



Dottorato
Asia
Africa
e Mediterraneo

Università di Napoli L'Orientale

Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies

PhD Program in Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies

Curriculum: Philology-Linguistics-Literature

XXXVIII cycle (2022-2025)

PhD THESIS

The Onsen Imagination

Representations of Hot Springs in Modern Japan

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Academic year 2024/2025

Abstract

This dissertation traces the cultural history of hot springs (*onsen*) in modern Japan through their representation in literature, cinema and other media. It argues that the importance of hot springs in tourism infrastructure and popular culture is the result of a historical process in which representation and society have continuously influenced each other. Over time, cultural production not only reflected social, economic and political changes but also, in turn, affected them by constructing a shared framework for imagining and experiencing hot springs. To account for this process, this dissertation proposes the concept of the “*onsen* imagination” and interprets hot springs as a *topos* that formed at the beginning of modernity and developed through postmodernity. Throughout this history, representations of hot springs intersected with material changes in tourism, leisure and consumer culture, but cultural memory continued to preserve and activate long-standing associations with melodrama, eroticism, reflection, mystery and nostalgia. By tracing the emergence and transformation of these associations in different media and historical periods, this dissertation shows how cultural production created meanings that shaped the way people understood hot springs in modern Japan.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many people and institutions. During my research, I had the opportunity to travel and work in different environments. Each of these experiences contributed to the development of this work, so their sequence is the only way to give an order to acknowledgments that were otherwise equally fundamental for the realization of this project.

First of all, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Giorgio Amitrano from the University of Naples “L’Orientale” for his unyielding support at every stage of this research and for his guidance over the course of my academic journey up to this moment. An immense thanks also goes to Professor Maria Roberta Novielli from Ca’ Foscari University of Venice for the confidence that she has put in me from the beginning of this project, as well as for her continuous encouragement and ideas.

I want to thank Professor Odaira Maiko for her incessant enthusiasm in accompanying me during my research in Japan, which was made possible by a fellowship from Keio University in collaboration with the Italian Institute of Culture, and for her generosity beyond that period. The same gratitude goes to Professor Michael Emmerich for our stimulating discussions during my time at UCLA, where the Yanai Initiative for Globalizing Japanese Humanities gave me unrepeatable opportunities to develop my research in an incomparably inspiring environment. I also extend my sincere recognition to Professor Ivo Smits for his unwavering support during my visit to Leiden University, where he gave me brilliant insights and put me in contact with scholars like Professor Katarzyna Cwierka and Doctor Andrea Giolai, whose suggestions have also been important sources of inspiration for this work.

I also wish to thank Professors Morita Norimasa and Toeda Hirokazu from Waseda University and Professor Okamura Tamio from Hōsei University, who shared inspiring ideas during our discussions outside formal duties, making their contributions to this research even more meaningful and special to me. For the same reason, I am grateful, in alphabetical order, to Professors Silvana De Maio, Gala Maria Follaco, Chiara Ghidini and Roberta Strippoli from the University of Naples “L’Orientale,” who helped me in various and fundamental ways at different stages of this project. I want to thank the coordinators of the doctoral program, Professors Michele Bernardini and Ignazio Tantillo, for their kind support, but also all the other professors and colleagues at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and at the other institutions that hosted me. Even though I have not mentioned them one by one, their advice and encouragement were an important part of this work.

Finally, this work also benefited from the suggestions of the reviewers, Professors Luca Capponcelli from the University of Catania and Rebecca Suter from the University of Oslo, whom I want to thank

for their sharp and keen observations. I tried to incorporate their feedback within the limits of the time available, but I propose to work on them in greater depth in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of modernity, hot springs (*onsen*) have been a favorite destination for domestic tourism in Japan. According to the latest survey conducted by the Japan Travel and Tourism Association in 2024, the main activity of leisure travel is bathing in hot springs (17.9%) and the top expectation for an ideal trip is a relaxing thermal bath (40.4%). These figures are not an exception but part of a trend that has been repeating for years. After the secularization of travel in postwar culture, hot springs became an almost mandatory stop on national routes, but their importance in tourism infrastructure and collective imagination is the result of a historical process in which society and representation, both from high and popular culture, have continuously influenced each other.

