

Original Paper

Study on the Infancy Characteristics of Meiji Capitalism in *Takekurabe* under the Semiotic Square Theory

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Abstract

Takekurabe (Child's Play) is one of the masterpieces of Ichiyō Higuchi, a Japanese female writer, during the Meiji (Note 1) period. Setting in the context of Yoshiwara, a famous red-light district in Edo (Note 2) period, the novella depicts the absurd and wild growth experience of a group of youths who were deeply influenced by the feudal dross culture. From the perspective of structuralism, this paper leverages Greimas's semiotic square theory to explore the meaning structure beneath the ostensible narratives of the work. It is found that the contradictions and entanglement among teenagers are closely connected with Yoshiwara's social culture and mainstream values. It can be said that Yoshiwara in the Meiji period portrayed by Ichiyō is a residual epitome of Edo feudal culture.

Keywords

Ichiyō Higuchi, Takekurabe, semiotic square theory, meiji capitalism

1. Introduction

Ichiyō Higuchi, as the first female writer who emerged after the Heian (Note 3) period of Japanese history, more than a thousand years later, is known as the "Lady Murasaki" and one of the early pioneers of critical realist literature in modern Japan. Born into a minor samurai family, Ichiyō moved to Ryūsenji-chō in Shitaya (Note 4) after encountering family misfortunes. There, she observed closely the real-life conditions of the people in the bottom society of Japan at that time. This experience impacted enormously on her literary creation. That's how *Takekurabe* came into being.

The work portrays a group of youths who grew up in a prostitution quarter. The teenagers raised in different classes, naturally divided into two rival groups: the main street gang and the back street gang (Note 5). With their minds being corroded by the prostitute culture, these teenagers' growth experience is particularly absurd and deformed. Adopting Greimas's semiotic square theory, this paper analyzes the

fundamental reasons for contradictions and oppositions among these teenagers by constructing semiotic squares of their relationships. Yoshiwara was considered as “the tip of the iceberg” to observe Meiji society, so as to explore the social form of Japan during the Meiji period.

2. *Takekurabe* under Greimas’s Semiotic Square Theory

Greimas, the author of *Structural Semantics*, engaged in structuralist narratology. The “semantic square” he put forward is an extremely pragmatic tool in the specific practice of literary criticism. Square of opposition is considered as the elementary structure of meaning. Literary stories originate from the opposition between X and anti-X, but new factors were introduced in the course of the story, which resulted in the creation of $\sim X$ (not X) and $\sim \text{anti-X}$ (not anti-X). When these factors are unfolded, the story is complete (Zhao, 2007, p. 104). The specific semantic square is shown in the Figure below:

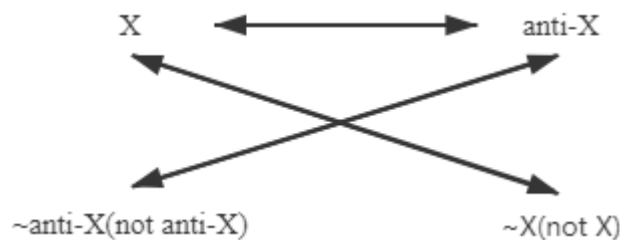


Figure 1. Greimas’s Semiotic Square

The above-mentioned square can be regarded as the opposition model of various semantic semes in literary works. By using this model and a little modification, the square relationship of the characters in *Takekurabe* can be shown below:

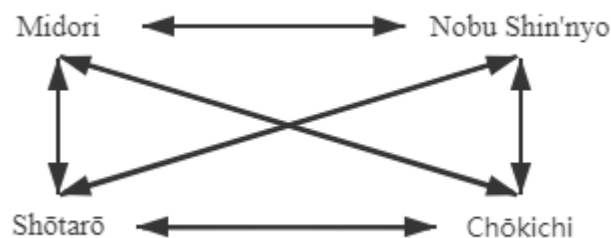


Figure 2. The Square Diagram of the Character Relationships in *Takekurabe*

The square all implies contradictory relationships among the four characters in different aspects and degrees. In this intricate contradiction network, this paper attempts to analyze the causes of the contradictions by focusing on the contradictory main bodies. With Midori as the main body, we can

find that Shin'nyo, Chōkichi and Shōtarō all have contradictory relationships with her, and the contradiction stems from their different attitudes towards Midori who later became a courtesan. Taking Shōtarō, who represents the merchant class, as the main body, we can observe that there are contradictions between him and Shin'nyo who represents the upper class of Yoshiwara, Chōkichi who is born in the townsman class, and Midori who represents the lower class. The author employs the contradiction among these young people to metaphor the contradictions and conflicts between various strata of society at that time.

2.1 How the Public Prostitution System Persecuted Women: With Midori as the Contradiction Main Body

Soon after the establishment of the Edo shogunate, a licensed brothel district was set up in Fukiya-chō, Nihonbashi. That marks the beginning of the public prostitution system which existed for a long time, and created Yoshiwara, a famous red-light district in Japan, recognized and protected by the shogunate. Although the Meiji government promulgated policies to abolish the system, it was preserved in another ambiguous way. In Yoshiwara, although high-ranking prostitutes lead superior material lives, their social status is lower than that of the poorest among the common people.

Midori was originally domineering as a little girl among her peers, and she also enjoyed her popularity and the feeling of superiority. However, in a fight at the store, Midori was publicly humiliated by Chōkichi, whose material conditions were not as good as hers. This greatly dampened her self-esteem and made her aware of the special characteristics of prostitutes for the first time: her glossy and beloved life turned out to be even no match for the back street gang.

Midori and Shin'nyo had a crush on each other. On a rainy day, Midori gave a scarlet scrap of Yuzen silk to Shin'nyo whose sandal was broke. Shin'nyo deliberately threw a paper narcissus into the gate of Midori's house before beginning his training at a Buddhist seminary. This is not only his response to Midori's affections but also a termination. Once Midori asked Shin'nyo to pick flowers for her. However, fearing to be gossiped by his classmates, Shin'nyo picked off a flower very perfunctorily, threw it to Midori and hurried away. When he was teased by his classmates, "what's he going to do—take her for his wife? If she goes to live at the temple, then she really will be Miss Daikoku" (Higuchi, 2014, p. 221). After that, in order to avoid rumors and gossip, he deliberately alienated and neglected Midori. This is not only related to his melancholy and cowardly character but also because he knows that in Yoshiwara under the public prostitution system, Midori is destined to be a courtesan in the future and that there is no way for them to be together. Besides, such rumors could tarnish his reputation as a priest's son.

Shōtarō, Midori's good playmate, had sentimental affection for her, which is mentioned many times in the works. He cares about and loves Midori. After Midori was bullied by Chōkichi, he sincerely apologized to her and comforted her with exquisite objects. When the Donkey at the dumpling shop said that when he had enough money, he would buy Midori for a night, he was irritated and told the

Donkey it was impossible. Shōtarō clearly fell for Midori, but when the store's owner implied his affections for Midori, he flatly denied it. "She's even prettier than her sister. I hope she won't end up like Ōmaki" (Higuchi, 2014, p. 244). This is Shōtarō's monologue. From here, we can infer that he is convinced that Midori will become a courtesan in the future. Shōtarō, who was born in the merchant class, is an extremely filial child with a sense of family responsibility. Even if he truly adores Midori, it is hard to tell that he is courageous enough to win her affections.

Midori grew up in such a red-light district protected by the law. What she saw was gorgeous dresses, and what she heard were fling stories. Over time, she grew into a frivolous, vain girl. Her friendship and love have all turned into phantoms because of the fact that she is doomed to be a courtesan. The lingered public prostitution system has already foreshadowed her misfortunate.

