Modern Japanese Literary Studies

Seth Jacobowitz and Jonathan E. Abel, Editors

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CHAPTER 12

The Many What-ifs of Literary Urbanism

A European Perspective

Gala Maria Follaco

As a university student of Japanese in Italy in the early 2000s, I recall being impressed by the highly pervasive presence of Tokyo in modern literature, as both a space of representation and production. I was under the impression that after the Meiji Restoration, the literary life of the entire country had moved *en masse* to the new capital. I was learning of writers who had come to Tokyo from the provinces to cultivate their literary ambitions and of other writers who, inspired by the new paradigms of urban life, developed novel and sometimes revolutionary motifs and languages. I was in the process of discovering whole neighborhoods where publishing activities were concentrated, to the extent that they became centers of a thriving and increasingly diverse industry.

To some extent, my impression had to do with the multiple processes of periodization, hierarchization, and canonization of literary phenomena that were taking place in Japan during the transition to a modernity that was, in many ways, inspired by European ideals. The many cultural changes that accompanied the country's economic and social evolution after 1868 were a conservative revolution, since many of the questions crucial to the realization of this modernization had already been posed long before the Restoration.

This is perhaps the most defining feature of Meiji literature—and the main reason for the impression I had as a university student. It signals the disruption of the existing balance and the transformation of a relational

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system at a time when many established categories were being questioned. It marked the start of a process that would give rise to an "imperialist" literature seeking to appropriate a territory of new extension.[1] An appropriation that, apparently, began and ended in the space of the new capital.

The most obvious results of the multiform intrusion of capitalism and Euro-American imperialist policies in the field of writing were the drastic reform of language and a redefinition of the contours of the literary canon. At the heart of the new literature was narrative prose, more precisely the "novel," in a sense closer to its Western European conception than to its Japanese counterparts. This led to a gradual renunciation of Sinitic writing and a devaluation of genres that were difficult to assimilate into Western forms and styles. To be modern, a novel had to tell real stories and had to do so in a language that was as close as possible to the spoken language; one that everyone could understand. A language that had to be "Japanese."

And the space of storytelling was no less important. After the abolition of the status system, society had lost some key identity coordinates.[2] At the same time, Euro-American ideas and techniques were spreading, inspired by massive urban modernization projects. Everything was changing: the city and the lives of its inhabitants, and both the territorial as well as the mental landscapes. On the other hand, as nothing really changes in such a short time, the rhythms and trajectories of everyday life retained the vestiges of the past for longer. Tokyo in the 1870s should be regarded as a space of limbo, a city in transformation, whose status as capital had not yet been established.[3] One of the main characteristics of Meiji literature—being "urban"—did not manifest itself until the end of the century, when novelists inspired by European Realism and Naturalism began to set their stories in urban contexts, most notably Tokyo. They were certainly modern, telling the real story and describing the city as it was at the time, but their representation was not entirely new. Images of European cities from the works of Goethe, Zola, and many others mingled with those of Edo and Tokyo's recent past, just as they appeared in the "useless" *gesaku* prose of fifteen or twenty years earlier; the city's pre-Restoration spatial zoning was still faintly visible, like a watermark, behind the modern scene of the Meiji capital. New problems arose, as the stories of literary characters unfolded in spaces that, very often, were much more than a mere background or setting.

Aside from the debt that any line of research on the modernization of urban space must necessarily owe to Maeda Ai[4] and his effort to read Japanese modernity as part of a worldwide process, it is important to underline the influence of Jinnai Hidenobu's work on Edo,[5] which, especially through the suggestion of a resemblance to Venice, both being "water cities," has shed light

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on hitherto neglected aspects of urban modernization and its impact on the representation of space. Further, Jinnai has succeeded in convincingly demonstrating that the transition from Edo to Tokyo, far from being a moment of rupture, actually marks a continuity, especially a cultural one, between the two cities.[6] Transformation in waterways as a crucial step in Tokyo's modernization is also at the core of Paul Waley's research on Japanese river culture and its actual, as well as symbolic, connection with spatial zoning.[7]

The importance of looking at urbanism from a historical perspective, not minimizing the elements of continuity but indeed stressing them, is implicitly emphasized by the joint effort by Waley himself and other scholars who, after organizing a session at the conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies in 1997, published a book[8] in which three distinct capitals, Kyoto, Edo, and Tokyo, are studied from multiple points of view and through their numerous representations. This work has the added value of addressing the theme of urban space from an interdisciplinary perspective, also going beyond the Tokyo-centric approach of many studies on Japanese urban modernity, especially in the literary field.

