Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and China

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927) lived a mere thirty-five years, much of it in ill health, but he filled it with experiences and writings that have long outlived him. He was born in an area of Tokyo inhabited almost entirely by foreigners; there his father sold dairy products to the Westerners. By all accounts his family life was less than happy. One of three children, an older sister had died before he was born, and his mother fell into a state of dementia shortly after his birth. He was raised by his maternal uncle and his uncle’s wife, taking their surname of Akutagawa. On the whole, although he was not a deprived child, the memories of his youth were not without pain.

In later years, Akutagawa recalled that the favorite novels as a youngster were the great Chinese epics, *Xi you ji* (Journey to the west) and *Shuihu zhuan* (Water margin), and characters from these works figure in several of the theatrical productions he describes at length in his travelogue of China. Indeed, the fact that he knew these and other Chinese novels so well, having read them many times, greatly enhanced his experiences in China. Wracked by illness from a young age, he spent many hours in his youth reading at home and in the local libraries. This voracious reading habit—he gobbled up all the Japanese writers of the Meiji period—remained with him his entire life. By the last years of the Meiji period, in his later teens, he began as well to read works in English or translated into English.

As a student in the elite First Senior High School, Akutagawa chose English literature as his major. He was a hard-working student there who never accommodated to the reckless lifestyle that many of his contemporaries adopted. During these years he also began reading in European philosophy and extensively in continental European literature. His friend and classmate, Kikuchi Hiroshi, whose name appears in this travelogue, believed him to be the best-read Japanese of his generation.

From his youth through his adolescent high school years, Akutagawa also developed a keen interest in bizarre tales of ghosts and other supernatural phenomenon, an interest that would remain with him his entire short life. Many of his early stories combine a penchant for the fantastic, even grotesque, with an inclination toward history. This combination can be seen in perhaps his most famous work, *Rashōmon*, which appeared in 1917.
His stories frequently demonstrate a firm grounding in the literary traditions of both Japan and China. We may now take it for granted that educated men and women of late Meiji and Taishō times were well educated in the Chinese and Japanese classics, but we should not lose track of the fact that the acquisition of this knowledge still required many long, hard hours of study, and some certainly took that learning to higher levels than others.

Among those Japanese writers and poets of the prewar era who traveled to China, Akutagawa was in a small class with Satō Haruo (1892–1964), Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886–1965), Yosano Akiko (1878–1942), and perhaps a few others who knew the Chinese literary tradition well. One tends to think of the late Meiji and Taishō era as a time in which Western literary trends had captured the Japanese creative imagination. Without attempting to disprove this general assessment, it is important to remember that even the greatest literary masters of the era, men and women much in debt to and heavily influenced by European literature, such as Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916), also owed much to continental Asian literary traditions. Sōseki was one of the greatest Chinese-language poets of his day in Japan.

From 1918 Akutagawa entered into an exclusive contract to write only for the Ōsaka mainichi shinbun, and over the next three years he wrote and published prolifically. In late March 1921 he went to China on assignment for the Ōsaka mainichi to write a series of articles on cultural life in China’s major cities. He had acquired sufficient stature as a writer that the newspaper owners felt that such a series would be a major publicity coup. In fact, installments of his travel narrative were carried in the Japanese-language press in China as well, making the whole journey a literary event. The newspaper widely publicized the trip, and he was doted on by Japanese he met all along the way. From the later 1910s China was in the grip of intellectual ferment, the New Culture Movement or the May 4 Movement, and the Japanese press was interested in capturing that ferment for their readers. Akutagawa’s task was to convey how younger Chinese activists under the influence of Western trends in politics, literature, and the arts were confronting age-old Chinese cultural forms.

Unfortunately, he became seriously ill en route and had to wait more than a week in the Japanese port city of Moji before he was fit enough to board a ship for Shanghai. When he did arrive in Shanghai at the very end of March, he was so ill that he was forced to spend three weeks in a hospital to overcome a bout of pleurisy. His travels took him to a number of China’s major urban centers—Shanghai, Beijing, Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Nanjing, among them. Charged with interviewing a number of major Chinese cultural and political figures, Akutagawa hoped to get some answers to questions about the new intellectuals and their opposition to their cultural predecessors. Those interviews with several exceedingly famous Chinese intellectuals—Zhang Binglin...