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‘Failed Individualism’ Observed in Japan: the Novels of Soseki Natsume (1867–1916)

Soseki’s possible experience of racial prejudice during his visit to London, as a backdrop to the novel I Am a Cat

Soseki’s upbringing in Tokyo was followed by a period as a high-school teacher in rural Kumamoto in the southern island of Kyushu. From there, he travelled to London in October 1900, during the last few months of the reign of Queen Victoria, to study English literature. He lived mostly in the Clapham Common area, south of the Thames, a rather bleak region of London. It is well known that Soseki did not fit in at all well in London or in England, feeling foreign, excluded, alone and miserable during the whole of his stay, which lasted two years, even suffering as a result from chronic neurosis.

In the Japanese literary research industry, Soseki’s study visit to London has been hugely popular, but there has been no discussion of (nor light shed upon) racial prejudice against Asian visitors, particularly the Japanese, which Soseki might well have experienced at that time, and might be representing in his work.

Historical documentary films on the BBC have shown many African or Asian students looking for lodgings being turned down by lodging house owners at the door, in fact for the hidden reason of race or skin colour, disguised by the blunt reply ‘The rooms are full’. When Soseki himself was trying hard to find lodgings in the Clapham Common area, he must have received a number of unpleasant refusals before finding the flat in which he settled. It was just after the time of the Russo-Japanese War, in which defeat of the Russians by the ‘diminutive’ Japanese had surprised and shocked Westerners.
greatly, causing them to open their eyes to this inscrutable race and island country in the Far East.

Soseki was introverted, insular, unsociable, awkward, of a nervous disposition, unworldly and not well-practised in spoken English – and thus had all the ‘handicaps’ imaginable so far as receiving favourable or friendly attention from his British hosts was concerned. No wonder he remained lonely, miserable, friendless and neurotic for the duration of his stay in Britain. However, readers of his novels, such as *I Am a Cat*, must be grateful for his misery, because without having felt like a cat – not a human being but just a stray animal wandering through the streets of London – Soseki’s genius could hardly have created such a unique masterpiece, in which the tale is told entirely from the cat’s point of view.

**Soseki and his interpretation of Western individualism**

Behind the scenes and inside Soseki’s subconscious there was a dramatic shift in importance in his value judgments in relation to authority and power. In his youth during the Meiji era, the whole of Japan was geared to regarding Chinese studies and literature (*Kanbun*) as the principal authority for Japanese intellectuals, including Soseki himself, to revere, and to value culturally and literarily as the highest possible model. However, the arrival of the Taisho era in 1912 completed the process of the previous comple of decades, in which Chinese studies gave way to Western studies (*Yogaku*). A particularly popular subject was English literature and the study of the English language, as a symbol of an advanced culture and its merit and influence throughout the world. Thus Soseki specialised in English literature at Teidai (Tokyo University), where he was later to return as a teacher.

Simultaneously, with regard to another form of authority, Soseki was rather unfortunate. He missed out almost entirely on the experience of parental or paternal authority, and lacked security in his childhood at a crucial age, affecting his appreciation of the significance of family life. He was adopted by his uncle, and moved around frequently within the small households of his relations. Such continual shiftings and transfers of authority in the confines of his family affairs was mirrored in the broader transformations occurring