The intersection between space and identity in a context that is not necessarily Tokyo-based is at the center of Stephen Dodd's research in his book on *furusato*,[9] which brings to the forefront the theme of native place within a timeframe (from the mid-Meiji period through to the late 1930s) in which everything that fell outside the (real and ideal) perimeter of the capital tended to be overlooked.

Deserving a mention here is the 2012 volume *Urban Spaces in Japan*, which followed the 2005 conference of the German Association for Social Science Research on Japan and, adopting an interdisciplinary approach based on a set of case studies, offered a critical reflection on the topic of space in Japan. It examines space inside and outside the capital and even beyond strictly national borders, space as the subject of composite and original research, which, through a multiplicity of languages and approaches, brings to light new problems, questions established issues, and imagines future developments.[10] One of the editors, Evelyn Schulz, is a key figure in Europe regarding the relationship between urban and literary studies. Her work on Nagai Kafū (1879–1959) and on *hanjōki* (records of prosperity) relating to Tokyo, not to mention the volume *Tokyo: Memory, Imagination, and the City* that she co-edited in 2018, addresses the topic of collective and individual memory, thus of image-construction and resistance within the space of the city and through the lens of literary writing.[11] The extensive application of urban studies tools in the analysis of literary works signals the overcoming of the many limitations inherent in text-based approaches and

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the consolidation of a theoretical foundation that greatly enriches the study of a subject with profound rhetorical, if not instrumental, connotations. At the same time, the systematic exchange and continuous engagement with other disciplines in the field of historical and social sciences connected with Japan ensure the accuracy of a broader perspective, which is of fundamental importance when approaching a topic with diverse implications, such as literature (and, more generally, representation), of the modern urban space.

In 2018, a symposium held in Naples sought, through the prism of narrative, to investigate the dynamics of appropriation, representation, and self-representation of urban space in modern Japan. Taking urban centers such as Tokyo, Kobe, and São Paulo as its focus, the symposium explored the ways cultural, political, and economic dynamics interact to shape urbanization models across Japan and along migration routes. It investigated the construction of urban space in the imagination of residents and migrants, as well as according to market dynamics. It also examined discourses and narratives performed by literary writers and historiographers in the rhetorical representation of the "modern Japanese urban space" and the negotiation of identities of urban denizens in literary and historiographical works. Prioritizing the theme of narration and representation, the symposium aimed to stimulate reflection and take a step toward overcoming the fundamental disparity in the exchange between literature and urban studies, namely toward a re-evaluation of modern Japanese literature as a valid tool in itself for interpreting urban phenomena and not just as a reservoir of information and symbolic configurations useful for analysis in other fields of knowledge.

In the current crisis of the humanities, literary studies risk, in Europe as elsewhere, ending up at the bottom of every government's priority list. Emphasis on STEM subjects is sometimes interpreted as excluding other disciplines, and in an academic environment increasingly governed by market forces and strongly encouraged to pursue innovation at all costs, literary studies (especially those related to past eras) are being relegated to an ancillary role in comparison to language instruction. From this point of view, universities that continue to offer—despite enormous sacrifice and amid countless difficulties—area programs that, alongside language learning, include the compulsory study of cultural disciplines related to Japan and/or Asia, sometimes in great depth and with a variety of approaches and content, represent a valuable resource for the survival of literary studies. Compared to two decades ago, students of Japanese have definitely increased, and the motivations behind their choice have diversified. If already in the early 2000s the paths in areal studies related to Asia, and Japan, were no longer perceived as eccentric, in today's Europe there is, on the one hand, a greater

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solidity of the field, and on the other hand, an audience of students landing at the university with a greater awareness of the most characteristic cultural (but especially popular culture, as also evidenced by Treat in his chapter) elements. One can study Japanese in large cities as well as in smaller university centers, with in-depth study options varying according to the programs offered, with language instruction leading the way for all other disciplines.

