The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Reborn from the Earth Scarred by Modernity: Minamata Disease and the Miracle of the Human Desire to Live

Michiko Ishimure

Reborn from the Earth Scarred by Modernity: Minamata Disease and the Miracle of the Human Desire to Live

Ishimure Michiko

Translated by Michael Bourdaghs

For nearly half a century, Ishimure Michiko (b. 1927) has been an important voice in Japanese environmental literature. She first came to national attention as a result of her writings on the ongoing environmental disaster of Minamata Disease. Caused by the methyl mercury and other poisonous industrial wastes dumped by the Chisso Corporation into the harbor at the town of Minamata, the debilitating neurological syndrome first began appearing in the mid 1950s, but won widespread attention only in the 1960s, thanks to the efforts of local residents and activists. Ishimure's 1969 book Kugai jÅdo: Waga MinamatabyÅ *(available in English translation by Livia Monnet as* Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease*) played a major role in alerting the public to the disaster and its horrific consequences. An intricately constructed jeremiad, the work weaves together narratives of Ishimure's personal encounters with victims of the disease, quotations from scientific reports, poetic evocations of landscape, and folkloric reconstructions of a local culture devastated by industrial modernity. Ishimure would continue to write additional installments of* Kugai jÅdo*, and in 2004 the work was finally published in its completed form as a trilogy. In addition to her non-fiction prose, Ishimure's poetry and fiction have also won acclaim, including her 1997 novel, Tenko (forthcoming in English translation by Bruce Allen as Lake of Heaven). MB*

The mouth of the Minamata River flows down into the Shiranui Sea. We called the strand that stretches out broadly to the left *Umawari no Tomo*.

Some two hundred years ago, it was apparently a shallow, gently sloping beach. Small fishermen's homes dotted the shoreline.

This embankment that sits between the town inland and the Chisso chemical plant built on its outskirts was originally formed by the plants that flourished naturally there—*susuki* grass, *yoshitake* reeds, wild chrysanthemums with their tiny flowers, oleaster trees. A stone wall was built sloping gently down into the sea, and people needing to moor their boats would walk barefoot up and down its length, driving their stakes into gaps in the rock wall to tie up their boats. When was it, I wonder, that they built the current stone wall, the one that stands perpendicular to the sea?

Chisso plant, the Shiranui Sea, and the plant runoff

I often used to go together with my blind, half-mad grandmother to visit this Umawari no Tomo, which in later years would take on such profound significance. There were also times that I went by myself. It was at the beginning of the ShÅwa era, before I began primary school. No one lived on the embankment, and when adults gathered to drink they spoke about Umawari no Tomo as "the place where they come out to play"—they meaning various divine beings, foxes and *kappa*, "Motan no Moze" or "Tabira no Taze" or "Gane no Aragami-sama," among other invisible deities. When night fell, from Nagasaki and Shimabara, from the Satsuma islands, they would come over, one after another, crossing the Shiranui Sea.

At the time, my family lived in Sakae-machi, which neighbored the Chisso plant. In back of us were rice paddies, and so avoiding the house-lined streets we would cut across the paths between the paddies, crossing small streams, offer a prayer to the Shiogami deity, and cut across a field called Shiohama before we reached Umawari no Tomo. Susuki grass flourished on that long, long strand, sometimes making it seem to zigzag. Barefoot fisherman would on rare occasion appear from around its gentle curve, carrying fish baskets or nets. I wondered if they were them. The people we passed always looked back at my grandmother as she tottered along, hacking her phlegmy coughs.

Once we entered the embankment, there were no houses around. On autumn evenings the sea breeze would set the ears of susuki grass to murmuring, the evening sun would illumine the small wild chrysanthemums at the side of the path, and the shadow of my grandmother's long,

riotous hair would make me wonder: was she perhaps not one of *them*?

