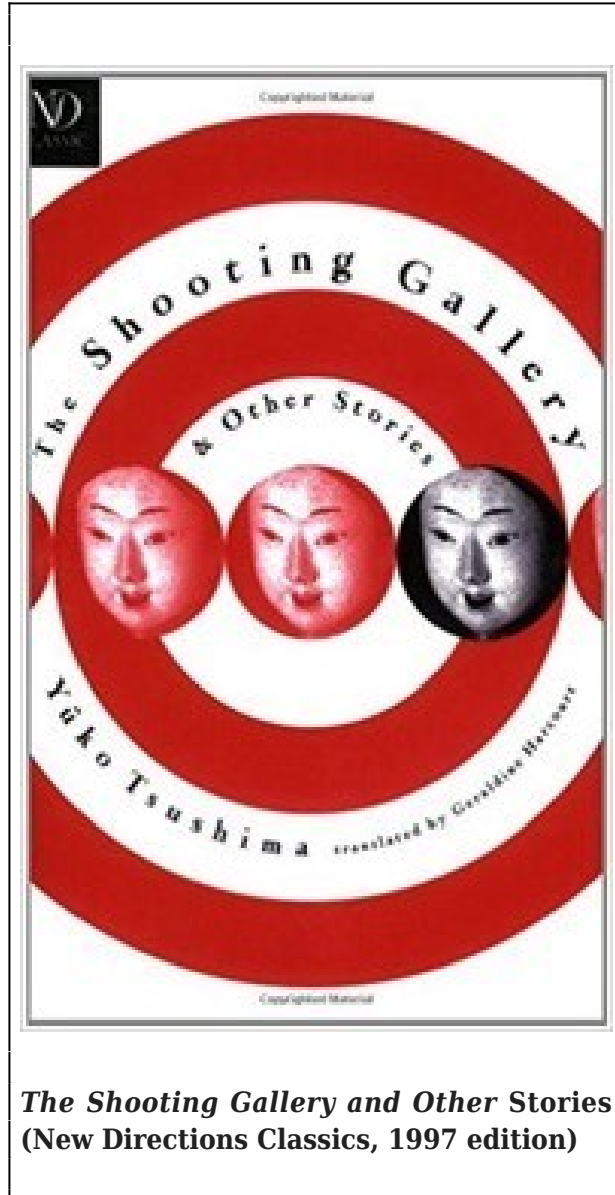
Tsushima’s first story, “A Birth” (ある誕生), was published in 1967 under the pen name of Aki Yūko. Tsushima’s college thesis formed part of an English degree at her *alma mater*, Shirayuri College (where some of these essays were workshopped at a [symposium](#) in 2016). The thesis treated two British versions of the Faust legend, Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and Lord Byron’s dramatic poem *Manfred*. Gothic and self-reflexively confessional elements suffuse both plays, as does the question of selling one’s soul for the promise of something transcendent.

Later works retain the strong sense of voice characteristic of I-fiction. But the memory of war and other kinds of dispossession often comes across in non-linear ways that depict events and landscapes far beyond the personal in scope. Over the course of Tsushima’s works, first-person dramas shift to exploring questions of dispossession and inheritance, especially as state power (Japan, the Soviet Union) affects family, movement of households, and different kinds of inheritance in conditions of war and empire. Tsushima’s later work beginning in the 1990s takes on these kinds of questions and shifts their focus from the politics of domestic space to a much broader geographical stage.

This drama unfolds in a style more characteristic of epic storytelling, set in a larger timescale and a larger geographic range. At the same time, the story confides and explains in a first-person voice with the quick changes of topic and emotional processing more familiar from I-fiction. This combination of personal and epic puts her later works closer to story-worlds more familiar from manga and anime—with their speculative forms. But its focus on retrospection, and the possibilities and limits of shared memory, remain Tsushima’s signature.