This interaction is particularly vivid in a 1973 episode from the manga series *Doraemon* (*Doraemon*, 1969–1997), where Nobita uses a three-dimensional projector to transform his house into a huge resort. When his father complains that something is still missing from the atmosphere, the machine creates a group of guests walking back from the baths who enter the room by mistake. Only at this point does he taste the flavor of hot springs, which were so intrinsically tied to leisure and mass tourism that the absence of crowds initially made the illusion feel incomplete.¹

This picture of postwar economic growth is not completely out of date in the present, suggesting that the understanding of hot springs in contemporary culture is inseparable from the reconstruction of the historical phases that established the modes of representation now taken for granted. This episode confirms that cultural works like manga and literature do more than reflect existing ideas. They also help people become familiar with certain images, which in turn shape expectations in a continuous loop where society and representation influence and reinforce each other.

In recent years, the idea that hot springs can be a lens through which to study society has attracted attention in the academic debate across various disciplines, including literary studies. This interest has led to the formation of a body of work known as hot-spring literature (*onsen bungaku*), but this field is still young with little research in Japanese and none in English. At the moment, the only book-length studies are *Onsen bungaku ron* (Theory of Hot-Spring Literature, 2007) by Kawamura Minato and *Onsen bungaku-shi josetsu: Natsume Sōseki, Kawabata Yasunari, Miyazawa Kenji, Mōpassan* (An Introduction to the History of Hot-Spring Literature: Natsume Sōseki, Kawabata Yasunari, Miyazawa Kenji, Maupassant, 2024) by Okamura Tamio. The former is a collection of essays on texts related to hot springs, while the latter is the first attempt at a preliminary history of hot-spring literature. These books are complemented by *Onsen bungaku jiten* (Encyclopedia of Hot-Spring

¹ Kanno Takahiro, “Onsen imēji no hen’yō: kōkoku, zasshi kiji ni miru shikō no henka,” in *Onsen no bunka shi*, edited by Nihon Onsen Bunka Kenkyūkai (Tōkyō: Iwata Shoin, 2007), 317.

Literature, 2016) edited by Uranishi Kazuhiko, which offers a long list of texts involving hot springs and provides a useful resource for the formation of a canon.

These publications offer inspiring insights, but their scope is unfortunately narrow. With partial exceptions, they mainly focus on literary works from the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–1926) periods with little attention to later developments, other forms of artistic creation and the intersection between representation and social practice. In addition, none of these works tries to define the category of hot-spring literature, which ends up forming a retrospective label imposed on a corpus assembled by critics rather than resulting from historical analysis.

This is no wonder considering that the cultural meaning of hot springs has constantly changed in response to the development of the tourist infrastructure. This variability makes it difficult to identify structural characteristics that tie together heterogeneous and even incompatible images in a static genre, but some studies also suggest in passing that hot springs form a *topos*.² This idea is still without systematization, but depending on how this concept is interpreted it can have great potential as a flexible model that gives up the pretense of coherence in favor of the recognition of contradiction, avoiding strict categorization and opening the possibility of considering other forms of expression.