People said that it was because the Umawari no Tomo had formed that those invisible them would frolic all around this place. Even though storms never visited the place, it was said that sometimes the susuki grass fields would be found all trampled and tangled.

Dreams of Birds, Dreams of Fish, Dreams of Boats

No matter what footwear we gave her, my grandmother would always throw them away and go barefoot. The streets in town were hazardous, with horse droppings and what not, but the path on Umawari no Tomo was soft, buried in dried grass. Nor did we ever encounter there the snakes we feared. In their place were the little sea lice, which climbed onto the embankment from gaps in the stone wall, climbing up and down my grandmother's feet as they crossed the path. These harmless seashore creatures had many short legs and seemed terribly busy as they stirred all of their yellow legs at once. They were numerous, taking shelter in abandoned boats along the strand. These were not to be taken lightly: they knew everything, my parents told me, and at night they would ride those boats, crossing back and forth over to Amakusa, Shimabara, Iki, or Tsushima, serving in attendance to the invisible *them*.

Unlike the roads in town, the path on the embankment was crawling with countless small living creatures. It wasn't just the sea lice crawling in and out of holes in the stone wall. Baby crabs no larger than a child's pinky fingernail would flitter up the gently sloping sand to crawl into the stone wall, and from there they would emerge onto the embankment path. I would lie with my legs thrown out along the ground, and they would crawl across my feet, tickling me.

The faint sound of waves carrying quietly over from the tideland. The vast stillness of the sky and sea at the onset of dusk. Reaching this would have a moderating effect on my grandmother's spirits, bringing out an evident calming and even softening her normally painful cough. To be completely embraced by the immense sea: what did it feel like? It was not total darkness. A world to foster dreams lay below that ocean surface. Dreams of birds, dreams of fish, dreams of boats. Seeing the tideland, even a child could understand that here was the place where life began.

What was the strand? It was the path for newly born life to traverse between land and sea. "Umawari no Tomo" never leaves my thoughts because even now, across the river from my village, I can hear the long, ceaseless groaning of the strand, buried alive beneath the carbide residue produced by the Chisso factory. What was it, I wonder, that made a young girl visit it so often? No doubt it was because she was called to the afterglow of what is now a mythic world.

Ishimure Michiko

First she went leading the blind old woman by the hand, and later she went by herself. What could be seen in that old woman's field of vision? Was she perhaps lured on by some eternal rapture found only on the evening strand? When I think of it now, it really was something out of the ordinary.

I hear that since the beginning of the 21st century, the number of people exhibiting suicidal impulses or symptoms of depression has increased. I feel certain that my grandmother anticipated all of the causes of our 21st century illnesses and that my unrelieved repugnance for the present-day world can also be traced back to her. Out of its suffering, that strand picked out the "madwoman and her granddaughter," possessing our spirits from the very start. The girl would only come to realize this after half a century had passed.

At the other end of the strand lies a small hill known as Maruyama and the Marushima fishing harbor. The Chisso Corporation chemical plant was built close by. This little village with its fine wharf grew up in the modernity of our country, a model prototype of industrial capitalist society. The still-unfolding story of Minamata Disease in this town is depicted in Part Three of my *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*; I will not revisit it here.

Ishimure's *Kugai Jôdo*

Distortions Caused by the "Gap between City and Country"

I go into such great detail in describing the strand because I want each of you to look around you, to see how modernity in this archipelago has corroded down to the bone the natural environment that gave birth to us all, steeping every inch of it in a brine of chemical poison until it seems to have lost all regenerative powers. Because it is the earth that is suffocating now, the earth that sustains all living things.

Imagine, for example, our archipelago as a single human body—because this is not something limited just to Minamata. The heart, the kidneys, the right and left brain—see how the blood flow clots and congeals. And I would like you to go look at the place where our rivers begin, too, those mountain springs up around the terraced rice fields. I know you will find them built over into concrete waterways, with their crucian carp and loaches, their eels and long-legged shrimp, the catfish and pond snails and clams and river grasses, all of them died out and gone. You will find that the old fishing river we once sang about now gives off a putrid smell. At least, that is how they are around where I live.