She published a short book in 2003 called *The Pleasure of the Bookshelf: How to Read Books to Free Yourself from the Word* (快樂の本棚—言葉から自由になるための読書案内). Its short memoir-like chapters describe how books and reading changed her life and opened her world, giving her different patterns for shaping experience. The adult voice recalls examples that range from the Meiji era of Ochiai Naofumi’s 1888 song-poem “Song of Shiragiku, Mourning Her Father” (老女白菊の歌), which told the sad story of a girl losing her father in the Seinan War and was later re-purposed as a story to console for war loss into the postwar era. Other touchstones are the 1959 girls’ manga *Puichin-san* (フイチンさん) set in colonial Harbin, which introduces encounters with the translated transgressions and profundities of DH Lawrence, Ihara Saikaku, Oscar Wilde, and later, explorations of circular time linked to political sovereignty in the Maori writer Patricia Grace’s *Potiki*. In person, later in life, she would enable translation by organizing many events and readings with other Asian writers. These included the Japan-India Writers’ Caravan that visited both countries, which fiction-writer Hoshino Tomoyuki describes as “a traveling roadshow [that] facilitating direct meetings between non-Western authors,” and later visited Taiwan.³

Changing shapes of the household



***The Shooting Gallery and Other Stories*
(New Directions Classics, 1997 edition)**

Literary historian Nishiwaka Yūko has identified a pattern in twentieth-century Japanese fiction focused on family life—the first form of kinship we see as the magnetic field of Tsushima’s earlier works.⁴ Domestic novels written by male authors, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, tended to describe the struggles of the male protagonist to escape the suffocating bonds of the extended family (the *ie*) by forming a new modern household (the *katei*). These novels might include canonical Meiji works like Tayama

Katai’s *Futon* and Shimazaki Tōson’s *The Broken Commandment*.

But fiction written by female authors tended to portray the conventional *katei*—the single-generation nuclear family composed of husband, wife, and children—as precisely the trap to be escaped through experiments with non-standard forms of family and home. Tsushima’s early work—Nishikawa highlights the 1979 novel *Territory of Light* (光の領分)—often centers on single mothers working through their relations with their children, as well as their own mothers, as they cobble together living spaces marked by an absence of father or husband figures. These works’ granular, sometimes confessional, descriptions of vivid interior life have made it easy to read Tsushima’s work in the grand tradition of the *shi-shōsetsu*—I-fiction.

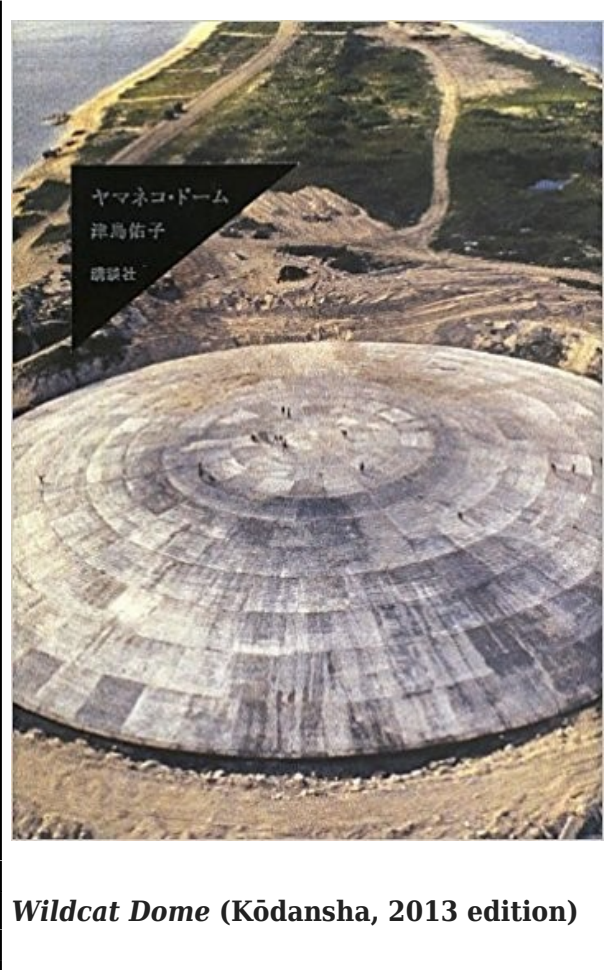
In Tsushima’s case, treatment of the main themes of her I-fiction—new and newly articulated modes of kinship and shared experience—has been complicated by the biographical reality of being the daughter of a very famous writer, Dazai Osamu. Dazai’s renowned [decadent novels](#), published on the cusp of the Pacific War defeat, and housed in translation in the abstract modernist covers of the New Directions series, were also intensely voiced pieces of I-fiction. The “I” of *Setting Sun* (斜陽, 1947) and *No Longer Human* (人間失格, 1948) wasn’t exactly Dazai himself; in fact, the former is narrated by a young woman who recounts the story of her formerly noble family’s struggle to keep its dignity afloat in a world of postwar scarcity. But the tendency to include identifiable events against a backdrop of camouflaging origin also marks I-fiction. Dazai’s life had a distinct closure, as it ended in suicide in 1948 when Tsushima was one year old, shortly after *No Longer Human* dramatized a suicide attempt. Tsushima’s own work marks the absence and grief over lost fathers and brothers—real life events on the way to her becoming a real-life orphan. But her writing

