

# The Incident at Nishibeta Village: A Classic Manga by Tsuge Yoshiharu from the *Garo* Years-- 西部田村の出来事—つげ義春ガロ時期の古典的マンガ

Tom Gill

“Yoshiharu Tsuge is arguably Japan’s premier eccentric manga artist... he has probably had more written about him than he has himself created.” (Schodt 1996: 200).

Can there be any other manga artist who has been so lavishly praised in the English language and yet been so little read or understood? To date only three short comics by Tsuge Yoshiharu have been translated into English (Tsuge 1985, 1990, 2003a), <sup>1</sup> a few more into French (Tsuge 2004), and outside the Japanese-reading world, even the most avid manga fans have little idea what Tsuge is all about, beyond a vague awareness that he is difficult, dark and perhaps, surrealistic. He is typically accorded a few paragraphs in general surveys of postwar manga, but there is only a single short paper devoted specifically to his work published in English (Marechal 2005).

In Japan he is revered by anyone who takes manga seriously. Five films have been made out of his comics and nine have been adapted for TV. He remains a towering figure, frequently referenced and occasionally parodied, although he has not published any new manga since 1987. I am now engaged in making tentative first steps towards the close reading of word and image in Tsuge that has not hitherto been attempted in English.

Tsuge became famous through his work for the celebrated alternative comic magazine, *Garo*, and his work can conveniently be divided into three periods: pre-*Garo*, *Garo* and post-*Garo*. Before *Garo*, Tsuge was a self-confessed hack, turning out large volumes of hard-boiled manga

in the *gekiga* style pioneered by the likes of Tatsumi Yoshihiro, many of them published in pulp magazines designed for pay-libraries. Tsuge wrote gangster stories, samurai/ninja yarns, westerns, sci-fi – whatever would sell. Most of these stories are unrelentingly noir – they are nihilistic tales that end badly. For example, in ‘Obake Entotsu’ (Ghost Chimney, 1958), a story set in a tough industrial city, a particular factory chimney gets a reputation among the chimney sweeps for being unlucky after a series of nine fatal accidents. No one dares clean it – except one man, desperate for work after a lengthy spell of unemployment. He ascends the chimney in the midst of a rainstorm – and, sure enough, loses his footing and falls to his death. In ‘Shakunetsu no Taiyo no Shita ni’ (Under a Red-Hot Sun, 1960) a group of men from various countries fall into a treacherous pit while being driven to see the pyramids by an Egyptian guide. They are trapped there for a week and nearly fried to death, when a rescue helicopter arrives – only for them to accidentally kill the pilot in the rush to get on, and then crash the helicopter, so they are going to be fried to death after all. In ‘Nezumi’ (Mice, 1965) a couple of mice stow away on a space freighter, breed a massive colony, eat the spaceship’s stores and then devour the crew as well.

I hope these very brief summaries give something of the flavor of Tsuge’s pre-*Garo* output. Many of them are comparable to the boys’ own tales of the British tradition, except with a heavier emphasis on doom. Tsuge takes a grim pleasure in depicting the hideous fate of

his characters. Apart from those drawn in a specific fantasy/SF genre, they are mostly set in rough, working-class settings. The drawing is dynamic, but nowhere near as sophisticated as in his later work. Though interesting in places, they would probably not be in print today without the fame of his later works. A generous four-volume collection of these early works was published by Kodansha in 2003 (Tsuge 2003b).

Tsuge was out of work, depressed and contemplating suicide, when he was contacted by Nagai Katsuichi, the legendary editor of *Garō*. Nagai coaxed him back to the drawing board, and gave him unprecedented editorial freedom (Nagai 1987: 216-223). From August 1965 to March 1970, Tsuge would publish 22 manga in *Garō* (table 1). The first four I would describe as only mildly interesting, but the fifth, published in February 1966, would be remembered as Tsuge's breakthrough work – 'Numa' (The Swamp). This and a dozen more of his *Garō* manga turned Tsuge into a counter-culture hero. Somehow he had found a way to reach deep into the well of his own sub-consciousness, to produce a string of cameos that were masterpieces of both art and literature – the holy grail of any manga artist. This too, was the moment when "Tsuge helped to free manga from the strictures of narrative and sought a more poetic grammar for them" (Gravett 2004: 134). The best of the *Garō* works dispense with conventional plot and are full of ambiguity, inviting the reader to engage in interpreting multivalent dream works. After 'Numa', no one would ever again get killed in a Tsuge manga, although the deaths of animals occur frequently enough to be numbered among the motifs of the *Garō* period. There would be no more violence, either, except for some ambiguous cases of possible sexual assault that I will discuss in another paper; and there would be no more reliance on the stereotyped formulas of gangster yarns, sci-fi etc. Instead, Tsuge came up with works of striking originality.