This variety and spread, however, is not matched by an equal investment of resources by individual governments, with countries that can count on a more attentive and forward-looking political class, and others that can rely solely on EU funds and Japanese fellowship programs (MEXT, Japan Foundation, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, and others), or funding from other countries.

Endorsing Richard L. Stein's notion of "the city as a perfect interdisciplinary object,"[12] one might consider the study of the representation of urban spaces in modern Japan as strategic, for it addresses topics that are of global interest today, such as urbanization, gentrification, resilience, migration, and social inequalities, providing interpretative insights drawn from the empirical experience of cities filtered through the sensitivity of writers who grappled with issues of identity, cultural negotiation, and their relationships with authority over a century ago. By, on the one hand, expanding the discourse to the so-called secondary cities to the urban centers of colonial Japan and those where migrant communities settled, and, on the other, to forms of writing which, for reasons of genre, gender, and language, are non-canonical, the relevance of this discourse in the current context emerges even more strongly.

A recent trend in the field of urban studies, specifically on the historical, geographic-cultural, architectural and anthropological fronts, is to read Japanese urban phenomena from a comparative standpoint, looking to other realities in Asia and around the world both in terms of broadening the perspective and deepening our knowledge of colonial and migratory events. Moving beyond the illusion of Tokyo's particularism in order to examine the representation, in various cultural expressions, of other cities, whether they are within or outside the archipelago's borders, is to set as a horizon a much greater awareness of the urban literature of modern Japan. Michael Cronin's recent work[13] on Ōsaka is an example of such a direction,[14] as is Joshua Fogel's longstanding effort to clarify the importance of Chinese territory for modern Japanese literati.[15]

Urban modernization in Tokyo has incurred very high costs. Repeated reconstructions of the capital have drained available resources, often at the expense of secondary cities and more peripheral regions with the intent of

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giving a tangible dimension to the ideals of prestige and progress pursued by the authorities. But Tokyo was not only a prosperous and bustling city, reflecting unstoppable renewal and an expression of Japanese society on the path to modernity. It was also the destination for internal migrations that highlighted the contradictions of the era. Entire neighborhoods within the city were immersed in degradation and poverty. Some writers immediately captured these realities in their works, intuiting their potential for social criticism. Although they are not canonical forms of writing and are not normally considered to be among the most representative works of Japanese literature of the period, these texts serve as important historical documents and a representation of an alternative image of the city.

The so-called *shakai rupo*, short for *shakai ruporutāju* (social reportage), became particularly widespread between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when thousands of workers poured into the capital to contribute, directly and indirectly, to its reconstruction, often living below the poverty line. The neighborhoods where these people tended to concentrate were veritable slums. Among them, places like Shitaya and Fukagawa stood out, their cultural significance in the past sharply contrasting with their current state. The reportages were almost always the work of journalists, the most notable of whom were certainly Yokoyama Gen'nosuke (1871–1915), author of *Nihon no kasō shakai* (*Japan's lower-class society*, 1898), and above all Matsubara Iwagorō (1866–1935) with *Saiankoku no Tōkyō* (*Darkest Tokyo*, 1893), a text most likely inspired by *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) by the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth (1829–1912).

Matsubara's text is considered the main example of *rupo* in Japan.[16] It voices the author's doubts about ongoing modernization, which, from his point of view, had not succeeded in reducing the gap between social classes or eliminating the problem of poverty.[17] On the contrary, it had exacerbated them. What mattered to him was therefore to propose a different image of the new capital, in sharp contrast with the modern and absolutely positive vision promoted by the authorities.[18] On the other hand, Yokoyama's work was motivated on the whole by his determination to give visibility to people who, working anonymously and under often meager conditions, contributed substantially to the modernization of the city.[19]

In his afterword to Matsubara's book, Tsubouchi Yūzō describes it as the "masterpiece of Romanticism,"[20] an anti-canonical definition that sounds almost like an *épater le bourgeois* (middle class scandal) kind of provocation and grasps a fundamental point: in the process of appropriating foreign genres and motifs, and elaborating (and re-elaborating) indigenous tropes, one inevitably proceeds in a partial manner, and this has the effect, in the

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long run, of canceling altogether—or relegating to secondary or eccentric cultural expressions—representations that might otherwise spark novel insights not only into literary, but also social and political, history.