2.2 The Profound Class Conflicts in Yoshiwara Society— with Shōtarō as the Contradiction Main Body

The contradiction between Shōtarō and Midori has been discussed above, so this part will elaborate on the class contradiction between Shōtarō with Shin'nyo and Chōkichi.

The reason for Shin'nyo's participation in the back street gang against the main street gang is not only Chōkichi's persuasion but also that he and Shōtarō were from different worlds. He despised Shōtarō's vanity, flamboyant, flattering, and sycophantic behaviors. Shin'nyo, born in a priest family, represents the upper class of the shogunate. His class status is higher than that of Shōtarō, who was born in the merchant class, which was transforming into the bourgeoisie in the early Meiji era. Meanwhile, their social status was increasingly rising. In addition, Shin'nyo studied Buddhism as he grew up. He is different from his greedy father. He tried to dissuade his father from doing businesses to earn money, and he was ashamed of his father's binge on drinking and eating, reflecting his self-righteous and self-restricted character. This is completely different from that of Shōtarō, who helped his grandma collect load money from childhood, who had a knack of saying wisecracks to please the adults and preference for fancy clothes and accessories. The contradiction between Shin'nyo and Shōtarō symbolizes the conflict between the old upper class and the increasingly influential bourgeois upstarts in the early Meiji era.

Chōkichi, the son of a fire chief, belongs to the class of ordinary townsman in Yoshiwara society. However, due to his rogue practices, as well as these troublesome and restless behaviors, he was a "nasty" boy. As he is portrayed in the book, "the firemen's wives all griped among themselves, 'if he weren't the chief's boy, he'd never get away with it'" (Higuchi, 2014, p. 202). On a surface level, Chōkichi's resentment towards Shōtarō is because well-mannered, popular, likeable Shōtarō, both among the peers and adults, made him feel inferior. On a deep level, it is because he couldn't stand that Shōtarō's family controlled the economic lifeline of Yoshiwara's several big brothels by profiting from loan interests. This is the epitome of the proletariat's revolt against capital manipulation by the bourgeoisie. The contradiction between Chōkichi and Shōtarō symbolizes the conflicts between

ordinary people and capitalists in the early Meiji period.

3. Study on the Infancy Characteristics of Meiji Capitalism from *Takekurabe*

The infancy period of capitalism is a chaotic span in which the old and new economic systems, ideologies and cultures collide with each other in the initial stage of capitalism. In the 1860s, impacted by Western capitalist industrial civilization, Japan began the top-down, capitalist Meiji Restoration. Japan embarked on a long period of exploration, during which it transformed from a feudal agrarian society to a capitalist society. Until the Taishō Democracy Movement, there was still hot debate domestically about the rights of the emperor and the parliament as well as how to carry out ordinary election laws (Sato, 2016, p. 245). Therefore, it is fair to argue that the entire Meiji period can be regarded as the infancy period of Japanese capitalism. *Takekurabe* was written by Ichiyō based on her own life experience in Ryūsenji-chō in Shitaya, Tokyo. According to research, the locations, characters, and scenes in the work are in line with those of Ryūsenji-chō and crystalize the typical shogunate feudal remnants—how the society of the red-light district Yoshiwara appears in the early Meiji period. Thus, we can discover some Infancy characteristics of Japan’s capitalism during the Meiji period based on the above analysis of the work from a structuralist perspective.

