

Lee O-young *Smaller Is Better: Japan's Mastery of the Miniature* (1982)



Tōru Haga



Lee O-young. (Source: Shōichi Saeki & Tōru Haga, Eds., *Gaikokujin ni yoru Nihonron no meicho - Goncharov kara Pinguet made*, Chuokoron-Shinsha Inc., 1987, p. 261)

Lee O-young was born in Chungcheongnam-do, Korea in 1934, when it was under Japanese rule. In 1958, he graduated from Seoul National University with a bachelor's degree in literature, and in 1960, he received a master's degree from the same university. From 1960 to 1973, he served as an editorial writer for *The Korea Daily* and *The Chosun Ilbo*. During this time he became a well-known literary and arts critic and founded the monthly publication, *Munhak Sasang* (Literary Thought), which he presided over for many years, exerting a profound influence on the literary and poetic circles of the time. He was a professor at the prestigious Ewha Womans University in Seoul and, from 1981–1982, he was a visiting scholar at the University

Tōru Haga passed away before the publication of this English language edition.

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of Tokyo's Graduate School of Comparative Literature and Culture, at the invitation of the Japan Foundation. During that time, he completed the book *Chijimi Shikō no Nihonjin (Smaller Is Better: Japan's Mastery of the Miniature)*, which was published by Gakuseisha, and made him a best-selling comparative cultural theorist. He gave many lectures and talks throughout Japan and it could be said that he single-handedly accomplished the equivalent of three years' worth of work for one embassy's cultural department in six months. In addition to this book, he has written several other books, including *The Cultural Theory of Resentment* (Gakuseisha) and *Reading Japan in Haiku* (PHP) both in Japanese, and *Lee O-young's Collected Works* (22 volumes) in Korean. Although not a specialist in Japanese studies, his knowledge and experience of Japanese culture and society are broad and intimate, and his strength lies in his ability to quickly objectify them from a Korean perspective. He says that when he first learned Japanese as a "national language" at a National Elementary School (*Kokumin gakkō*), he was most amazed by the miracle of "iroha," the Japanese alphabet poem, which "packed" all the kana characters of Japan into a single poem without repeating a single character twice. He died of cancer on February 26th, 2022 at 88 years of age.

Every page of Lee O-young's *Chijimi Shikō no Nihonjin (Smaller Is Better: Japan's Mastery of the Miniature)* sparkles with erudition, wit, and sarcasm and displays the rapid-fire, elegant eloquence of this brilliant professor, who is considered the best in modern Korea. With a single focus on "*chijimi shikō*" (a miniaturizing orientation), this book consistently analyzes Japanese culture, from *Man'yōshū* and Matsuo Bashō to Matsushita Electric and pachinko (the Japanese pinball machine). The sarcasm from someone from a neighboring country is much more poignant and sometimes painful than that from a Westerner, but it is an intellectual pleasure to feel that "I see," and once you start reading the book, you can't put it down.

For example, regarding Japanese food, the Frenchman Roland Barthes, in his *Empire of Signs* (1970, see Barthes' article in this book), took sukiyaki, tempura, and sashimi and called them "Food Decentered" and discussed it in his unique semiotic style. However, to be honest, I cannot deny that for me, Barthes' argument suggests that of a cultural ambassador to Japan or a high-class tourist returning to his salon in Paris and sharing a lot of his souvenir stories.

On the other hand, this Japan expert from Korea cites a phenomenon of Japanese food culture which is as diverse and abundant as French cheese: there are 1800 varieties in *ekiben* (boxed meals sold at train stations) alone. The fact that he cites *bentō* rather than tofu as a counterpoint against cheese is a clear demonstration of Lee O-young's comparative cultural freedom of thought and association.

Korean food, he said, is usually a combination of broth and solid food. In Japan, pickled daikon radish is served only as yellowish lumps of *takuan*. In contrast, Korean *kkakdugi* is always served with broth—the same can be said about kimchi—and in both cases, the broth is also eaten with a spoon. Japanese miso soup and *osumashi* are soups with few ingredients, while Korean *guk* contains a lot of ingredients such as *wakame* seaweed and bean sprouts. In other words, in Korea, broth with solid ingredients and solid dishes with broth are the basis of meals, and

“He has no broth” is the harshest insult one can make about someone, whereas in Japan, the two are clearly separated. Thus, Koreans have been unable to produce *bentō* as a portable meal, while the Japanese have been able to do so ever since the invention of the *bentō* as the military rations of Oda Nobunaga’s troops, or perhaps as the interlude meal at kabuki theaters during the Edo period. Moreover, he adds, there is still a sense among Koreans that the humble, functionalist *bentō* culture is vulgar and embarrassing.

