



# The Murky Side of Meiji Japan

By Naoyuki Haraoka

Photo 1: Kingendai Photo Library / AFLO



*An Inlet of Muddy Water*, one of the best Japanese films of the 1950s, portrays three women battling against the surging tide of Japanese capitalism in the 19th century.

## A Brilliant 19th-Century Writer

Ichiyo Higuchi (*Photo 1*), a genius of Japanese literature in the Meiji period (1868-1912) who died at the age of 24, published a number of masterpieces in her short life. Three of them were made into a film by Tadashi Imai, a young director, in 1953. The film is an omnibus based on three novellas by Higuchi, namely, “The Thirteenth Night” (*Jusanya*), “New Year’s Eve” (*Otsugomori*) and “Murky Waters” (*Nigorie*).

The film is a faithful rendition of the original stories and an eloquent testament to the author’s talent. Higuchi’s novels have been translated into many languages, but a film may make it much easier for non-Japanese to understand the essence of her works than translations do, due to its visual impact. I recommend that you see this film if you are interested in Higuchi, whose portrait is now on the Japanese 5,000-yen note.

The film depicts the poverty of lower-class people of Japan in the 1890s. Higuchi is known as a novelist of romanticism, but the three short stories in this film are more like works of realism. They remind us of the more naturalistic works of Balzac or Zola. Just as they described the misery of poverty in 19th-century France, so Higuchi describes the misery of poverty in Japan in the 1890s. This period corresponds to the initial stage of the industrial revolution in Japan and the beginning of Japanese capitalism. I think that, as in the case of the major Western nations during the same period, Japan was falling under the shadow of capitalism in its initial stage while enjoying high economic growth at the same time.

The shadow of capitalism is reflected in growing inequality. Capitalism produces winners and losers. While the winners’ successes tell us about the dreams embodied in capitalism, the miseries of the losers introduce us to the tragedy of human life. Higuchi suffered seriously from poverty in her own short life, enabling her to depict a poor person’s psychology in detail and to succeed in impressing readers with the misery caused by poverty.

The first episode, “The Thirteenth Night”, is a story of a young woman from a poor family who is married to a high-ranking bureaucrat. Having suffered for a long time from her husband’s psychological harassment, Oseki decides to leave him in spite of her

maternal love for her only child, and returns to her parents’ house with this firm resolution. However, her father persuades her to stay with her husband no matter how difficult it may be, since her parents and brother have been the beneficiaries of this marriage, in particular her brother, who had got a good job thanks to Oseki’s husband. They are poor and cannot afford to let her divorce her wealthy, socially respected husband.

Having given up her original resolution, on her way back to her husband Oseki finds that the rickshaw man taking her to her home is an old childhood friend. He looks in poor health and is extremely unhappy, having spent many days drinking and gambling following Oseki’s marriage. Before her marriage, she was secretly in love with him. A bureaucrat’s wealth and social status had even robbed her of her true love.

Though her cruel and snobbish husband does not show up at all in the film, it movingly delineates both the winner (her husband) and the loser (the rickshaw man). The author does not make any value judgment on a society which makes such a clear distinction between winners and losers. But assuming that bureaucrats working for the government then were part of the nation’s capitalistic circles, the story is about the shadow of capitalism creating poverty that deprives people even of the liberty to love.

The second story, “New Year’s Eve”, also depicts the misery of poverty. Mine, who works for a wealthy merchant family as a housemaid, has a seriously sick and poor uncle, who brought her up. On New Year’s Eve, Mine’s uncle, being in urgent financial need, asks her to lend him some money. He thinks she can manage to do so, since her diligence seems to be truly appreciated by her mistress and the uncle thinks it would be possible for her to ask this mistress to pay Mine part of her salary in advance.

However, the mistress, who is unkind, greedy and unsympathetic towards poor people like Mine’s uncle, turns down Mine’s request (*Photo 2*). Suffering from a conflict between her obligation to respect her mistress’s

Photo 2: ©DOKURITSU-PRO MEIGA HOZONKAI





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decision and her love for her uncle, she finally attempts to steal some money from the mistress. Again, this story describes very well the psychology of the poor and the misery of poverty and is also a story of a winner (Mine's wealthy mistress) and a loser (her sick and poor uncle).