Table 1: Tsuge Yoshiharu's 22 manga published in *Garō*

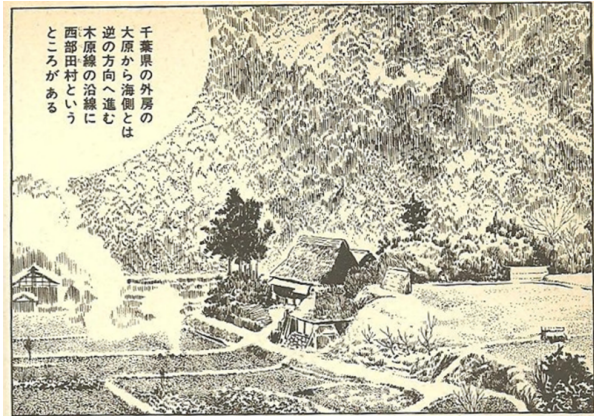
DATE	TITLE	Pages
65/8	<i>Uwasa no Bushi</i> [The Rumored Samurai]	13
65/10	<i>Suikashū</i> [Watermelon Sake]	8
65/12	<i>Unmei</i> [Fate]	18
66/1	<i>Fushigi na E</i> [The Mysterious Picture]	16
66/2	<i>Numa</i> [The Swamp]	14
66/3	<i>Chiko</i> [Chiko]	18
66/4	<i>Hatsutakegari</i> [The First Mushroom Hunt]	8
67/3	<i>Tsuya</i> [The Wake]	10
67/5	<i>Sanshōuo</i> [Salamander]	7
67/6	<i>Li-san ikka</i> [The Family of Mr. Lee]	12
67/8	<i>Toge no Inu</i> [The Dog at the Mountain Pass]	11
67/9	<i>Umibe no Jokei</i> [A View of the Seaside]	27
67/10	<i>Akai Hana</i> [Red Flowers]	18
67/12	<i>Nishibeta-mura Jiken</i> [The Incident at Nishibeta Village]	17
68/1	<i>Chohachi no Yado</i> [Chōhachi's Inn]	24
68/3?	<i>Futamata Keikoku</i> [The Futamata Ravine]	18
68/4	<i>Ondoru-goya</i> [The Ondol Hut]	21
68/6	<i>Honyaradō no Ben-san</i> [Mr. Ben and his Igloo]	28
68/6	<i>Neji-shiki</i> [Screw-style]	23
68/7	<i>Gensenkan Shujin</i> [The Master of the Gensenkan]	29
68/8	<i>Mokkiriya no Shōjo</i> [The Girl at the Mokkiriya Bar]	16
70/2-3	<i>Yanagiya Shujin</i> [The Master of the Yanagiya]	40

Tsuge drifted away from *Garō* after just a couple of years. After publishing steadily from early 1966 to summer 1968, he dried up creatively, returning to *Garō* just once with the magnificent 'Master of the Yanagiya' in 1970. By his own account he became lazy because the relative success of his *Garō* works meant he was not quite as desperate for cash as usual (Tsuge 1991: 13). Also he was getting into an intense relationship with Fujiwara Maki, an avant garde actress and children's book illustrator whom he met in February 1968. After the 'Master of the Yanagiya' Tsuge published nothing for two years. He then re-emerged with a new style, or perhaps a pair of styles. Some of the new works were based closely on erotic or horrific dreams and fantasies; others were autobiographical, based on life with Fujiwara and their son, born in 1975. That was the year he and Fujiwara were legally married.

The *Garō* period protagonist is always a single man (except for 'Salamander,' which is narrated by a salamander); the post-*Garō* protagonist is a family man and much of their interest comes from the family dynamic. Fujiwara provided her own account of life in the Tsuge household in two picture books

(Fujiwara 1987, 2003). Genuine creative works in their own right, they depict the couple's fights and neuroses with a surprisingly humorous touch. The former is sub-titled "The terrifyingly contented days of a family living in a by-way of a metropolis" (*Daitoshi no katazumi ni ikiru kazoku no osoroshiku kokoro-tanoshiki hibi*).

There is a somewhat similar sardonic humor to many of Tsuge's post-*Garo* works, reflecting on the various unsuccessful attempts made by a struggling manga artist to find alternative employment, for example by recycling old cameras or selling stones found on the riverbed as *objets d'art*. Sometimes social realism gives way to magical realism, as in *Torishi* (The Bird Master; 1985) the story of a man who strongly resembles a bird and makes a living by enticing birds to him and selling them to pet shops. But the emotional coloring of these later pieces grows steadily darker, culminating in the harrowing *Ribetsu* (Parting; June 1987), describing the break-up of a sexual relationship followed by an almost-successful suicide attempt. To this day, that remains the last manga that Tsuge ever published. Suffering from various psychological and physical ailments, he withdrew to a very quiet family life on the Tama River in the rural outskirts of Tokyo. In 1999 Fujiwara Maki died of cancer; since then Tsuge has been living with his son. He has cooperated with the filming of several of his works, and publication of various collections and reprints of his works. But there has been nothing new for a quarter of a century.

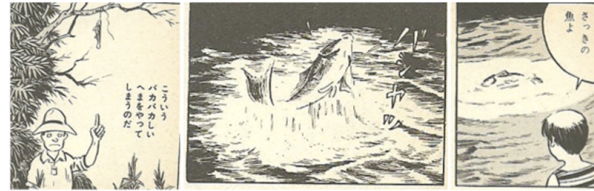


**Fig. 1** Opening frame of 'Nishibeta-mura Jiken.' Text describes location of the village.<sup>2</sup>

There are various theories as to why so little of Tsuge's work has been translated. Some say that the work is too challenging to interest mainstream publishers, others that Tsuge has usually refused to allow his work to be translated because he does not like the way manga tend to be "flipped" when translated into English, meaning that the page lay-out and all the frames are back to front, that being the cheap and simple way to get round the problem that the Japanese original reads right to left and with the pages starting from what in European languages would be considered the back of the book. Yet another rumor has it that Tsuge promised the translation rights to some long lost friend in America who has never made use of them. Whatever the reason, it has been almost impossible to get close to most of Tsuge's work without a knowledge of Japanese (or French). As one who has been reading Tsuge's cartoons in the original Japanese for some 25 years, I now propose to take a close look at one of the more interesting works from Tsuge's *Garo* period: 'Nishibeta-mura Jiken' (The Incident at Nishibeta Village). It was published just two months after 'Akai Hana' (Red Flowers), which is one of the few Tsuge works available in English (Tsuge 1985), and has been discussed at some length by Ng Suat Tong (Ng 2010). Both feature the same hero, a



wandering fisherman who finds himself caught up in some unsettling developments in an alien milieu.