This new knowledge of the Korean dietary habits (which we cannot immediately confirm) is already very stimulating. It reveals a blind spot for us as a “sunflower culture people,” as Lee calls us: we who have always looked toward the “sun” of Euro-American culture. Furthermore, Professor Lee goes on to read in the Japanese *bentō* culture a typical example of the constant “miniaturizing orientation” of the Japanese people. In other words, *bentō* is nothing but “shrinking a large and spacious meal into a small enclosure, such as a *hokai* container or a *warigo* box. This is something that is completely natural, but it is something we Japanese take for granted. If the *bentō* is an example of the Lee-style phenomenology of Japanese culture, we can recognize the same mindset becomes visible in a shrine being reduced to a portable one (*omikoshi*) carried around by many people on their shoulders, or a roofed Buddhist altar inside the temple, in which a smaller container for a statue of Buddha is enshrined. “After all, *bentō* is food of the Japanese, by the Japanese, and for the Japanese.”

However, what makes Lee’s analysis more convincing than a whimsical conjuring up of baseless comparisons is when he analyzes the dynamics inherent in the Japanese language, especially the verbs, which lie at the basis of such phenomena. This is a feat that we do not expect from correspondents, business scholars or ordinary diplomats from the West, even if they are all writing about Japan. This is an insight that could only come from Professor Lee, who was born in 1934 in Korea (under Japanese rule), was taught Japanese at a “National Elementary School,” grew up with Japanese picture books, and later became a specialist in poetics and rhetoric, and who even reads and digests books by Gaston Bachelard and Roland Barthes.

In the example of *bentō*, the very basis of the word is the verb to “pack” (*tsumeru*). This, he says, is a verb that forms the basis of Japanese culture, for example: “stuff” (*komeru*) things into *ireko-zaiku* baskets; “fold” (*ori-tatamu*) and “grip” (*nigiru*) a folding fan, and “pull” (*yoseru*) it toward one’s mouth; and “take” (*toru*) and “shave” (*kezuru*) down a doll to its essential elements. Similarly, when a lot of people are gathered in a small place, it can be expressed as a “packing together” (*tsume-ai*). “Packed in” (*tsumeru*) can also mean to be stuck in a place and the place itself can be called a “packed-in place” (*tsume-sho*), a word generally used to mean guardhouse, station, or office. Whether it is a novel, a play, or a conference, the climax near the end of it is referred to in Japanese as a “great packing in” (*ōzume*). In short, the essence of “packing in” is the action of converting quantity into quality by coagulating more things in a small space in a dense and compact manner. This idea of “miniaturization (or shrinkage)” has been applied to everything from lunchboxes to transistors.

