

Frank Yung-Fong TANG

EWRT 1A

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A Novel Make the Readers Feel Hungry and Appreciate Inner Beauty

In her novel *The Samurai's Garden*, the San Francisco born author Gail Tsukiyama, who has a Hawaii Japanese father and a Hong Kong Chinese mother (“Gail Tsukiyama: Novelist.”), brings her readers into a remote foreign world 85 years ago, in the years leading to WWII. She was fascinated by her father's Japanese heritage which inspired her to develop this novel:

“Through all the books I’ve written, I’ve gone back and forth in terms of exploring Chinese and Japanese culture” (Walton). In this book, she introduces her readers various Japanese vocabularies, food, festivals, customs, and relationships through a first person narrative written by Stephen, a Chinese young man. It is a novel that makes the readers feel hungry and appreciate inner beauty!

Throughout the novel, Tsukiyama mentioned Japanese terms all spelled out in *romaji*, the writing system of using Latin alphabets to denote the pronunciation of Japanese words (Rose). She helped the readers to connect these phrases to Japanese daily life more closely. She shows some of the greeting or expression phrases in the speaking context without much explanation, by that she compel the readers to think about their meanings through observing their repeated patterns, for example: “*Konnichiwa*” (Tsukiyama 26, 40, 45, 60, 63, 165), “*Dōmo arigatō gozaimasu*” (Tsukiyama 28, 41, 60, 65, 190), “*Hajimemashite*” (Tsukiyama 35), “*Sumimasen*” (Tsukiyama 41), “*Dōmo*” (Tsukiyama 47, 60), “*Dōzo*” (Tsukiyama 47), “*Ohayōgazaimasu*” (Tsukiyama 62, 163), “*Sayonara*” (Tsukiyama 66, 153, 204), “*Tadaima*” (Tsukiyama 176), and

“*Okaeri naisai*” (Tsukiyama 176). These are all greeting or appreciation phrases used in regular Japanese conversation. After reading the novel, we almost all know how to speak them to our Japanese at the appropriate time.

In this novel, Tsukiyama shows us many Japanese daily foods and cooking and connects them to their festivals. She reveals to us what Japanese breakfast usually consists of: “Matsu prepared a breakfast of rice with pickled vegetables and miso soup” (Tsukiyama 13). She also mentions what kind of beverage and snack Japanese hosts usually treat their guests, during Stephen’s first meeting with Sachi: “Sachi returned carrying a tray of tea and crackers ... Sachi leaned forward to serve the strong green tea...” (Tsukiyama 27). She explains the sweet snacks young Japanese girls will make for the boy they have affection for: “‘Homemade *yokan*’ ... Matsu picked up one of the rectangular red bean cakes ...” (Tsukiyama 61). The author then carefully alludes that Japanese use *furoshiki* to carry their lunch during their trip: “Matsu carried a bundle wrapped in a dark blue and white cotton *furoshiki*. ‘It’s our lunch’” (Tsukiyama 88); “... Matsu ... reached down into the *furoshiki* he carried and brought out some sticky rice ...” (Tsukiyama 90); “Matsu and I wrapped up the food he had prepared in a *furoshiki* to take with us to Yamaguchi” (Tsukiyama 95); “then carefully untied the *furoshiki* and spread out the content” (Tsukiyama 166); “she packed up the *furoshiki*” (Tsukiyama 167); “carrying *furoshiki* filled with food for the graves of their family members” (Tsukiyama 180); “Matsu and Fumiko unpacked the *furoshikis* and placed bowl after bowl of food on the three graves in front of them” (Tsukiyama 180). Through these repeated mentions of *furoshiki* in various parts of this story, Tsukiyama helps her readers to understand deeply how *furoshiki* is used to prepare and carry Japanese lunch.

The author also teaches us about other Japanese daily food and their preparation, for example, she mentioned the *udon* noodles several times in the book: “I quickly ate the bowl of cold *udon* noodles and fish cake he had left in my room” (Tsukiyama 14) and “Fumiko dropped thick *udon* noodles into the pot, making sure they were separated and wouldn’t stick together as they cooked” (Tsukiyama 177); From these description, we learn *udon* could be eating cold, with fish cake and need to be separated during cooking and it is appropriate for them to eat this food inside their bedroom. The author also connect our sense of taste and hunger in this novel: “he cracked two eggs into a clay bowl, mixed them thoroughly, and poured them into a hot skillet” (Tsukiyama 38); “On the table were bowls of pickled vegetables, deep-fried tofu, rice balls filled with red beans and salted fish” (Tsukiyama 179); “The smell of frying fish, *mochi* in soy sauce and sugar, and red bean cakes made my stomach growl” (Tsukiyama 181). Through these vivid illustrations of Japanese food, the author not only makes me feel extremely hungry while reading her book, she also motivates me to explore the nearby Japanese supermarkets more.