**Fig. 2: 'Nishibeta' p. 3, 'Umibe no Jokei' pp. 7, 12**

This story is set in Chiba prefecture, just to the east of Tokyo. The south end of the prefecture is the Bōsō peninsula. It is a largely rural area, far less popular with holidaymakers than the fashionable Izu peninsula on the opposite side of Tokyo, having far fewer hot springs. Anyone who visits Bōsō will be surprised to find some quite lonely, depopulated areas, barely an hour's train ride from Tokyo. Tsuge spent part of his childhood there and has travelled there all his life. The lonely Bōsō landscape features in a number of Tsuge works. The inspiration for this story came from a fishing trip he made to Nishibeta with friend and fellow manga master Shirato Sanpei, in which Shirato managed to get his leg trapped in a hole driven into rock to take a construction peg (Tsuge and Gondō 1993 vol. 2: 94-95).

In the story, a keen amateur fisherman comes to the village of Nishibeta, on the east side of the Bōsō peninsula, in hope of catching some dace (*haya*) at an S-shaped stretch of the Isumi river. The village is quite carefully described and really exists. It has a mild climate and thus is the location of a mental institution called the Nishibeta Sanatorium. This also exists, although in reality it is named the Ōtaki Sanatorium, Ōtaki being a nearby town.



**Fig. 3 The search party**

The protagonist walks past the sanatorium on his way to a fishing spot. He can see the inmates doing radio calisthenics when he peeps through the fence. The only problem with the fishing spot is the dense undergrowth around it – one can easily get the line caught in overhanging branches. We see an example, which ends with a dead dace hanging from the branch of a tree, the line having broken, out of reach of the fisherman. It is presented as comical (fig. 2 left), but this accidental hanging recalls an earlier manga, *Umibe no Jokei* (A View of the Seaside) in which the protagonists happen to see a fish get caught by a fisherman standing on a high cliff but then fall back into the water as the line snaps (fig. 2 center). They later see it floating dead (fig. 2 right) – presumably killed on impact. So both stories feature a fishing motif, and both show us the rather rare outcome where the fish escapes the fisherman only to perish. If we are looking for a cheap metaphor, in which we can empathize with the fisherman making a catch or with the fish getting away, we will be disappointed; Tsuge permits neither.



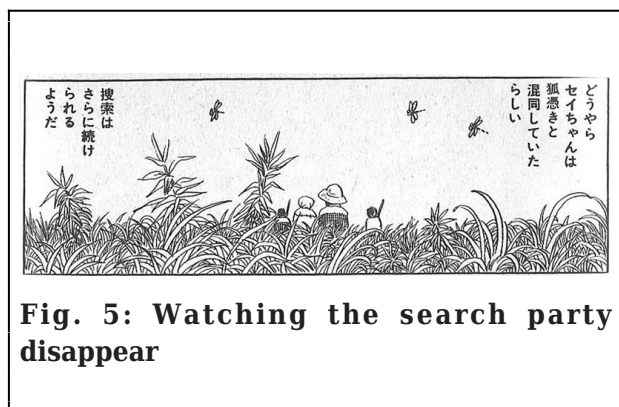
**Fig. 4: The shrine in the jungle**

Tsuge employs an ambiguous narrative style as he leads us into the story – he starts out talking in general terms about things that can happen when one visits the place, but then it turns out that the incident with the fish is in the here and now, as the protagonist is spotted with the fish hanging over his head by the local inn-keeper where he is staying, who warns him that a patient has escaped from the sanatorium. The village is in uproar – this is no time to be fishing. The two men run back to the village, where a search party is organized. They divide into two groups, going round the mountain from opposite directions to cut off the escapee. The villagers are in a state of high excitement; they are drawn comically (fig. 3) in a style reminiscent of Mizuki Shigeru, for whom Tsuge had recently been working as an assistant. Tsuge also admits to literary influence from the humorous novels of Ibuse Masaji (Tsuge and Gondō 1993: 94).

Two of the villagers claim to have seen the escaped lunatic near the *geta* (sandal) factory.

Note that manufacturing *geta* is a traditional occupation of the Burakumin outcaste minority in Japan. It is not uncommon for despised facilities like mental hospitals to be sited in or near Burakumin districts, in a system of nested discrimination whereby one discriminated group is made to put up with another. The concentration of U.S. bases in Okinawa, and of nuclear power plants in rural peripheries, would be similar cases in point.