The term *topos* refers to a concept that is hard to grasp because its meaning has shifted over time. At first, it referred to commonplaces based on shared beliefs and opinions, which were used in classical rhetoric to persuade listeners. After the decline of oratory, these topics set foot in all literary genres and became clichés that could be applied to other spheres of life, but this process has been interpreted in very different ways. For instance, Ernst Robert Curtius³ took into consideration both single phrases and notions treated at length to demonstrate the existence of a European literature held together by a network of connections. His interpretation goes well beyond the assumptions of the rhetorical tradition, but it sometimes presents *topoi* as timeless truths that tend to universalization and indicate archetypal images of the collective unconscious,⁴ showing little interest in the historical process of

² Okamura Tamio, *Īhatōbu onsen-gaku* (Tōkyō: Misuzu Shobō, 2008); Lee Myung-hee, “Kawabata Yasunari to Nishikawa hakase no onsen hōkoku: zasshi *Onsen* ni miru *Yukiguni* no dōjidai teki gensetsu,” *Nagoya daigaku kokugo kokubungaku kai* 104 (November 2011), 73–93; Okamura Tamio, “Natsume Sōseki no Meiji sanjūkyū-nen: Nihon kindai onsen shōsetsu no tanjō,” *Onsen no genfūkei: ronshū onsen-gaku III* (Tōkyō: Iwata Shoin, 2013), 155–197; Andō Shiho, “Meiji 30-nendai to hajimari no Ikaho: Tokutomi Roka *Hototogisu* ni okeru kōfuku no gisō,” *Kokyō: Nihongo bungaku kenkyū* 16 (2023), 117–134; Andō Shiho, “Dasoku no bungaku-shi koto hajime: sei, furoba, onsen,” *Ronju* 33 (March 2024), 1–35; Andō Shiho, “Onsen to iu imēji denpa to hen’yō: *Konjiki yasha* ni okeru Atami to Shiobara ni chakumoku shite,” *Sagami joshi daigaku kiyō* 87 (March 2024), 1–14; Okamura Tamio, *Onsen bungaku-shi josetsu: Natsume Sōseki, Kawabata Yasunari, Miyazawa Kenji, Mōpassan* (Tōkyō: Suiseisha, 2024).

³ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated by Willard Ropes Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

⁴ Carsten Meiner, “The Double Topology: Reflections on the Function and History of Literary Topoi,” *Poetics Today* 43, no.1 (March 2022), 56–57.

construction and assimilation that inevitably led to changes with the transposition between different contexts.

Another study worth mentioning is that of Michelle Weil and Pierre Rodriguez from the Société d'Analyse de la Topique Romanesque (SATOR), who defined *topoi* as “recurrent narrative configuration[s] of pertinent thematic or formal elements.”⁵ This definition has the merit of identifying factors that are not signs of archetypes of the collective unconscious, but it reduces them to a mechanical repetition where a minimum of two and a maximum of six elements are required to meet taxonomic conditions. From this perspective, *topoi* become strictly textual categories without connection to aspects like cultural memory and identity, drawing a clear boundary between literature and extra-literary discourses.

In contrast, I propose that the *topos* of hot springs must be understood as an active cultural mechanism. It is more than a set of motifs because it also functions as a store of knowledge that activates cultural memory and influences expectations in the real world, to the point of guiding behavior and even physical place-making. This dynamic formation grew out of a historical process rooted in the ambiguities of modernity, so it cannot be reduced to a universal archetype. Starting from the Meiji period, it took in the contradictions of each period in a continuous negotiation between cultural production and lived experience, suggesting that the mutual influence between representation and social practice goes beyond mechanical repetition.

Before returning to this discussion in depth in chapter one, it is important to take a temporary step back and note that the cultural meaning of hot springs is different from their definition by law. The Hot Springs Act of 1948 declares that a hot spring must be at least twenty-five degrees Celsius or have a minimum level of minerals and gases. However, this technical classification does not reflect the symbolic role of hot springs. In legal terms, it is not difficult to find facilities that respect one of these criteria in Tokyo and other metropolitan centers, but these places are more readily thought of as public bathhouses (*sentō*) or spa centers (*sūpā sentō*) grounded in the urban environment.

In a survey conducted between October 2013 and November 2014, respondents were asked to list their first associations of ideas with hot springs, ranking travel second only to relaxation.⁶ This indicates that hot springs are conceived as spaces of detachment that involve departure from normal life. The gap with the legal definition reveals that technical principles are not enough to express what I will define as the “*onsen* imagination,” but it also demonstrates that representation worked with

⁵ Ibid., 58.