In the diary entry of January 1, 1938, the author explains how Japanese celebrate *Gajitsu*, New Year’s Day, and compare their differences to a Chinese one: “there’s something more spiritual in Japan on this day or renewal. There’s the giving of simple gifts, visits to the temples and shrines, and debts that are repaid from the previous year. All the bad and hurt are erased, and everyone is granted a fresh start for the coming year” (Tsukiyama 95). Tsukiyama mentioned the custom of hanging *kado-matsu* pine, plum and bamboo boughs wreaths that symbolized “prosperity, purity, longevity, and loyalty” (Tsukiyama 96), the giving of a *daruma* good-luck doll (Tsukiyama 95), the *shime-nawa* twisted straw/paper rope (Tsukiyama 96). Here we see an image of a happy new year celebration with many interesting decorations in their society. Again, she also discussed the food associated with this festival are “sushi, herring roe, and red bean

cakes” (Tsukiyama 95), “dried chestnuts and *toso*, a sweet *sake*” (Tsukiyama 96), “a bowl of *zoni*, a broth containing *mochi*” (Tsukiyama 96), and “*mochi* and black beans” (Tsukiyama 96). Reading about these increases the length of my Japanese supermarket shopping list. She also talks about some other Japanese festival phrases: “*Hajime*- a first ceremony” (Tsukiyama 96); “*Setsubun*, The First Rites of Spring” (Tsukiyama 98); “*mame-maki*, being throwing” (Tsukiyama 98); “*O-bon* Festival” (Tsukiyama 169, 175, 179-81, 186)- “a day to honor the dead, it was a homecoming, a celebration of ‘*furusato*,’ one’s birthplace and spiritual home” (Tsukiyama 175); “*Shubun No-Hi*, the Autumn Equinox” (Tsukiyama 189). Each holiday is introduced with some unique food to intrigue the hunger in our stomach to remember these concepts for us: “surrounded by yellow lanterns, forming a perfect circle of light... drinking *sake* and eating *sushi*, or *mochi* dipped in soy sauce and sugar” (Tsukiyama 159). Gee! These words really make me feel hungry!

Some cultural concepts the author discusses are much deeper, for example the two Japanese garden styles appear in this book: a more conventional green garden style Matsu planted, and *kare sansui*, a dry landscape Sachi worked on. The author describes Matsu’s garden: “There’s something very seductive about what Matsu has created. Once, when I asked him to name a few blossoms for me, the words ‘*Kerria*, *Lespedeza*, *Crepe Myrtle*’ seemed to flow from his lips in one quick breath. ... The black pines twist and turn to form graceful shapes, while the moss is a carpet of green that invites you to sit by the pond. Even the stone lanterns, which dimly light the way at night, allow you to see only so much. Matsu’s garden whispers at you, never shouts;” (Tsukiyama 31). Notice she first mentions several flower names to paint them into our imagination. She then connects us to some shapes by “twist and turn” and “carpet”; color by “black” and “green”; illumination by “stone lanterns”, “dimly light” and “night”; sense of

hearing by “whispers” and “shouts”. These phrases rendered a multidimensional image into our mind about a small conventional Japanese garden in Stephene’s house.

On the other hand, Sachi worked on a very different one, *kare sansui*, a dry landscape: “In place of the green, browns and flashes of color which punctuated Matus’s garden, the sparseness of Sachi’s garden stunned me. There were no trees, flowers, or water, only a landscape made of sand, stones, rocks, and some pale green moss which covered the shaded area. ... On the rugged, sloping earth, Sachi hand created mountains from arranged rocks, surrounded by gravel and elongated stones flowing down like a rocky stream leading to a lake or the sea. The flat surface of water was formed by smooth round pebbles, raked in straight and enriching lines to suggest whirlpools and waves” (Tsukiyama 40). She first contrasts this garden against the one of Matsu’s by eliminating the “green, browns and flashes of color” and “trees, flowers, or water” from our mind. She then added “sand, stones, rocks, and some pale green moss” and “earth, ... rocks, gravel, stones, ... pebbles” into the picture to create an image of gray and dryness. Then she shows us that this garden is really a more directly and tightly controlled artwork by the gardener and is capable of forming a very rich image of “mountains, ... stream, ... lake or the sea, ... flat surface of water, ... whirlpools and waves”. By comparing and contrasting these two different Japanese garden styles, Tsukiyama invited her readers to appreciate Japanese garden art on a deeper level! Now only that, she uses these two different styles to symbolize two important characters in the novel- Matus, the healer, and Sachi, the wounded one. In the story, Matus gives, cooks, plants, helps, and cares. Therefore, his garden is full of life and color, as what states in the New Testament Bible: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (New American Bible, Acts 20:35b). Sachi, on the other hand, is the wounded one. Her garden is full of hardship and dryness, but yet persistence and strength. It is a garden lacking in life, but yet full of life: a

garden of rebirth, a garden of revelation, a garden of redemption. The unique presentation style of this garden assists us to better appreciate the inner beauty of Sachi.

From the examples above, we see how Tsukiyama uses her excellent writing skill to ignite the interest of her English readers to deepen their knowledge about Japanese culture. This novel actually could be used as a beginning Japanese textbook for second language learners. The author shows us how basic greeting phrases are used in daily Japanese life. Tsukiyama also connects many famous Japanese foods to their customs and festivals. She also shows us how different garden styles symbolize respective situations and personalities of different characters. This fiction encourages and invites us to understand and investigate Japanese society and language more deeply. The author not only continuously mentioned great food all over the book to make us hungry, she also opened our eyes by using the garden style to better appreciate Sachi's inner beauty from an unconventional view point. It is a wonderful read.

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