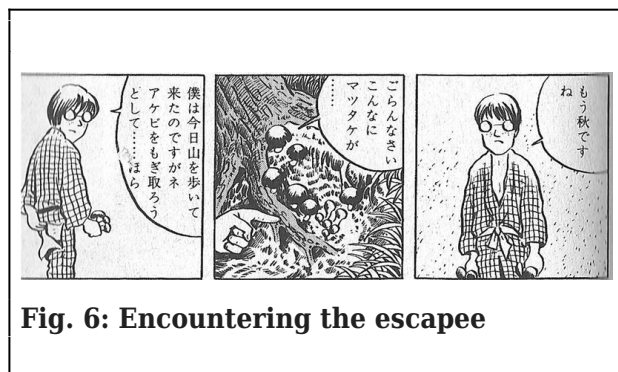
The hero nervously says, “we’re not going to kill him are we?” Receiving no reply, he asks again. “Depends on the circumstances... if he tries to bite us, well, anyone would strike back...” says one villager, pensively scratching his chin.



**Fig. 5: Watching the search party disappear**

There’s a false alarm at an oak tree (*kashinoki*) by the village shrine, an occasion for comic by-play among the rustics. An old man called Sei-chan claims to have seen the lunatic climb up a huge tree next to the torii gate. Another says no man could climb that tree – it has a massive *aodaisho* (‘Green General’; the Japanese Rat Snake which grows up to two yards in length) living in it. The old man retorts that he caught a glimpse of the lunatic’s yukata. The other man says it could have been a horned owl (*mimizuku*). A young boy climbs up the tree and puts his hand in a hole to confirm that there is an owl there. It gradually becomes apparent that the lunatic could not have hidden himself in the tree, and Sei-chan is humiliated. In a last attempt at self-defense, he claims he heard the man cry out, something like *kon*. But he has

lost all credibility and the company concludes that he must have heard the sound of a *kitsunetsuki* – a woman possessed by a fox spirit – and mistaken that for the voice of the lunatic.



**Fig. 6: Encountering the escapee**

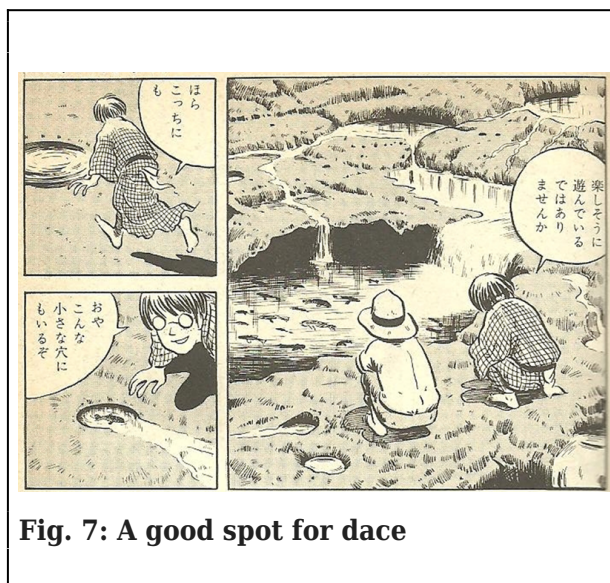
Clearly the villagers are deeply confused. One moment they are arguing about snakes, then owls, then fox spirits. They have no idea as to what shape or manner this alleged lunatic might really have assumed. Ironically, a *kitsunetsuki* happens to be the best-known variety of possession by a familiar symbol – often used as an explanation for madness in early-modern Japan. They are blissfully unaware of that irony. The villagers appear lost, physically as well as intellectually, several times depicted as a little knot of humanity in a dense, impenetrable jungle (fig. 4).

As all this plays out, the protagonist's fear of the escapee shifts to a feeling of sympathy, as we would expect from Tsuge. He comments: "As I am so weak myself, I am always moved by weak people." (Tsuge and Gondō, 1993(2): 95).<sup>3</sup> He leaves the search party, an event we see through his eyes (fig. 5), heading upstream through fields thick with wild chrysanthemums (*nogiku*), thinking of doing some more fishing.

On the path he bumps into the escapee – on his haunches, looking for *matsutake* mushrooms in the undergrowth by the path. There can be no mistake – he is dressed in a *yukata* (a light kimono) and plastic slippers with the name of

the sanatorium written on them. He is a tall, thin youth, with round spectacles and unkempt hair. When he sees the traveller he says "Well, autumn's already here" (fig. 6 right). He points out a large clump of mushrooms growing in a hollow at the foot of a pine tree to prove the point (fig. 6 center), then indicates a tear in his *yukata* he got while trying to pick some akebia fruit (fig. 6 left).

Then he notices the traveller's fishing tackle and excitedly offers to show him an excellent dace fishing spot. On the way he tells hero he is from the nearby town of Mobara; that his family runs a western-style clothes shop; and that he had to drop out of his second year at Chiba Commercial University due to illness. The traveller takes the latter as an oblique reference to his stay in the sanatorium, but overall finds the youth perfectly normal.



**Fig. 7: A good spot for dace**

They reach the spot – a system of rock pools just below a dam on the way down the mountain side. The pools are teeming with dace. "They seem to be having fun playing around, no?" says the youth (fig. 7 right). He points out that even little holes in the rock have dace swimming in them (fig. 7 bottom left). The only trouble is – it's too easy. The traveler wants a stiffer challenge. Still, he decides to do a little easy fishing with the youth, goes to his



tackle box and bites off a length of fishing line for him. But when he returns, he finds the youth has his leg stuck in one of the little holes in the rock. The youth comments: "It's really strange, don't you think? Why should there be such a deep hole in a place like this?" (fig. 8). The traveler speculates that it might have been caused by a peg being driven into the stone when the nearby dam was being built. There is a live fish caught under the youth's foot, and it is tickling him to death.