The third tale, "Murky Waters", on which the film bases its title, is the most serious tragedy among the three stories. Oriki, a young hostess working at a bar and night club, has pursued an authentic love, though she is obliged to entertain all customers as a hostess to earn money, like a prostitute. After falling in love with Genshichi, a bedclothes shop owner, she learns that he has a wife and child. Genshichi spends a large amount of money on her and eventually sells his shop and moves with his family to a small house for poor people. After having seen his lovely child falling into poverty because of her, Oriki avoids seeing him again, though he insists on trying to see her. Finally, he divorces his wife and his family leave him. In ultimate desperation, he kills Oriki and immediately afterwards kills himself. The tragedy reveals that poverty has a cruel power and is in itself a source of serious crime.

### Beautiful & Symbolic Scenes

In directing the film, Imai tried to recreate the world created by Higuchi in her short stories as faithfully as possible. He was successful in creating a number of scenes that stay in the memory for their beauty and also their symbolic implications.

For example, in "The Thirteenth Night" Oseki and her old friend the rickshaw man are walking along a street while talking. The scene depicts how dark the streets were at night in Japan the 1890s, even when there was moonlight. This night-time darkness can be seen as a symbol of the 1890s period in Japan when innovation had not yet advanced sufficiently to fill the nights with artificial lights, and it seems also to be a symbol of the poverty from which many were still suffering during this period.

In "New Year's Eve" the heroine Mine stumbles as she tries to carry a heavy barrel of cold water and drops it, spilling the water all over the floor. Her mistress scolds her for this carelessness and worries that the barrel might be broken and not about Mine, even though she had stumbled and could have hurt herself. This episode shows how greedy and selfish this mistress is, being concerned only about earning money as a merchant, and seeing her employees as mere tools to achieve this. The scene of cold water spilt on the floor on a cold winter morning is a symbol of the coldness of Mine's mistress and gives viewers an intimation of the heroine's coming misery.

"Murky Waters" cleverly symbolizes the extreme misery of poverty in a scene involving muddy water. The heroine Oriki was very poor in her childhood. One day she is asked by her mother to buy a small amount of rice which could narrowly prevent her family from starving. On her way back to her home with the rice, she stumbles in the mud and drops all the rice in the muddy water. Since the rice is so crucial for her family's life, she tries to pick up the spilt rice as much as she can but finds all of it covered in muddy water and no longer edible (Photo 3). She cannot go home, feeling scared about

Photo 3: ©DOKURITSU-PRO MEIGA HOZONKAI



being severely punished. After a long time, her mother, worrying about her missing child and desperately looking for her, finally finds Oriki standing in the muddy waters totally depressed. As soon as her mother understands exactly what had happened, she and her daughter embrace each other, crying. This childhood memory seems to be a key factor in her decision to refuse to see her old lover Genshichi. By doing so she tries to stop his son from falling into the miserable life that she experienced in her childhood, having seen Genshichi spend so much money on her and become poor so unexpectedly.

The muddy or murky waters play a key role in provoking the tragedy that unfolds in the latter half of the story. The scene mentioned is not necessarily beautiful but is important as a symbol of the poverty at that time that could turn any man or woman into a criminal.

### Darker Side of Meiji Japan

This film is an excellent guide to Higuchi's work and also to the history of the Meiji Era in Japan. After seeing this film, I felt very proud to be Higuchi's compatriot. She was successful in revealing the dark side of Japan's early modernization by sharply depicting the varieties of bad luck caused by the poverty then dominating the lives of the majority of the common people that surrounded her in her neighborhood. For the ruling class, the 1890s were the days when Japan as a nation was successfully pursuing economic development and strong military power, but for women like Higuchi it was a dark age filled with the misery of poverty. Higuchi probably had no intention of criticizing the government policy of seeking to become a strong military and wealthy nation. But her sharp observations of the realities around her tell us that the administration at that time was unable to resolve such problems as poverty.

Lastly, I would like to mention that the film includes some of the finest Japanese actors and actresses of the 20th century. Even if you cannot follow the Japanese language, their performances are definitely worth watching. **JS**

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