3.1 Uneven Civilization Progress of Citizens among Different Regions

Stepping up national education is the centerpiece of the Meiji government’s endeavors of modernizing the country. In the Meiji Restoration, it was well set out by the government to develop modern education and cultivate talents catering for capitalist needs. To this end, Japan established the Department of Education (old Monbusho) in 1871, promulgated the “Education System Ordinance (Gakusei)” (hereinafter referred to as “Ordinance”) the following year, and then issued two crucial education orders that addressed local issues to make up for what was ignored in the “Ordinance”. The Meiji government in the later stage spared no efforts in boosting secondary and higher education. The “Ordinance” clarifies that the new education is aimed at individuals, “everyone...establishes himself, manages his property, and develops his own career to fulfill his life goals... this is the reason for setting up schools”, “what one learned should be the financial capital of one’s life “(Monbusho, 1938, pp. 276-277). However, this ideological trend of establishing oneself in society failed to civilize the citizens in Yoshiwara. Since the establishment of Yoshiwara as a licensed red-light district by the Edo Shogunate, until the early Meiji period, Yoshiwara had only one legal entrance to connecting with the outside world. This led to the formation of its own enclosed society with a certain level of resistance to the outside culture. While the external world is undergoing earth-shaking changes, Yoshiwara is like stagnant water scarcely ripples, let alone the splashing of advanced ideas. The ignorant and stubborn people maintained the old way of production day after day. Almost the whole town’s livelihood was related to the prostitute business, and what people see, hear, and think was all those things in the prostitutes. On the other hand, as Yoshiwara was protected by the shogunate during the Edo era, people

there had always considered the place to be the only genuinely legal red-light district in Japan, giving rise to a sense of superiority and pride in the minds of Yoshiwara people. There was a description in the work, “It’s rude to say it, but someone summed them up next to the alley: ‘look, there goes a man with money. But that one over there, he couldn’t have a penny to his name’” (Higuchi, 2014, p. 224). The slow absorption of external culture caused by the objective environment and the rejection of outside culture generated by subjective psychology made Yoshiwara society persist in maintaining the original social class in the early Meiji period and lagging behind other regions in terms of civilization.

3.2 *The Refractory Feudal Culture*

The fate of Midori in *Takekurabe* is firmly controlled by the decadent system of public prostitution. Soon after the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate, a licensed brothel district was set up in Fukiya-chō, Nihonbashi. That marks the beginning of the public prostitution system which existed for a long time, and created Yoshiwara, a famous red-light district in Japan recognized and protected by the shogunate. In 1657, a fire broke out in Original Yoshiwara (Yoshiwara, Nihonbashi), and the Shogunate moved the brothel district to Asakusa (New Yoshiwara). Under the public prostitution system, prostitutes had different rankings. Those showing the status of prostitutes are called verification seal and Iriyamagata. Yoshiwara also had a fixed Monbi day, that is, a brothel district festival, as a tradition had been retained until the early days of the Meiji period. In 1872, the Japanese government promulgated the Liberation of Geisha and Prostitutes to restore the freedom of prostitutes from the legal level. But in fact, it was fruitless, because the order stipulated that prostitutes could obtain business licenses through registration and work in designated prostitution premises. In 1873, the government revised the regulations on prostitutes, clarifying that prostitutes could be creditors of brothels, and geishas could be employees of prostitutes and continued to work in brothels as adopted daughters. Subsequently, the Prostitutes’ Virus Inspection Regulations promulgated in 1876 transferred Yoshiwara’s jurisdiction from Tokyo Prefecture to the National Police Agency, which further clarified the legal status of public prostitution in Yoshiwara (Musugi, 2009, p. 237). It was not until the promulgation of the Prostitution Prevention Law of 1958 that the public prostitution system was truly abolished. From the Meiji to the early Shōwa period (Note 6), to a certain extent, the government had been maintaining and protecting the public prostitution system. The system, as the remaining feudal dregs of the shogunate era, had survived as long as 90 years in Japan’s capitalization, which demonstrates how refractory the feudal culture is, and accounts for the tragic life of Midori in *Takekurabe*.

3.3 *Intensified Contradictions between Classes under the Deconstruction of the Old Identity Hierarchical Order*

In *Takekurabe*, due to the slow progress of Yoshiwara’s social civilization and other reasons, the class form of the society basically retained the old identity hierarchy of the Edo period, but its internal structure was beset with numerous contradictions, and the disintegration of the old order was just

around the corner. The merchant class represented by Shōtarō's family became a common enemy for Yoshiwara's old upper class and the townsman class.