⁶ Sekiya Daiki and Kaji Yūichi, “Onsen tsūrizumu shikō to onsen imēji no tokuchō o saguru: shinri teki yōin to no kanren ni chakumoku shite,” *Tōkyō Seitoku daigaku jinbun gaku bu: ōyō shinri gaku bu kenkyū kiyō iinkai hen* 22 (2015), 53.

infrastructure and institutions to shape practices and influence the way in which hot springs are perceived and consumed.

For instance, souvenirs and commemorative signs inspired by *Bocchan* (*Botchan*, 1906) by Natsume Sōseki have an important role in the promotion of tourism in Dōgo Hot Springs. The novel is often mentioned in studies of hot-spring literature,⁷ but it rarely describes Dōgo as a tourist spot. In the beginning, the protagonist perceives a provincial roughness that briefly distances him from the civilized world of Tokyo, but this impression quickly fades away as he gets used to his new routine of walking to the baths for socialization. From a narrative point of view, the story has more in common with works involving urban bathhouses like *Sorekara* (*And Then*, 1909) and *Higan sugi made* (*To the Spring Equinox and Beyond*, 1912) rather than rural destinations, but the presence of hot springs still evokes the *onsen* imagination so that it fills the gaps in the text with associations derived from social practice, particularly literary tourism.

The same mechanism can be seen in the frequent inclusion of works like *Konjiki yasha* (*The Gold Demon*, 1897–1903) by Ozaki Kōyō and *Hototogisu* (*The Cuckoo*, 1898–1899) by Tokutomi Roka in the canon. These popular novels are discussed in numerous studies of hot-spring literature⁸ simply because famous scenes take place in locations with hot springs, but there are almost no mentions of the baths, demonstrating the impossibility of reducing the *onsen* imagination to empirical definition and, conversely, the ability of readers to generate meanings that go beyond the internal logic of texts.

Starting from this observation, it becomes possible to stretch the boundaries of hot-spring literature with the inclusion of works where a quick mention of hot springs is enough to evoke familiar associations without detailed descriptions. In fact, these indirect references constitute a privileged channel for the study of the *onsen* imagination in its embryonic form, when a simple allusion activates cultural memory. For this reason, it is possible to loosen the canon proposed by studies that focus on

⁷ Oka Masamoto, “Onsen to bungaku,” *Nihon onsen kikō butsuri igaku kai zasshi* 65, no. 1 (November 2001), 7–9; Lee Heo Seok, “Ukabiagarushintai: Sōseki sakuhin ni okeru onsen kūkan to jendā,” *Nihongo bungaku* 43 (2009), 349–368; Lee Heo Seok, “Manazashi no naka no onsen shōjo: Nihon kindai bungaku ni okeru onsen kūkan to jendā,” *Nihongo bungaku* 47 (2010), 407–423; *Sakka to onsen: o-yu kara umareta 27 no bungaku*, edited by Kusanagi Yōhei (Tōkyō: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 2011); Okamura Tamio, “Natsume Sōseki no Meiji sanjūkyū-nen: Nihon kindai onsen shōsetsu no tanjō;” *Onsen bungaku jiten*, edited by Uranishi Kazuhiko (Ōsaka: Izumi Shoin, 2016); Okamura Tamio, “Hajimari no onsen shōsetsuka: Natsume Sōseki,” *Onsen* 85, no. 4 (Winter 2017), 4–7; Andō Shiho, “Dasoku no bungaku-shi koto hajime: sei, furoba, onsen;” Okamura Tamio, *Onsen bungaku-shi josetsu*.