**Fig. 8: The escapee trapped in a fishing hole**

The traveler cannot pull him out, so he goes for help. He returns with a doctor from the sanatorium. The youth has somehow managed to pull himself out, and is lying exhausted on a boulder, his leg smeared with blood. The autumn evening has come early in the valley and he has caught a cold. Once he has cleaned out his runny nose in the river, the doctor and an assistant take him back to the sanatorium, silhouetted in the twilight as they go, apparently restraining the youth with a rope (fig. 9).

The traveler stays behind for a reflective

cigarette. "This incident that caused so much of a stir has been brought to a low-key denouement by this unexpected accident," he reflects, in strangely stilted manner. Then he thinks of the fish that had been trapped under the escapee's foot. It is still alive, though limp and motionless. He picks it out of the hole and returns it to the river (fig. 10 top right). It rests for a while in the shade of a pussy willow (fig. 10 top left), then swims away powerfully. The final frame shows it disappearing into light while the traveler is seen from behind, in shadow, watching it go (fig. 10 bottom).



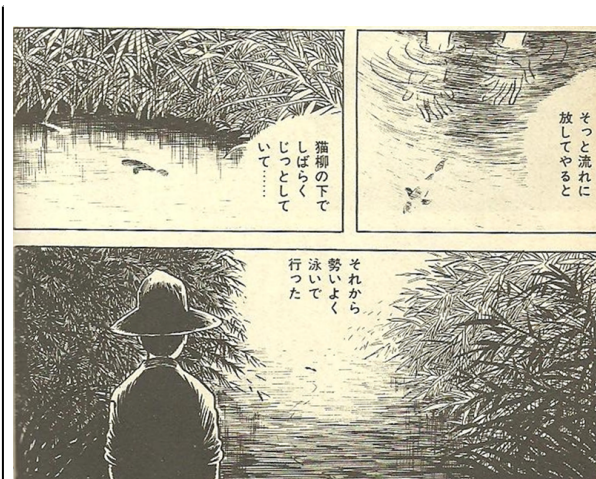
**Fig 9: Back to the sanatorium**

Like many of Tsuge's works in this period, 'The Incident at Nishibeta Village' has the quality of a fable. On the face of it, this is a mild, humorous story – a whimsical rural yarn, slightly reminiscent of an early Jacques Tati film perhaps. It only gently hints at concealed depths. Shin Gondō, who played Boswell to Tsuge's Johnson in publishing an 800-page collection of interviews with him, remarks: "There's a fair bit of slapstick comedy along the way, and it's not a particularly dark story, but there's a strangely lonely feeling about the way it ends" (Tsuge and Gondō 1993(2): 95). I agree. Indeed the whole piece has a lonely feeling to it, despite the relatively cheerful story line. So let us now consider where that

lonely feeling comes from.

The story obviously invites us to draw some kind of parallel between the trapped fish and the youth, who is first confined in the sanatorium and later trapped in the same rock as the fish. Indeed, Tsuge himself has stated, “I matched the youth and the little fish as doubles. They were both stuck in little holes and swam away lustily. I like to draw in a way that leaves a lingering reverberation” (ibid. 96). At the end of the incident, both the youth and the fish are in a totally exhausted state, and Tsuge uses the same word, *guttari* (dead tired) to describe both. The youth seems perfectly normal, if slightly eccentric. The fish is literally oppressed, by a foot crushing down on it. At the end of the yarn, the fish swims free – liberated, ironically, by a fisherman – while the apparently normal youth is escorted back to captivity. I would argue that here is a gentle, implied criticism of Japan’s approach to mental health, and of modern Japanese society more generally.

Bear in mind that the concept of a perfectly sane person being forcibly incarcerated in a small rural sanatorium is particularly plausible in Japan, which has the world’s highest per-capita mental hospital population, with a relatively small number of psychiatrists to look after them [5] leading to a heavy reliance on physical restraint and chemical sedatives.



**Fig. 10 The fish swims away**

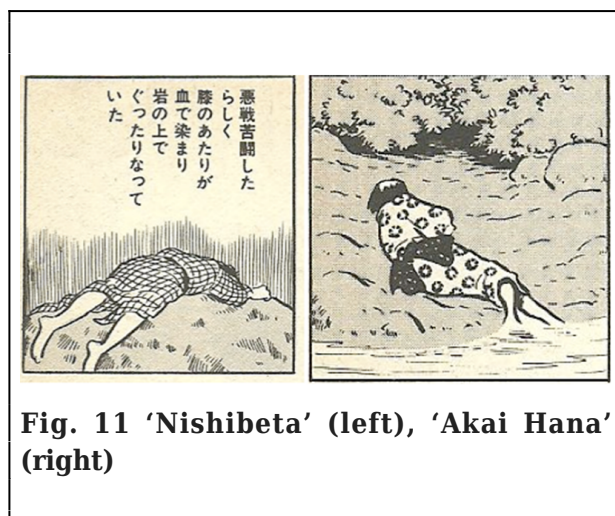
Japan never went through the process of closing down mental hospitals and casting out patients – a process known euphemistically as ‘mainstreaming’ in Reagan’s USA and as ‘care in the community’ in Thatcher’s Britain. Instead mental hospitals – most of them private, many of them set up with government encouragement after World War II when defeat in war had left deep psychological scars and the government had no cash to deal with them – have remained numerous and they are a powerful, well-organized lobby, adept at winning government subsidies. The result is that it is only too easy to get forcibly incarcerated in Japan – all it takes is two signatures, one from a psychiatrist who may be in charge of the institution expecting to take custody (and profit materially), and the other from a relative, typically one’s own spouse, parent or child. The risks of abuse in such a system are obvious, especially when many of the institutions are small and in remote rural locations, like the one at Nishibeta.