Looking at the history of cities from the perspective of marginalized groups such as immigrants, the poor, women, and so forth, is certainly a way to enhance the literary representation of otherness in a period of Japanese history characterized by an emphasis on homogenization. Searching for images of cities outside the canonical forms, questioning pillars of modern Japanese literature, such as urban settings (where urban stands mainly for Tokyo-centered), the primacy of the novel, and the Japanese language, is a way of reimagining literature itself and diversifying the picture enough to do justice to its complexity, bringing up themes that resonate with a wide audience today.

In the early Meiji period,[21] Sinitic texts lost their position of authority and were replaced by forms of writing considered more "useful," more "practical," not intended for entertainment, whose language, which was closer to everyday language, as in Western European literature, would facilitate general understanding and therefore convey a greater number of messages. Chinese influence in Japan had a long history, and, until then, Sinitic had been a fundamental component in Japanese literature. In the Meiji era, some books were still being written in Sinitic, and sometimes they sold well. They described and critiqued the real world, and people read them with pleasure; young writers were inspired by them. Topographic texts included the *hanjōki*, chronicles, or narratives, of prosperity, which recounted with biting irony the splendor (and also the decadence) of contemporary urban space.

Robert Campbell defined the representation of society in *hanjōki* as a faithful and facetious "self-portrait," which was successful from 1874 onwards due to its affinity with the work of numerous chroniclers who narrated and criticized the times by focusing on people's lives. All of this took place against the backdrop of the activities of the Freedom and People's Rights Movement.[22]

These texts are organized according to a more or less standardized thematic plan that reveals, through its variations, the most subtle nuances of social change and literary sensitivities. Study of this genre could help us reconstruct the transformations of the Japanese literary polysystem in relation to the West and Asia. *Hanjōki* have to do with "China" while being deeply rooted in a synchronic dimension, inscribed in the temporality of 19th-century Japan. But they are also timeless because they are still part of a tradition, a canon, albeit obviously unofficial.

It is a corpus of prose texts, generally considered documentary and non-

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fictional, even though they often present narrative insertions that constitute micro-narratives. As a corpus, they pose interesting theoretical problems, especially regarding language, genre, and reception.

If *hanjōki* sold so well,[23] therefore enjoying such wide readership, to the point that several modern writers admitted to being fans of the genre, why has their importance in the literary history of modern Japan almost always been underestimated, and why have they been treated merely as sources of information, at best as satirical texts, in a way that has minimized their literary value in spite of the sophisticated intertextual mechanisms at work in these writings and their potential influence on writers of later generations?

The main explanation is probably their failure to fall into line with the new canon of Meiji literature, which, as noted above, favored the Japanese language, the novel genre, and realistic representation—primarily meaning a depiction of the individual's supposedly true interiority. Influenced by seventeenth-century Chinese pleasure district literature,[24] conventionally thought to be the link between Tokugawa-period anecdotal narratives and the Western-inspired novel,[25] and published at a stage in Japanese cultural history when prose in literary Sinitic was highly devalued,[26] the *hanjōki* seem to defy all the major categories sustaining the discourse of Japanese literary modernity.

Being written in Sinitic, they were read mainly by *shosei*, the college students who would become the writers of the next generation. From 1872 onwards, this language was gradually abandoned in schools and newspapers, as the school system was overhauled to bring it into line with the country's new requirements, that is, to be more open to Western knowledge. The situation was therefore doubly locked: literary Sinitic was no longer the language of scholarship or literature. Certainly, there were still many people who read it—as demonstrated by the great success of some *hanjōki*—but this was leisure reading, in most cases suffused with nostalgia. In the Meiji era, literary Sinitic was not considered the language of modernity. This is the first reason for the exclusion of *hanjōki* from the "serious" canon of literature: they were not written in the dominant language.