We started getting a modern education, and it made us all feel so smart: there was a time when we looked down on the country, abandoned those mountain rivers and the little hamlets that had looked after our ancestors' graves. The so-called "gap between city and country" is not simply an economic issue: it has produced a monstrous distortion in the spiritual history of our nation's modernity.

People complain loudly about the safety of our food. But the number of farmers who can raise crops without pesticides or chemical fertilizers is shrinking, and because of that the flavor of our vegetables is changing—but the people who consider only “consumption” and “demand” don’t notice, they don’t notice that our sense of taste is declining. Three years ago I visited Tokyo and was shocked to find how flavorless the vegetables were, whether at the restaurant in a famous hotel or at an anonymous neighborhood eatery. I wonder if we aren’t suffering a nationwide decline in our sense of taste.

When I foolishly switch on the television, the behavior of the performers, the color and shape of the things they wear on their body: everything is the utmost in vulgarity. We Japanese exceed all global standards on this; when it comes to vulgarity, we really are number one, aren’t we? The lack of scholarly ability and discipline among our children is probably the fault of parents and families; after sixty years of the postwar era in our country, our spiritual rigor has gone slack. In every sense, we have lost sight of our standards of “beauty” and morality,” and I can only conclude that we have forfeited our status as an ethical society. The naked avarice of our politicians is the symbol of this. From what I can see on my television, the exaggerated expressions and actions and the shrill voices of those characters who attempt self-expression all seem to originate in a desire to imitate America. Don’t they know that doesn’t go well with the way we Japanese are made? When all the girls in Japan start doing that hideous leg-lifting dance that makes me worry they will dislocate their hips, I can’t help but feel there is some deep connection to our declining birth rates and graying society. Doesn’t this case of national dementia represent the successful outcome of all those long-lived Occupation policies instituted after our defeat in the war? I can’t help but remember that before the war, there was a Japanese kind of intelligence, even among ordinary commoners. In, for example, the modest way you were supposed to conduct yourself when visiting someone’s house.

The creek of my childhood where we gleefully caught the crucian carp, loaches, eel, long-legged shrimp and pond snails I described above now lies across a rice paddy from my house. (Sadly, today it is a concrete irrigation channel). Back then, it bubbled up from a mountain spring and carried water to the surrounding rice paddies. Roughly 130 centimeters wide, it also served as the laundry stream for village wives. Downstream, where it widened out to a few meters, it met the ocean tide, and there a floodgate was built to keep the ocean water out. My father was in charge of the floodgate. Along the barely one kilometer stretch of the creek from its starting point at the mountain spring to the floodgate, girls could easily catch plenty of those fish, the river snails and clams I mentioned. Eels were another matter, too quick to trust to girls’ hands.

The water in the creek came halfway up a child’s calves. Many kinds of fish lived among the grass and reeds that stood up straight in the water, and there were boys who used different kinds of nets depending on the kind of fish they were after; though they were still children, they were widely respected for their skills. Particularly admired were the boys who caught large freshwater crabs by sticking their hands into gaps in the stone wall and letting them pinch them with their claws. For local youths, catching fish at the winter gatherings of the local young men’s association was a popular pastime. River snails, large and small, could be found anywhere around the roots of river grass and rice plants. Gathering clams was a favorite game among girls; they have two little breathing siphons called *ikiri* that stick out above the mud, just like two little eyes, so if you stuck your fingers down into the mud there you would find a triangle-shaped one about two centimeters in length, and in no time you could fill your little basket. The creek, together with the surrounding rice paddies, was breathing with water down to the mud at its bottom, sustaining the river grass, reeds, and dragonflies. Now, the old creek remains in form alone, reduced to a sluggish concrete irrigation channel. The only things living in it now are mosquito larvae, ugly worms, and a strange-looking slime. When a stream is shut up between concrete on three sides, the fish, clams, and aquatic plants all die out. Municipal housing projects spring up where once were paddy fields, and people today don’t even know that the irrigation channel with its brackish water was once a lively creek, teeming with fish. In my childhood, the hamlet at the river mouth was called “Chidorisu.” The children of today—and of their father’s generation, too—don’t seem to play there anymore, dripping with sweat as they splash around in the current, playing with the *kegani* crabs and their large pinchers, yelping with delight. They’ve lost the bonds that kept them splashing up water together with the earth and its living creatures; I suppose they are all absorbed into video games.