⁸ Komori Yōichi, “Sōzōryoku no gensen: kindai bungaku no naka no onsen,” *Front* 3, no. 5 (February 1991), 28–31; Kawamura Minato, *Onsen bungaku ron* (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 2007); Lee Heo Seok, “Manazashi no naka no onsen shōjo: Nihon kindai bungaku ni okeru onsen kūkan to jendā;” *Onsen bungaku jiten*; Andō Shiho, “Meiji 30-nendai to hajimari no Ikaho: Tokutomi Roka *Hototogisu* ni okeru kōfuku no gisō;” Andō Shiho, “Yuge kara hanareta tokoro de: Kōda Aya no essei ni wakiagaru onsen,” *Yuriika* 56, no. 8 (June 2024), 221–234; Andō Shiho, “Dasoku no bungaku-shi koto hajime: sei, furoba, onsen;” Andō Shiho, “Onsen to iu imēji denpa to hen’yō: *Konjiki yasha* ni okeru Atami to Shiobara ni chakumoku shite.”

bathing scenes⁹ and instead include in the bracket of hot springs the whole sphere of leisure and entertainment that developed around them over the course of the twentieth century.¹⁰

After all, hot springs are so closely tied to travel that tracing the history of their representation at times feels like tracing the history of tourism in Japan. However, their specific character makes it impossible to reduce them to generic destinations, all the more so because the *onsen* imagination does not refer to a static collection of ideas but changes over time. It is a discursive formation in which cultural production constructs and transmits meaning grounded in texts that go beyond literature to include the social practices and collective expectations that shape the way in which hot springs are perceived and consumed. In this system, representation is “a constitutive process of reality” that participates in discourses made up of “a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society.”¹¹

In addition to literature, cinema is another privileged channel in the formation of cultural identity. Before the rise of mass media in the postwar period, they were the primary means of creating and spreading meanings. At first, literature established patterns of representation in artistic production for elite consumption, but cinema popularized them before the advent of radio and television. Over time, these images have been continuously replicated in a cycle of production and reproduction of reality that eventually involved other forms of cultural production, including painting, theater, music, manga, anime and so on.

The *onsen* imagination took shape in all these forms of expression and this study, while privileging literature and cinema, takes them all into account. However, it mainly focuses on works with great visibility and circulation, choosing them on the basis of commercial success, canonical status, cult recognition and rankings, but also allowing occasional inclusions of minor or untranslated works that still touch on important aspects. The aim is to maintain a balanced selection of productions for different audiences, avoiding rigid distinctions between high and low culture to support the thought that the same environment can shape the ideas of different social groups.

⁹ Okamura Tamio, “Natsume Sōseki no Meiji sanjūkyū-nen: Nihon kindai onsen shōsetsu no tanjō;” Okamura Tamio, *Onsen bungaku-shi josetsu*.

¹⁰ Andō Shiho, “Meiji 30-nendai to hajimari no Ikaho: Tokutomi Roka *Hototogisu* ni okeru kōfuku no gisō;” Andō Shiho, “Onsen to iu imēji denpa to hen’yō: *Konjiki yasha* ni okeru Atami to Shiobara ni chakumoku shite.”

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Introduction,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications in association with The Open University, 1997), 6.

At the basis of this approach is the theory of geocriticism, which puts emphasis on the importance of spatial representation in the production of cultural meaning.¹² Instead of focusing on individual works or authors in isolation, it offers an interdisciplinary method for the examination of the role of hot springs as both imagined and material spaces in the historical creation of the *onsen* imagination at the junction of cultural representation, spatial production and collective memory. From this perspective, the reproduction of the same motifs in various forms of cultural production reflects its operation at multiple levels of artistic creation, naturalizing specific ways of remembering and consuming hot springs.

Based on this premise, this dissertation combines close reading with discourse analysis to study the relationship between representation and social practice. More specifically, close reading is applied to analyze narrative structures and understand how texts produce meaning and develop motifs. On the other hand, discourse analysis is used to contextualize them and examine their broader circulation and reception, tracking how specific images become established or contested in wider cultural debates about modernity and identity. Theoretical inquiry is paired with historically grounded readings to interpret texts in light of the larger contexts in which they are produced. In turn, representation is inserted in larger discursive formations that put the construction of hot springs in relation to aspects like nostalgia, tourism, gender, sexuality and commodification.

