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Sunday, Dec. 31, 2006

A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION

## Make sure you read the best Asia books

*The holiday season is upon us, and as we look toward 2007, why not make a resolution to read some of the best books*

***about Asia? We introduce a few of our contributors to help you decide what not to miss***

Donald Richie

**RASHOMON AND SEVENTEEN OTHER STORIES** by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, translated by Jay Rubin (Penguin Classics)

Finally, the definitive translation of one of Japan's most original modern writers. Heretofore the very popularity of the author seems to have discouraged scholars. Now, however, the translator of Natsume Soseki and Haruki Murakami has given us an Akutagawa who speaks to us in the English equivalent of his own voice. His subtle style becomes visible, and his honest and despairing view of the human predicament becomes persuasive.

**TRADITIONAL JAPANESE ARTS AND CULTURE: An Illustrated Sourcebook**, by Stephen Addiss, Gerald Groemer and J. Thomas Rimer (University of Hawai'i Press)

This admirable and necessary volume is a collection of examples and documents devoted to traditional artistic culture. Here the original writers speak to us directly, the translations tracing ideas and concepts reflecting changing values all the way from prehistoric times to the Meiji Restorations of 1867. All the sources are primary and many are here translated for the first time.

**THE TALES OF THE HEIKE** translated by Burton Watson (Columbia University Press)

A new translation of substantial sections from Japan's greatest war chronicle. Though it has been several times translated, in full or in part, "The tales of Heike" has never been rendered by anyone of the caliber of Burton Watson, the pre-eminent translator of classical Japanese and Chinese literature. Here he combines a colloquial tone with a certain formality of diction -- an English style that allows him to parallel the Japanese and render nuances not heretofore visible.

*Donald Richie served in the Maritime Service during World War II and in 1947 went to Japan where he became film critic for the Pacific Stars and Stripes. He returned to Japan after the end of the Occupation and became a film critic for The Japan Times. He has been resident for over 50 years and written a number of books. At present, he is an arts critic for The Japan Times and was named by TIME magazine "the dean of Japan's arts critics." Susan Sontag has said: "Donald Richie writes about Japan with an unrivaled range, acuity, and wit."*



## David Burleigh

**ON TWO SHORES: New and Selected Poems by Mutsuo Takahashi,**  
translated by Mitsuko Ohno & Frank Sewell (Dedalus)

The poetic dialogue between Ireland and Japan began with one Nobel laureate (W.B. Yeats) and continues with another (Seamus Heaney). But we rarely get soundings from the Japanese side, which is why this book is so valuable and gratifying. Allusions to leading Irish poets, both living and dead, are built into the poems: Mostly these derive from Takahashi himself, but are sometimes enhanced by the translators. This bilingual edition allows us, too, to be enriched by the poet's Irish journey.

**FALLING BLOSSOM: A British Officer's Enduring Love for a Japanese Woman,** by Peter Pagnamenta & Momoko Williams (Century)

This book also grew out of one published in Japan and, more surprisingly, out of hundreds of letters, many on decorated paper, composed by a Westerner in Japanese. The author was Arthur Hart-Synott, a military officer from the gentlemanly class in the North of Ireland, while the recipient, Masa Suzuki, was a woman he had met when posted to Japan at the beginning of last century. It is rare for such a story to be so well recorded, and recounted.

**THE TUNNELS OF CU CHI: A Remarkable Story of War in Vietnam,**  
by Tom Mangold & John Pencycate (Cassell)

Part of a series on war ("Tales of Japanese Soldiers," about the fight for Burma, is also very good), this absorbing account describes how the Viet Cong dug in not far from Saigon and carried out their resistance from headquarters, including hospitals and factories, constructed underground by hand. It is a tale of great ingenuity and courage against overwhelming odds, and told extremely fairly. "The war came and went, thousands died . . . but Vietnam revived," says the preface to the new edition.

*David Burleigh grew up in the north of Ireland and has lived and taught in Tokyo for almost 30 years.*

## Jeff Kingston

**THE MAKING OF THE "RAPE OF NANKING": History and Memory in Japan, China and the United States,** by Takashi Yoshida (Oxford University Press)

Takashi Yoshida's excellent and balanced analysis of how the discourse about Nanjing has developed and resonates in Japan, China and the United States helps us understand why the massacre has become so controversial. I liked his dispassionate and incisive overview of the angry polemics and agree that Japan is not in collective denial about the atrocities committed in Nanjing despite the best efforts of some reactionary leaders. Rather than emphasizing what happened in Nanjing, he examines why it has become a potent and divisive symbol for Japan's war memory and identity. I share his pessimism that the "intractable war of words" over history that divides Japan and China will persist.

THINK GLOBAL, FEAR LOCAL: Sex, Violence and Anxiety in Contemporary Japan, by David Leheny (Cornell University Press)

JAPAN'S DUAL CIVIL SOCIETY: Members without Advocates, by Robert Pekkanen (Stanford University Press)

These two books by young political scientists in the U.S. are welcome signs of life in an academic discipline that is suffocating from its emphasis on quantitative methods. David Leheny's is a more engagingly personal, informal and lively account, but both excel at helping readers better understand the dynamics of policymaking and the nature of political institutions in Japan. Leheny examines how domestic anxieties and international norms, ranging from child abuse to counterterrorism, are instrumentalized by policymakers to achieve long-standing agendas. He shows us how Japanese policymakers artfully manipulate and orchestrate *gaiatsu* (foreign pressure) to force through legal and policy reforms. By justifying such initiatives in terms of international norms and expectations while playing on popular anxieties, political actors have been advancing their agenda by stealth.

For example, U.S. pressure on Japan to contribute to the "war on terror" is being exploited by Japan's neoconservatives who are eagerly "chipping away at the shackles on the use of force to deal with international security."