also re-aligns the two narrative lines of reality and imagined poetics by generating new kinds of kinship. In this dossier, the poetics of grief and generativity that suffuse Tsushima's work are the focus of several works that treat Tsushima's writings from the Heisei period (1989~present).

Early works take on a critical reimagining of the status of motherhood.⁵ The 1978 novel *Child of Fortune*, for example, ends with the divorced heroine violently rejecting the suggestion that she remarry in order to provide her growing daughter with a father.⁶ Tsushima's heroines exist in a realm in which it is uncertain who can exchange what with whom and on what basis. The linked themes of inheritance and experience appear in forms grounded in people, places and times, often through conflicts where possession and sharing are considered and fought for in personal relationships.

Can mothers-in-law, for example, take possession of their daughters' husbands—and if so, on what basis and in exchange for what (see the short story “Blindweed Mother” 「葎の母」)?⁷ Or can a mother take possession of her daughter's children (“Grass Pillow” 「草枕」)? Can animals participate in these exchanges taking place between humans (“The Silent Traders” 「黙市」)? Can two women share ownership in a man (“The Chrysanthemum Beetle” 「菊虫」)?⁸ Can a daughter take possession of herself away from her mother? (“Address Unknown” 「行方不明」)?

Possession, inheritance and historical memory



Wildcat Dome (Kōdansha, 2013 edition)

Intellectual property among writers is often seen as a kind of inheritance—such has been the critical placement of Tsushima, often situating her as an inheritor of Dazai's legacy. However, the kinds of succession dramas that play out in her works do not surface either as plots or as fraught intertextual relations. On one hand, a conventional “traffic in women” narrative never appears, in which male characters cement relations with other men by exchanging women, usually through a process of marriage. Instead, Tsushima depicts various forms of traffic among women, a subversive kind of game in which characters and narrators lack any certain knowledge of the rules or even its final goals. Reiko Abe Auested's essay “Tsushima Yūko and the Ethics of Cohabitation” explores the ethical obligation to those with whom we cannot exchange places—not opting in and out like investors, but living

with, co-habiting, on a scale we now know to be planetary, out of which there is no “out.” In other words, we should acknowledge the non-chosen nature of many communities we live in and respond to that mix of people different than ourselves as an ethical imperative to live with others.

On the other hand, the scarcity that often marks terms of exchange—something belonging only to one limited time or space—is diverted by Tsushima’s use of the collectively-authored, long-term arcs of song and *monogatari* she draws from. *Wildcat Dome* critiques the violence of the ethno-state by telling the stories of inter-racial children born between Japanese women and the American soldiers who experienced discrimination in the postwar period. This trilogy of works—with its focus on “foreigners” left behind in the nation-state of Japan—figures whose lives and deaths were tangled up in the conflicts arising from Japan’s imperial expansion and whose struggles with the vicissitudes of history are now largely forgotten—forms in many ways the essence of Tsushima’s late *oeuvre*.