This approach to representation as “one of the central practices which produce culture”¹³ necessarily requires a diachronic perspective, because meaning results from social conventions that are continuously subject to reinterpretation.¹⁴ For this reason, this dissertation traces their evolution from the beginning of modernity to the immediate aftermath of the burst of the economic bubble. Over time, hot springs assumed different meanings, but the forms of modern tourism that emerged after the diffusion of railroads provide the context that ties together representation from the Meiji period onward. Accordingly, premodern culture is excluded from historical investigation despite the existence of rudimentary forms of travel, because it belongs to a completely different infrastructural and media environment.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters that cover the various historical stages in this evolution, with the aim of outlining a tentative cultural history of the way in which hot springs have been imagined and represented in modern Japan. The main question is what role representation plays in

¹² Robert T. Tally Jr., *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, translated by Robert T. Tally Jr. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹³ Stuart Hall, “Introduction,” 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

the construction of the cultural and social space of hot springs through fiction, intended as imaginative works that include literature, cinema, manga, anime and other media. To answer this question, I argue that hot springs function as symbols rooted in cultural memory, which change meanings over time but remain accepted as plausible through repetition in various forms of artistic expression.

The first chapter traces the emergence of the *topos* of hot springs starting from the Meiji period, when the rise of modern tourism created the conditions for its formation in relation to romance and melodrama. This basic structure later grew to incorporate other themes like eroticism and reflection, forming an initial set of symbols that made the following developments possible. At the same time, its creation in canonical works like *Kusamakura (The Three-Cornered World, 1906)*, *Izu no odoriko (The Dancing Girl of Izu, 1926)* and *Kinosaki ni te (At Kinosaki, 1917)* helps explain its centrality in the construction of modernity.

The second chapter examines the consolidation of the *topos* in the interwar years as a result of repetition in various forms of fiction, which also introduced new associations with themes like mystery and investigation. At the same time, the diffusion of tourism and artistic production beyond the upper classes increased public participation in cultural life, reaching a larger audience and making it easier to use for ideological purposes in wartime propaganda.

The third chapter analyzes how postwar economic growth drove the massification of tourism and cultural production, making the *topos* available to an even larger audience through mass media. After the rise of mass tourism and the loosening of censorship, hot springs were often represented as resorts for leisure and sexual entertainment in popular culture, contributing to the commercialization of eroticism in some types of travel. On the other hand, the chapter also reconsiders this trajectory from the perspective of female authors who offered alternatives to the patriarchal codes defined by male producers, while traditional symbolism survived in the collective memory despite tangible changes in the real world.

Finally, the fourth chapter discusses the height of massification in postmodern culture, when the commodification of nostalgia gave rise to simulations that replaced reality. Advertising campaigns took advantage of feelings of urban alienation to sell an artificial vision of rural hot springs as repositories of vanishing traditions. They promised a reassuring sense of homecoming and spiritual reconnection with personal roots, but the fragmentation of conventional images caused the loss of coherence, resulting in a pastiche where motifs lost their original meanings out of context.

Overall, this dissertation offers a panoramic overview of the discourses that constructed hot springs in modern Japan, but it is inevitably non-exhaustive in terms of scope and depth. Instead of offering

the account of a genre, it reconstructs the history of a *topos* intended not only as an arrangement of motifs but also as a repository of communal knowledge, using some representative works to trace how it took shape under different historical conditions and contributed to the formation of cultural identity. By bringing together artistic production and material culture, this study wants to show how the cultural and social space of hot springs formed as a result of the convergence of texts, images and lived experiences, which together influenced collective expectations and actual behaviors. The hope is that this preliminary study will contribute not only to current discussions on hot-spring literature but may also prove meaningful for a broader understanding of Japanese culture and society.