Not that Tsuge comes at us waving a banner about this serious social problem. The tone is muted – a harmless youth with an interest in fishing, and a posse of villagers who are depicted as comical bumpkins, but who nonetheless are intent on capturing the escapee and willing to consider killing him if



necessary. The most frequently quoted Japanese proverb is “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down” (*deru kugi ga utareru*). In other words, Japanese society can come down hard on the eccentric or non-conformist. Tsuge, himself a perennial outsider, no doubt had this kind of thing in mind when he drew this manga, with its dramatic contrast between the dangerous fugitive described by the villagers, and the gentle bespectacled youth he turns out to be.

But the fish imagery also works at a deeper level, as we shall see if we go back to the manga Tsuge published immediately before this one – ‘Akai Hana’/Red Flowers.



**Fig. 11** ‘Nishibeta’ (left), ‘Akai Hana’ (right)

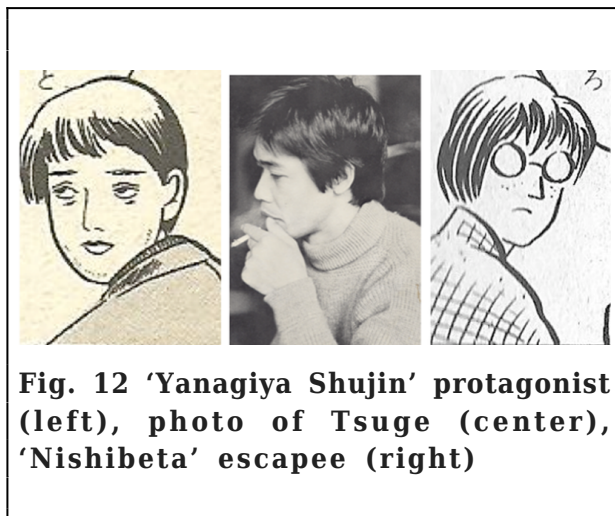
There is a clear visual parallel between the fugitive youth in ‘Nishibeta,’ and the young girl, Sayoko Kikuchi, in ‘Akai Hana.’ Each lies exhausted by the side of the river (fig. 11). Her exhaustion is brought on by menstruation – possibly her first ever – symbolized by red flowers falling onto a river. Freudian critic Shimizu Masashi, who devoted 20 pages to ‘Nishibeta’ in his monumental study of Tsuge (Shimizu 2003), argues that the exhaustion of the Nishibeta escapee, likewise, hints at a sexual explanation. When he shoved his foot into the watery hole, that was a kind of spastic penetration – possibly his first ever. His foot

was caught, as by a *vagina dentata*. The struggle to get out has left him lying there like a fish out of water.

Shimizu further argues that the injury to the leg signifies the father figure, represented by the huge boulder where all this happens, punishing the youth for trying to get back to the womb through incestuous penetration, with a threat of castration. The exhaustion and bloody leg are left over from that struggle (Shimizu 2003: 390). As for the little fish, that represents a fetus – one that has succeeded in staying in the womb. When the fisherman lets it go at the end of the story, he is reluctantly admitting the need to get out of the womb and join the river of life. Shimizu further argues that the youth is a subsection of the fisherman’s own personality, so that the entire story is a projection of the fisherman’s own internal psychological state. The fact that the fisherman has to walk round the perimeter of the sanatorium grounds, and presumably will have to do so again on his way home, indicates that he is in a borderline condition between sanity and insanity himself (ibid. 391). When he returns the fish to the river, he is coming back from the brink of the escaped youth’s insanity, which is in fact no more than a rash attempt to do what all men really want to do – return to the womb.

Shimizu’s interpretation is only partially persuasive. I am willing to accept that both the fisherman and the youth represent aspects of Tsuge’s own personality. The fisherman is clearly a version of Tsuge, who we know loved his rural rambles and fishing trips. But in terms of physical appearance it is the escaped youth who more closely resembles Tsuge, as we can see from fig. 12. Nearly all Tsuge’s mature works include a character closely based on himself. Usually he has some function close to that of a narrator, often in the role of a traveler arriving in unfamiliar territory, as here. A year or two later Tsuge started to draw this character so that it bore a physical

resemblance to himself, as in the 1970 image on the left from 'Yanagiya Shujin'. The photo of Tsuge (fig. 12 center) is from roughly this period. But in 'Nishibeta,' as in other works of this period like 'Akai Hana' and the subsequent 'Mokkoriya no Shojo' (another offbeat tale of a rural fishing trip) the traveler has a plain, button-nosed face. Instead, it is the escaped youth who makes us think we might be looking at Tsuge himself, or some version of him, behind his blank, round spectacles (right).