The endless cascade of scandals involving politicians and bureaucrats in contemporary Japan make one wish for a more robust civil society, but don't hold your breath. Robert Pekkanen explains why Japan's civil society has developed as it has, with numerous local groups and relatively few large, professionally managed national organizations. A hostile regulatory environment toward advocacy groups limits their resources and thus influence on public discourse and national policy debates. It is difficult for such groups to become large national organizations and if they do it is hard for them to remain independent. Instead Japan features community-oriented local groups that build social

capital but do not shape the national agenda. However, it is not all doom and gloom. Compared to 15 years ago Japan has a more robust civil society, and a flurry of recent legal changes should sustain this momentum.

*Jeff Kingston is director of Asian studies at Temple University, Japan campus.*

Mark Schreiber

INSPECTOR MORIMOTO AND THE FAMOUS POTTER by  
Timothy Hemion (iUniverse)

THE EMPEROR'S DIAMONDS by Donald G. Moore (iUniverse)

This past year I particularly enjoyed two self-published books from iUniverse that deserve mention. "Inspector Morimoto and the Famous Potter" by Timothy Hemion not only introduces the craft of Okayama's traditional Bizen-yaki, but is an excellent puzzler in its own right. After two brothers are found dead of a rare poison, homicide cop Morimoto and his assistant must determine whether their deaths were the result of a suicide pact, a murder-suicide or murder by a third party.

"The Emperor's Diamonds" by Donald G. Moore belongs to the genre of amateur adventurer in search of missing war booty, of which the tale of General Yamashita's gold is perhaps best known. Set in 1979, the story involves a submarine transporting a fortune in diamonds that sank in the Northern Marianas. A Japanese woman and her American boyfriend, an ex-Navy SEAL, charter a boat in Saipan and head for the submerged wreck, where danger awaits.

*Mark Schreiber is a passionate collector of mystery and adventure fiction set in Asia and invites interested readers to visit [www.thesteamyeast.com](http://www.thesteamyeast.com) for more information on this topic.*

David Cozy

BLIND WILLOW, SLEEPING WOMAN by Haruki Murakami,  
translated by Philip Gabriel and Jay Rubin (Alfred A. Knopf)

An oft-repeated critical canard has it that Haruki Murakami writes the same novel, the same story, the same character, over and over. "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman" should give that myth the lie. Elements that feature elsewhere in Murakami's *oeuvre* such as pasta, chance, jazz and coincidence are present, but one sees here how deftly Murakami slides those familiar pieces around to produce tales that, in their varying emphasis on the fantastic and the mundane, are delightful, and very

different from each other.

ABANDON THE OLD IN TOKYO by Yoshihiro Tatsumi, edited and designed by Adrian Tomine, introduction by Koji Suzuki (Drawn & Quarterly)

Murakami's characters get into trouble, but their lives are seldom entirely bleak. This is not the case in the dark world Yoshihiro Tatsumi paints in "Abandon the Old in Tokyo." Spending their days crawling through sewers or gathering garbage in comfortless Japanese cities, Tatsumi's characters live in a society that values them no more highly than the waste they process. Tatsumi writes comic books, and in them he reminds us how powerful images in conjunction with words can be.

THE THREE WAY TAVERN: Selected Poems, by Ko Un, translated by Clare You and Richard Silberg, foreword by Gary Snyder (University of California Press)

Ko Un's poetry is similar, in its breadth and specificity, its simple truths and crazy wisdom, to that of his friend, Gary Snyder. Ko has been, among other things, a peasant, a monk, a drunk, an activist, and a political prisoner, and he writes out of all of these experiences. There are short Zen gems, longer memories of growing up hungry, indictments of Korean despots, and lovely renderings of the everyday. All of it reminds us of the power -- and fun! -- of poetry.

*David Cozy is a writer and critic. He lives in Chigasaki and teaches at Showa Women's University.*

Stephen Mansfield

JAPANESE GARDENS IN A WEEKEND by Robert Ketchell (Bounty Books)

I had to chuckle at the title "Japanese Gardens in a Weekend," having spent the better part of a year's worth of weekends doing just that -- designing and building a Japanese home garden. If you know any Titans with green thumbs, send them over. Where this beautifully photographed and informed text does succeed is with inspiring ideas, and the realization that there may be conventions, but essentially, the art and design of a Japanese garden is a free form.

LOOP by Koji Suzuki (Vertical)

In "Loop" Koji Suzuki, master of the Japanese spook novel, brings the

trilogy that started with "The Ring" and "Spiral" to a satisfying conclusion. In the shadows and fluorescent light in a kitchen of utter ordinariness, "slight disturbances in the rays of light" warn that all is not well in either the natural or techno-congested world. More important than the forays into pseudo-science and the paranormal, though, is Suzuki's compelling yarn. In the search for a preventative virus a mystery waits to be solved, a riddle cracked.

## MARRYING BUDDHA by Wei Hui (Robinson)

I enjoyed a subversive shiver recently while sneaking Wei Hui's banned novel "Marrying Buddha" past the immigration counters at Shanghai's Hongqiao airport, a pleasant fizz that continued until I was safely back in Hong Kong. Wei Hui, has fallen afoul of the authorities before with her "Shanghai Baby," a steamy debut novel that turned the faces of China's official censors an apoplectic blue. The stunningly attractive author has become a hot item in the foreign media, running the risk of becoming a literary version of Paris Hilton. Beneath the stylistic mix of Henry Miller meets Harlequin romance, though, is a serious writer testing the limits of authorial tolerance.

*Stephen Mansfield is a British photojournalist and author whose work has appeared in more than 60 magazines, newspapers and journals worldwide. To date he has had eight books published. He is currently writing a literary and cultural history of Tokyo for publication in 2008.*

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