A second reason might be that it is quite difficult to attempt a "genre" definition for *hanjōki*. In Japan, as in China, there is a long tradition of writing about space, places, and topographical texts, but the difference between these other texts and *hanjōki* is that the latter often have almost no practical use. They only briefly recount the histories of places but provide no useful information, nor do they include maps or itineraries. As Evelyn Schulz has pointed out, the narrative inserts show that the authors wanted to amuse readers rather than instruct or inform them.[27] But this is not the case for

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the whole of *hanjōki*, that is, texts that have the word "*hanjō*" (flourishing) in their titles. There were works about the countryside, others focused on particular neighborhoods or life abroad, even works that were structured like *hanjōki* but treated places in the manner of other topographical genres. In short, *hanjōki* were hybrid and varied texts, part fiction and part non-fiction, with illustrations and sometimes verses—texts that, in any case, were impossible to assimilate into genres perceived as "modern" at the time.

As for reception, it was "limited" to students, samurai and other categories of readers who were capable of reading literary Sinitic and understanding the intertextual play within the text, but judging by sales and circulation figures, it may be said that the vast majority of people in these categories actually read them.

To sum up, *hanjōki* were widely read, entertaining, and escapist books, so not taken seriously, but at the same time they were literary texts, which filtered the mentality of the time and literary tradition for the benefit of a very acute and lucid critical spirit toward society. They can be considered one of the "useless" forms of writing par excellence: they are not written in Japanese, they are not novels, they have a nostalgic allure, so they do not seem to carry any progressive contents. In fact, many *hanjōki* authors had an idea of progress that was simply different: they scoffed at the radical positions of advocates of Westernization and did not reject the "new" a priori, but without necessarily being backward-looking.

Texts such as *shakai ruporutāju* and *hanjōki* confront us with contradictions and question the very nature of literary modernity, whose complexity has been known for decades. They are highly effective examples of the limitations of many of the categories that have informed the field's physiognomy and have yet to be rediscussed, if not entirely deconstructed, asking ourselves what the field would be like today if mechanisms of canonization and non-canonization had operated differently. In fact, they may constitute an addition to the discourse of canon-formation described in the second part of this volume. They highlight once again the need for a re-orienting of the scholarly approach to modern Japanese literature through a trajectory that moves away from the solidity of the canon to strengthen the misalignments that emerge from a re-examination of gender, class, language, space, and more. All this urges us to question again the notions of center and periphery in their most immediate, as well as in their symbolic, meanings.

The tools of literary analysis applied to urban thought assuredly appear suitable for reading and decoding problems of such complexity, and what has been done in recent years in Japan, the United States, and Europe is certainly commendable. It is important to continue with work capable of

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valorizing non-canonical texts, authors, and contexts, clarifying the centrality of literary discourse in the colonial space and urban experience in the context of migrations.

The fact that academic institutions in Europe are predominantly public means that the allocation of research funds is subordinated to political priorities much more than elsewhere. In this context, literary and humanities studies in general are automatically penalized. Thus, the effort described above must not be pursued with the self-serving goal of surviving a crisis in the humanities, which seems difficult to overcome today, but with the intention of contributing to a global debate that wrestles with such issues on a daily basis, and to which modern Japanese literature could provide a number of alternative keys to interpretation. The most important of these is the invitation to temporarily abandon the certainties of canon and to reason along the lines of a continuous and systematic "What if . . . ?"

Notes

1. Munakata Kazushige, "Jānarizumu to akademizumu," *A New History of Japanese "Letterature" Vol. 3: The Path from "Letters" to "Literature": A Comparative History of East Asian Literatures*, edited by Kōno Kimiko, Wiebke Denecke, Shinkawa Tokio, and Jinno Hidenori (Benseisha, 2019), 364–65.

2. David L. Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (University of California Press, 2005); Yoshida Nobuyuki, *Kinsei toshi shakai no mibun kōzō* (University of Tokyo Press, 1998).

3. Takashi Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 1996), 38.

4. Maeda Ai, *Text and the City: Essays on Japanese Modernity*, edited and with an introduction by James Fujii (Duke University Press, 2004).

5. Jinnai Hidenobu, *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology*, translated by Kimiko Nishimura (University of California Press, 1995).

6. The Edo-Tokyo transition, and the assessment of Edo's "modernity" is also part of French cultural geographer (and Watsuji Tetsurō's scholar) Augustin Berque's work from the late 1970s. See, in particular, his *Japan: Cities and Social Bonds*, trans. by Christopher Turner (Pilkington Press, 1997).