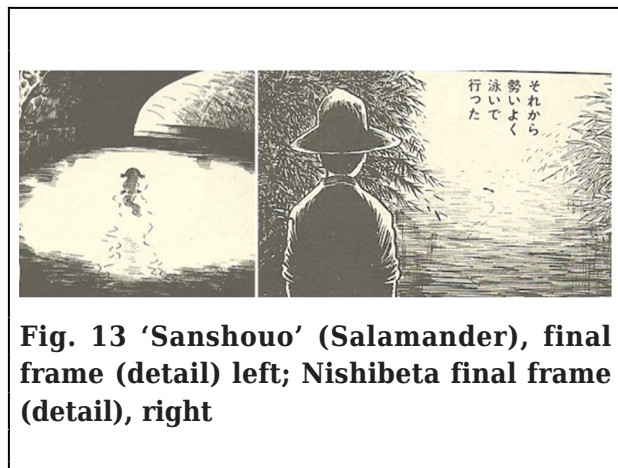


**Fig. 12 'Yanagiya Shujin' protagonist (left), photo of Tsuge (center), 'Nishibeta' escapee (right)**

So far, so good. But I would argue that Shimizu does not fully acknowledge the attenuated, shadowy relationship of the surface story to the underlying Freudian/Rankian myth he claims to identify. There are no women at all in this story, unlike many other Tsuge manga that *do* turn on sexual encounters, and the symbolism has drifted far, far away from anything resembling a real sexual experience. Is a large boulder full of rock pools a convincing father figure? The youth gets his foot trapped in the hole by accident – there is no intentionality.

But the biggest problem with the Oedipal reading concerns the little fish. It is not happy to be back in the womb, if the little hole is serving that function – it is trapped. I would argue that it has a different symbolic role, representing the trapped human spirit. When

the fish swims away in the final frame, we feel the same kind of liberation as at the end of 'Sanshouo' (Salamander), published six months earlier in *Garo*. That story, which I have discussed elsewhere (Gill 2011), is narrated by a salamander swimming in a sea of sewage underneath some great city. The salamander finally swims into the distance, remarking "I wonder what will come floating my way tomorrow. Thinking about it brings me a feeling of incredible pleasure." Tsuge's final frames are always very significant, and the final frame of 'Nishibeta' is clearly designed to echo that of 'Sanshouo' (fig. 13). In 'Nishibeta' the observer is saying or thinking, "with that, it swam vigorously away."



**Fig. 13 'Sanshouo' (Salamander), final frame (detail) left; Nishibeta final frame (detail), right**

What are we to make of these two similar yet contrasting images of aquatic animals swimming into the distance? Where Shimizu bets the farm on Freud, I would suggest that we turn rather to Jung, and the fish as symbolic of the human consciousness or self with the sea as the collective unconscious.<sup>5</sup> In Tsuge, both the salamander and the dace are bathed in an ethereal light and swimming towards open water and a brighter light, signifying enlightenment, escape, or death/rebirth, as in many accounts of Near Death Experience and cultural artifacts from all over the world ranging from the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead ("Book of emerging forth into the Light")

to Hieronymus Bosch's famous painting, *The Ascent of the Blessed* (fig. 14). The bright light seen at the moment of death is a recurring trope in Tibetan Buddhist writings. As the Dalai Lama puts it: "At the final stage of dissolution the mind is totally free of all these factors of obscuration. Therefore it is called clear light."<sup>6</sup>

The phallic salamander in 'Sanshouo' represents both the body and spirit of a man. In 'Nishibeta,' the fish has swum further into the distance, observed by a real man. We sense a Cartesian distinction between body and soul here: and if the little fish is the human spirit, then does its departure imply the death of the human body? Perhaps, in Tsuge's characteristic, understated style, it does. Perhaps the protagonist, in his double apparition as traveler and escaped patient, will finally free himself through suicide, so that the spirit leaves the body.

Or perhaps not: a few frames earlier (fig. 9 above) we see the fugitive youth being led away with his hands tied. That frame ends the penultimate page, and the reader thinks for a moment that the story has ended there. Thus Nishibeta closes with an image of recapture, followed by an image of escape. Are we supposed to think of these images sequentially, one proved false by the other that follows, or as a pair of alternative endings? Tsuge naturally declines to give us the "right" answer to that question.



**Fig. 14 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Ascent of the Blessed* (detail)**

Fish and other aquatic animals make many appearances in Tsuge's work. The fish can do a lot of symbolic work: its shape and its little fins make it a purposeful symbol, usually swimming in a clear direction. At the same time it is liable to be swept along by strong currents once it ventures forth from a womb-like pond or backwater, making it serve as an apt metaphor for the willed-yet-fated human condition. And those little fins can hint at the incipient limbs of a human fetus - a connection made more explicit in the case of the salamander.