Periphery as world



***The Golden Dream Song* (Kōdansha, 2013 edition)**

Tsushima’s interest in narrative forms from and about Japanese geo-peripheries, especially displaced, orphaned ones, extends to aboriginal and oral cultures around the world. Some of these cultures, as archived in writing and song, demonstrate kinds of autonomy that became a collectively-linked site for exploring a different mode of what we have come to call “world literature.”

By the term “world literature,” we mean a literature that has been distributed and come into contact with a range of local, regional and national writing traditions, brokered through different languages, cultural conversion systems, and economic relations. Most theories of world literature explicitly or implicitly presume an economy of exchange (usually in the form of translation) in which

enlightenment, reason, and writing travel from the West to the non-West, while raw materials, exotic stories, and orality flow from the non-West to the West—in other words, another variation on the old area studies model of “diffusion.” In this economy, translation, in particular translation into English, is the common medium of exchange. But Tsushima’s later works explore the possibility of what a different economy of world literature might look like if translation were written into Japanese fiction not just as theme, but as method. In other words, what if translation were not just something characters or authors did, but its workings were acknowledged as a main basis of fiction?

Tsushima’s 2010 modern epic, for instance, *The Golden Dream Song* (黄金の夢の歌), is a sprawling 500-page work that straddles the boundaries between fiction, song, and travel writing. An unstable narrative voice floats back and forth between first-, second-, and third-person voices as it relates a series of journeys (based on Tsushima’s own travels in the early 2000s) through central Asia: post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, Inner Mongolia and other autonomous regions of China, spaces saturated with multiple minority languages and storytelling traditions that exist in uneasy relations with the centralizing forces of existing nation-states. The bounds of the narrator’s experience go beyond what she can process in her own language; she must rely on translations, and on figuring how to make it work.

The central figure is a Japanese woman who chases traces and wisps of classical oral epics—*The Song of Manas* that is an encyclopedic story of the nomadic Kyrgyz people, but also many others: epic “dream songs” that spread across the face of the planet in ancient societies and whose voices still echo among the living today. We meet a number of local guides and interpreters along the way and learn about their lives, too, via the narrator’s encounter. The traveler is especially fascinated

by the idea that ancient oral epics all seem to form in aggregate one great “dream song.” This phrase was borrowed from writings on “songlines” translated in the 1990s.⁹ But in Tsushima’s use of dream songs, she is less concerned with exposing secret traditional knowledge, and more concerned with stories that emerge through relations to geography that do not involve settling or possessing it. Such stories serve as documents and testimonies of nomadism and dispossession. She is fascinated, for example, with how a certain animal figure shows up not only in the folklore of the Uyghurs, but also in stories about Alexander the Great and the great Mongolian conquerors.

The central Asian ‘dream songs’ were surely connected to the songs of Ancient Mesopotamia. Alexander the Great on his expeditions to central Asia might well have heard the local ‘dream songs.’ And then those ‘dream songs’ were permeated by the ‘dream songs’ that Alexander brought with him. Mutually permeating ‘dream songs.’ Like clouds in the sky, ‘dream songs’ constantly shifting shape as they fade away in the light, only to once more take shape in another part of the sky.

As a ‘dream map’ sung with no relation to chronology, as a ‘dream memory’ sung cheerfully yet haunted by the shadow of mortality of fragile human existence, it continues to flow on down to our present age.¹⁰

At irregular intervals throughout the work, we encounter onomatopoeic lines: “totto, totto, tan, to,” echoes of the mounted horsemen of early nomadic warrior tribes that continue to

traverse the landscape of the text. Along the way, too, we get meditations on fatherhood (one of the traveling companions is an expecting father, another already a father) in which the heroine finds herself rethinking her own negative conceptions of paternity.