This effect is directly at work in the psychological life of the Japanese. It is not enough for them just to see, think, or breathe. When the moment comes, you have to “pack yourself into watching” (*mitsumeru*, to stare hard at something), “pack yourself into thinking” (*omoitsumeru*, to take something to heart, to brood), “pack in your breathing” (*iki o tsumeru*, to remain breathless and still), or “pack yourself too hard” (*kon-o-tsumeru*, to work hard), or else you will not be regarded as “firmly pulled together” (*shikkari shite iru*), which means that your attention, your spirit, is packed in tightly in readiness, but rather you will be a “worthless” (*tsumaranai*) guy, which literally means “not packed in” and you will be ostracized by the village. What we see here is the characteristic of the Japanese as “tension people” (as a spoof of the *tenson* people, or descendants of heaven) and their collectivist tendencies. Indeed, when Japanese people abandon the task of calmly distinguishing and placing things in an order based on logic and principles, and continue to “pack themselves into thinking” (*omoitsumeru*) something and “pack themselves into watching” (*mitsumeru*) television, it will eventually give rise to phrases such as “100 million shattered jades” (*ichioku gyokusai*, which means that all Japanese must fight to death), “100 million repentance” (*ichioku sōzange*, means that all Japanese must repent for Japan’s war of aggression), and “100 million moronization” (*ichioku sōhakuchika*, means that all Japanese watch too much television and become idiots). Although Japan is often referred to as the only liberal democracy in East Asia, such a phraseology of forcing its entire population into a small framework, just like a packed lunchbox, seems to carry some totalitarian flavor. Such a way of thinking, he saw, would have been utterly unthinkable in Korea, which at the time was criticized by Japanese intellectuals as a dictatorship. This biting sarcasm, including some bitterness from a Korean intellectual who knows Japan well, hits the Japanese much harder than if the same thing were said by an American. According to him, not only is there no *bentō* culture in Korea, but also there is no vocabulary to describe this sense of density and tension, such as a verb that corresponds to the Japanese word *tsumeru* or *tsumekomu*. Thus, canned goods, which in Japanese are called *kanzume* (literally, “packed in a can”) are called in Korean *t’ongjorim* (literally, “can cooked”).

When we are told this by a Japan expert from South Korea, the country closest to Japan in terms of geography and culture, we feel as if we were being swept off our feet from an unexpected direction. This is perhaps the most thrilling part of the book for Japanese readers. As we read through this painfully clever “Lee’s theory of the Japanese,” we sometimes wonder if we have been taken in by the rhetorical professor’s rapid-fire rhetoric. But on the other hand, his argument seems to be well thought out, well organized, and supported by a diverse literature. Needless to say, the Iwanami Bunko (Iwanami Pocket Library) was very successful with its “method of shrinking any large book into a tiny volume” modeled after the German Reclam’s Library, and has surpassed it and continues to this day, and the first big advertisement for its first sale appeared on the front page of the *Tokyo Asahi Shinbun* on July 10, 1927. On the same day, the second page of the same newspaper carried an article on the ongoing Japan-U.S.-U.K. Conference on Naval Disarmament in Geneva. As one would expect, Lee had done his research. Lee O-young’s brilliant research is

evident in the fact that he then goes on to say that the “arms reduction” project ended in failure, while Iwanami’s “book reduction” project turned out a great success, even though they are both “*chijimi shikō*” (a miniaturizing orientation).

His analysis of the miniaturization-oriented “lunch box style” is just one typical example, as the other chapters are equally interesting. After introducing Sei Shōnagon’s *waka* poem, “All things small, no matter what they are, all things small are beautiful,” he first makes a point of mentioning Doi Takeo’s *Amae no Kōzō* (*Anatomy of Dependence*) and *Nihonjin no Kokoro* (*The Spirit of the Japanese*) by Umesao Tadao et al. He then criticizes the “sunflower tribe” of Japanese intellectuals (*himawari-zoku*, which is probably a twist on the term “sun tribe” i.e., *taiyō-zoku*, a Japanese youth custom of the 1950s derived from a novel by Ishihara Shintarō) for their habit of immediately defining a phenomenon as being uniquely Japanese if it is not found in the West. In turn he points out Roland Barthes’ “depressingly” poor knowledge of Asia in *Empire of Signs*. “It is the Korean eye, rather than the Western eye, that can now discover Japan’s unique characteristics with a little more precision,” he says, with a keen sense of polemic that only Koreans can possess. He then analyzes Ishikawa Takuboku’s thirty-one syllable poem “*Tōkai no kojima no iso no shirasuna ni ware nakinurete kani to tawamuru* (On the white sand beach Of a tiny island In the Eastern Sea, Bathed in tears, I toy with a crab)” as another typical example of a miniaturization-orientated poem with a matryoshka-like structure that reduces the large Eastern Sea down to a tiny crab through multiple possessives “*no*,” which can never be translated into Korean. With this analysis right up to the conclusion that if Japan truly aspires to be a superpower, it should not become the “demon” of the chant shouted in Japan on the eve of the first day of spring “Demons out! Fortune in!” but become an *issun-bōshi* (the one-inch boy), smaller, loftier, and more beautiful, this book will retain a remarkably stimulating appeal for the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago for some time to come.

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