At the end of both manga, the little fish disappear into a shining void. Or to rephrase it, they evaporate. Evaporation, or *jōhatsu*, is an important trope for Tsuge. He relates it to the Zen idealization of "nothingness" (*mu*), which he discusses at some length in a 1987 interview.<sup>7</sup> To disappear, to become nothing: that is the dream of Zen thinkers. In Tsuge's works, (1) death, (2) escape, (3) enlightenment, and (4) laziness/irresponsibility, are intertwined concepts. To evaporate is to die, to escape from responsibility, to disappear to a perhaps more enlightened elsewhere. He tried



to do it himself by running away to Kyushu and documented the attempt in an essay entitled 'Evaporation Diary' (*Jōhatsu Nikki*; in Tsuge 1991). As well as the philosophical/religious aspect of this metaphor there is also a political/sociological one. Tsuge's semi-autobiographical heroes reject the materialism of mainstream society, or simply cannot relate to it. To be lazy, to refuse or fail to conform to the socially sanctioned image of the 'salaryman' is a kind of statement, aligning one with a romantic, escapist, world-renouncing masculine fantasy I have discussed in an earlier paper (Gill 2003).

I hope this short essay has given some idea of the complexity of symbolism in the works of Tsuge Yoshiharu. For him, meaning is diffused to the point where it becomes emotion. That may sound silly, but I do feel that the complex symbolic system behind this seemingly simple tale perhaps accounts for the feeling of resignation and calm that comes over us as we view its final frame, the "loneliness" (*sabishisa*) mentioned by Gondō. Tsuge says he worked hard to produce that effect. Normally modest to a fault, he allows himself a note of pride in recalling the way he made the little fish not just swim away, but pause for a moment under the pussy willow. It is a moment that reminds us that freedom includes the freedom to stay, as well as to go; to hang around doing nothing, as well as to move forward with purpose; and perhaps, to stay alive, as well as to die. "I thought that was quite a good scene within the fantasy," he admits (Tsuge and Gondō 1993(2): 95-6). This leads to the discussion quoted earlier, about trying to leave a "lingering reverberation." That is my translation of the Japanese word *yo'in* (余韻, dictionaries give "a lingering sound, a reverberation") and it is a key term for understanding Tsuge. His tales are not secretly coded narratives with a one-to-one identity between surface narrative signifier and psychosexual signifier, as Shimizu would have us believe. Rather they are deliberately diffuse and ambiguous, not crossword puzzles but

koans, stories put out there to invite the reader to think, to seek for meaning. We will never come to the definitive interpretation, for there is no such thing, but we can still enjoy the quest.

The author would like to thank the readers who sent in comments on an earlier version displayed at [The Hooded Utilitarian](#).

I do have 2 other Tsuge/IJOCA papers as you know... and a half-finished one about war comics, focusing on Chiba Tetsuya's *Shidenkai no Taka*. How much interest do you think there is in this kind of thing?

Tom Gill is a professor at Meiji Gakuin University. He is the author of *Men of Uncertain: the Social Organization of Day Laborers in Contemporary Japan* and co-editor of *Globalization and Social Change in Contemporary Japan*.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are also very poorly translated 'scanlations' of various other Tsuge works floating around the internet. There has been a decent effort to gather Tsuge's translated works [on-line](#) (accessed August 24, 2012). The editors at SAP comics are unable to spell Tsuge's name consistently. Nonetheless they have managed to scrape together eight translated works here – good professional translations of the Garo masterpiece *Neji-shiki* (Screw Style) and two interesting post-Garo

works – *Oba no Denki Mekki Kogyosho*, (1973; Oba's Electroplating company) and *Hissatsu Surume-gatame* (1979; The Deadly Dried Squid Technique) plus rough amateur translations of the Garo era *Hatsutakegari* (1966; The First Mushroom Hunt; translated here simply as 'Mushroom Hunting'), *Chiko* (1966; Chiko; here Chico) and *Numa* (1966; The Swamp; here 'Marsh'); the post-Garo *Torishi* (1985; The Bird Master; translated here as 'The Bird Expert') and *Hissatsu Surume*-. (1979; The Deadly Dried Squid Technique). One further post-Garo work, *Soto no Fukurami* (1979; The Expansion of the Outside) is presented in Spanish (La Expansion del Exterior).

His works are readily available in Japanese, and all the ones discussed here are included in Tsuge 1994a or Tsuge 1994b, each of which is a handy paperback currently available at Amazon Japan for 610 yen, or about \$7.

<sup>2</sup>Note the teasing shape of what appears to be smoke rising from a bonfire on the left, perhaps suggesting a peacock or phoenix stooping down to peck.

<sup>3</sup> *Jibun jishin ga yowai desu kara, yowai mono ni kimochi o ugokasaremasu ne*. All translations of Japanese works by Gill.

<sup>4</sup> [Statistical data](#) from the Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare (Koseirodoshō) shows that the number of institutionalized psychiatric patients in Japan has been fairly steady, fluctuating between 329,000 and 353,000 in the period 1999-2008.

That is a very high population by global standards, Recent [OECD data](#) shows Japan with 2.7 psychiatric beds per 1,000 population, more than triple the OECD average of 0.8 and nine times higher than the US figure of 0.3.

Slightly older comparative data shows Japan with 206 mental hospital beds but only nine psychiatrists per 100,000 population, compared to 31 beds and 14 psychiatrists per 100,000 in

the US (WHO 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Transcript of the Dalai Lama's teaching at the event *Path of compassion teaching preliminary to the Kalachakra initiation* (Oct. 11-14, 1991 New York City) Accessible on-line here:

<sup>6</sup> See the intense [discussion](#) on fish symbolism in Jung 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Originally in Japanese, this interview with Yaku Hiroshi, the editor of *Komikku Baku*, which carried some of Tsuge's later works, was translated into French and is available on-line [here](#).

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