7. See, for instance, Paul Waley, "Following the flow of Japan's river culture," *Japan Forum* 12, no. 2 (2000): 199–217; Waley, "On the Far Bank of the River: Places of Recreation on the Periphery of the Pre-modern Japanese City," *Ecumene* 3, no. 4 (1996): 384–407.

8. *Japanese Capitals in Historical Perspective: Place, Power and Memory in Kyoto, Edo and Tokyo*, edited by Nicolas Fiévé and Paul Waley (Routledge, 2003).

9. Stephen Dodd, *Writing Home: Representations of the Native Place in Modern Japanese Literature* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2004).

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10. *Urban Spaces in Japan: Cultural and Social Perspectives*, edited by Christoph Brumann and Evelyn Schulz (Routledge, 2012).

11. Evelyn Schulz, *Nagai Kafū: "Tagebuch eines Heimgekehrten"—Der Entwurf ästhetischer Gegenwelten als Kritik an der Modernisierung Japans* (LIT, 1997); Schulz, *Stadt-Diskurse in den "Aufzeichnungen über das Prosperieren von Tōkyō" (Tōkyō hanjō ki): Eine Gattung der topografischen Literatur Japans und ihre Bilder von Tōkyō (1832–1958)* (Iudicium, 2004); *Tokyo: Memory, Imagination, and the City*, edited by Barbara E. Thornbury and Evelyn Schulz (Lexington Books, 2018).

12. Richard L. Stein, "Recent Work in Victorian Urban Studies," *Victorian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2003): 320.

13. Michael P. Cronin, *Osaka Modern: The City in the Japanese Imaginary* (Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2017).

14. Although it is not focused on literary representation of urban space, Louise Young's 2013 monograph on Japan's secondary cities in the interwar period is worth mentioning here. Louise Young, *Beyond the Metropolis: Second Cities and Modern Life in Interwar Japan* (University of California Press, 2013).

15. Also in his translation of Liu Jianhui's work on Shanghai, *Demon Capital Shanghai: The "Modern" Experience of Japanese Intellectuals* (Merwin Asia, 2012).

16. Kida Jun'ichirō, *Tōkyō no kasō shakai* (Chikuma shobō, 2015), 11.

17. Maeda, *Text and the City*, 45–48.

18. Tsubouchi Yūzō, "Meijiki romanha bungaku no kessaku." *Saiankoku no Tōkyō*, edited by Matsubara Iwagorō (Kōdansha, 2015), 159.

19. James L. Huffman, *Down and Out in Late Meiji Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).

20. Tsubouchi, "Meijiki romanha bungaku no kessaku," 159.

21. See also Fraleigh's chapter on modern Japanese literature and Sinitic in this volume.

22. Robert Campbell, "Ginza bungei no hyakunen (2)," *Bungaku* 16, no. 3 (2015): 217–18; Campbell, "Kaisetsu: shudaika suru toshi kūkan," *Tōkyō hyakunen monogatari: 1. 1868–1909*, edited by Robert Campbell, Toeda Hirokazu, and Munakata Kazushige (Iwanami, 2018), 315–19.

23. It is estimated that the main *hanjōki* of the Meiji era, *Tokyo shin hanjōki* (A new record of flourishing Tokyo, 1874–1876), written by Hattori Bushō (1842–1908), sold between ten and fifteen thousand copies. Miki Aika, *Hattori Bushō den*, in vol. 4 of *Meiji bungaku zenshū* (Chikuma shobō, 1969), 401–2.

24. Emanuel Pastreich, "The Pleasure Quarters of Edo and Nanjing as Metaphor: The Records of Yu Huai and Narushima Ryūhoku," *Monumenta Nipponica* 55, no. 2 (2000): 200.

25. Fukuda Naoto, "Hanjōki," in vol. 4 of *Nihon kindai bungaku daijiten* (Kōdansha, 1978), 431.

26. Okitsu Kaname, *Meiji kaikaki bungaku no kenkyū* (Ōfūsha, 1973), 128.

27. Evelyn Schulz, *Stadt-Diskurse in den "Aufzeichnungen über das Prosperieren von Tōkyō" (Tōkyō hanjō ki)*, 76–77.

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