Writing beyond the boundaries of Japan, Tsushima's ambitious later works sketch in a new kind of "planetary literature" that subverted the rules of the established game of "world literature" as creatively as she had deconstructed the rules of domestic fiction two decades earlier.¹¹ Other later works, including many discussed in the works included in this dossier, take up global issues of imperialism, capitalist exploitation, environmental degradation, and social discrimination.

Shortly after Tsushima died on February 18, 2016, literary critic Karatani Kōjin framed

Tsushima's work in a formal legacy more visible to readers—the Nobel Prize. Yet his tribute to Tsushima also sees her as an underknown writer, even in her home country. "It is not well known in Japan that Yūko Tsushima was a strong candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. She wrote a wide variety of works that were entirely worthy of the award, and she was active internationally. If only she had lived a little longer, she would probably have won."¹² We wonder how willing Tsushima would have been to participate in the conventional economy of World Literature, with its orbits around awards like the Nobel Prize. But as we mark the recent second anniversary of her untimely death, we celebrate the song that she continued over nearly four decades and that continues to echo across the planetary field of the present.

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Michael K. Bourdaghs is the Robert S. Ingersoll Professor in East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. He is the author of many works including *The Dawn That Never Comes: Shimazaki Tōson and Japanese Nationalism* and *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon: A Geopolitical History of J-Pop*.

Notes

¹ Tsushima Yūko, *Ōgon no yume no uta* [2010] (Tokyo: Kodansha bunko, 2013), 24. McKnight translation.

² Butler, "Precarious Life," 144.

³ Hoshino Tomoyuki, "[Promise: In Memory of Tsushima Yūko](#)." Translated by Brian Bergstrom. *Hoshino Tomoyuki: itteshimaebayokatta nikki*, March 7, 2016.

⁴ Nishikawa Yūko, *Shakuya to mochiie no bungakushi* (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1998), esp. 189-191 and 357-363.

⁵ See, for example, Livia Monnet, "The Politics of Miscegenation: The Discourse of Fantasy in 'Fusehime' by Tsushima Yūko," *Japan Forum* 5:1 (1993): 53-73; and Barbara Hartley, "Writing the Body of the Mother: Narrative Moments in Tsushima Yūko, Ariyoshi Sawako and Enchi Fumiko," *Japanese Studies* 23:3 (2003): 293-305.

⁶ See Yoshiko Enomoto, "The Reality of Pregnancy and Motherhood for Women: Tsushima Yūko's *Chōji* and Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 35:2 (1998): 116-124.

⁷ On "Blindweed Mother," see Sharlyn Orbaugh, "Oba Minako and the Paternity of Maternalism," in Rebecca Copeland, et al., ed. *The Father-Daughter Plot: Japanese Literary Women and the Law of the Father* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), esp. 276-77.

⁸ On "The Chrysanthemum Beetle," see Livia Monnet, "Connaissance Délicieuse or the Science of Jealousy: Tsushima Yūko's Story 'Kikumushi' (The Chrysanthemum Beetle)," *Japan Review* 4 (1993): 199-239.

⁹ *Ōgon no yume no uta* explicitly mentions Bruce Chatwin's book (27), but unlike his book the narrative does not depend on a surrogate that would presumably be "relatable" to the dominant-ethnicity reader.

¹⁰ *Ōgon no yume no uta*, 483. Bourdaghs translation.

¹¹ For an extensive exploration of "planetary" in contrast to global and other epistemes, see Masao Miyoshi, "Turn to the Planet: Literature, Diversity, and Totality," *Comparative Literature* 53:4 (2001): 283-97.

¹² Kojin Karatani, "[Love and Empathy for the Oppressed: Remembering Yūko Tsushima](#)" (translated by Geraldine Harcourt). This piece was originally published in Japanese in the *Asahi* newspaper on 23 February 2016.