In the Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunate set Shushigaku as an official school. According to the theory that "the Japanese society is divided into four main classes: the samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants", Japan's identity hierarchy was formally established. The samurai occupied the political sphere, the farmers were responsible for agricultural production, while the townsmen, composed of artisans and merchants, engaged in industry and commerce. Under such a strict identity hierarchy, people in different classes were hard to change their status, so they naturally tended to live in a state of "each in his proper place" (Liu, 2005, p. 333). This is exactly a vital factor for the basically stable and harmonious society during the Edo period. However, the Meiji Restoration politically abolished the old identity hierarchy and advocated that "the four classes are equal". Economically, it encouraged new industries, and vigorously advanced industrial and commercial activities. This change elevated the status of merchants enormously, some of which even developed into capitalists. The old upper class received government bonds as compensation for their original stipends under the policy of taxing their stipends on a rolling basis, while most of the lower-level samurai became victims of the primitive accumulation of capital because their government bonds came into the possession of the merchants and usurers. In addition, in terms of cultural policies, in order to achieve civilization and enlightenment, the government advocated vigorously developing modern education and improving the quality of the people. As a result, not only a myriad of talents that met the requirements of modernization construction for Japan were cultivated, but also the self-consciousness of people around the country was aroused. A typical event is that the Freedom and People's Rights Movement developed from an early request for civil rights of the gentry to a nationwide political movement, with three major requirements proposed: establishing a parliament, reducing land taxes, and revising the Unequal Treaties. In 1880, more than 246,000 people signed petitions for the establishment of a parliament in Japan.

It can be seen from the above that in the capitalization trend of the early Meiji era, while maintaining their political status, the upper class of the old shogunate attempted to gain capital interests in the economic field. The new bourgeoisie, as holders of huge amounts of capital, enjoyed a high social status in the capitalist society. Under the influence of "inalienable" natural rights and liberalism thoughts from the Western world, ordinary people started to be aware that they had the natural "human" right. As a result, people from different classes broke the original state of "each in his proper place". In the historical tide of reconstructing hierarchical order, and under the support of "inalienable" natural rights and other ideological theories, they relentlessly fought for their own rights. Hence, the contradiction between classes is inevitable.

4. Conclusion

In *Takekurabe*, Ichiyō Higuchi gave full play to one of the major characteristics of her literary creations, that is, modeling typical characters in typical environments. Whether it is the main characters such as Midori, Shin'nyo, Shōtarō, or the minor characters such as Chōkichi and Sangoro, Ichiyō drew their own portraits tailored to them. To better grasp the deeper meaning that these teenagers reflect, this paper employs Greimas's symbolic square theory to interpret *Takekurabe*, finding that the root of the contradiction among the four teenagers lies in the remnants of public prostitution and the deterioration of social class relations at that time. Given that the setting of the work restored the real scene of the then society to a large extent and the novel has the features of critical realist literature, the Yoshiwara society in the work is used as a window to explore the infancy characteristics of the capitalist in the Meiji society. In Japan, during the Meiji Restoration, although the government actively advocated "civilization" from top to bottom, in fact, the process of civilization varied greatly among regions, the remaining forces of feudal culture were still tenacious, and the contradictions between various classes in society were increasingly intensified.

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Notes

Note 1. Meiji, the era of the 122nd Emperor Muhito in Japan, was the 244th Japanese era. It was used from October 23, 1868 to July 30, 1912, for a total of 45 years.

Note 2. Edo period, from 1603 to 1868, was the last period of the feudal era in Japanese history.

Note 3. Heian period, a historical period in ancient Japan, began in 794, ended in 1192.

Note 4. An economically underdeveloped district in Tokyo.

Note 5. The main street gang are children born in wealthy families, and the back street gang are children from poor families.

Note 6. Shōwa period, the 246th Japanese emperor Hirohito's reign, lasted from December 25, 1926 to January 7, 1989.