In my generation, the kids who failed in school often became the neighborhood bosses. They often grew up to become local troubleshooters; many of them are skilled fishermen or mountain climbers, and when they tell their stories, everyone gathers to listen. In those days there were the treasures of the mountain: *akebia* plants, wax myrtles, Japanese white-eye birds, *yamakobu* fighting spiders. The ones who were famous for finding these tended also to take on important roles in the local community.
Those famous for these skills have nothing to do with modern electronic games. Ignored by their grandchildren and families, they must be dying of boredom. I want to call out to those energetic boys, those giants of the river and mountain games who are now in their seventies. Can’t we hold a symposium on all of the old games and sports? Why can’t we rip out all the stagnant irrigation channels in Japan, revive the blood flow of this archipelago, return the creek in our hometown to a living stream?

I know people who get teary-eyed just hearing someone hum that old children’s song about chasing rabbits.

About thirty years ago, I visited a terraced tea farm deep in the mountains of Kyushu. The fields I had seen in photographs were quite beautiful, but these shocked me. The area surrounding the beautiful tea fields, crisscrossed with grass pathways, had been sprayed with pesticides and was now deeply discolored. I felt choked up. Unable to move, I looked down below to where the dam reservoir sparkled in the sunlight. When it rains, the pesticides would run down into that lake. Then there were the towns and villages that lie downstream from the reservoir. It was a dying town; no young people. Who maintains the tea fields? Surely the old farmers no longer have the physical strength to climb the terraced fields. The grass on the path had turned a reddish brown, probably the result of herbicides.
How many generations of farmers had toiled over and loved those fields, before all the grasses had been wiped out? Now, due to unavoidable circumstances the practice of weeding by hand had been abandoned. I was just someone from the city who had come to see them. The old farmers of that village must all be gone by now.

In my hamlet set in front of a small hill, we had one “lucky well.” The young men from the town across the river who had been drafted as soldiers would come to drink its water when they parted from our world. When those young men in uniform finished drinking the water, they would face the well and salute it, a deep look in their eyes. The wives from the village would pause in their laundry, watching with hands folded together in prayer as they walked away.

“Come back alive!”

This well stream too flowed down to the floodgate, finally winding its way to the Chidorisu tidal basin. In the tidal basin, the mudskippers climbed around the leaves of the reeds. A conversation I had with my grandmother:

“Grandma, the mudskippers are swaying on the leaves of the reeds, praying to the sun.”

> “Oh? I suppose even mudskippers beg for mercy.”
>
> “Grandma, have you ever seen a mudskipper?”
>
> “Sure, I know them—the wives of the GorÅ, right?”

“GorÅ” was our name for the *mutsugorÅ* mudskippers that lived in the neighboring Ariake Sea.

An Unfathomable Horror

A remnant of the entryway to Umawari no Tomo remains on the Maruyama side, some twenty meters, like a flattened-down dragon’s head. The rest, all the way up to the river mouth, is buried under heaps of carbide residue, on top of which sits the Minamata Municipal Waste Treatment Center.

To avoid confusion, let me point out that this is not the site of the infamous reclaimed land at the Chisso Minamata Bay Hyakken Drainage Area. This is the place where beginning in 1947, taking advantage of either the goodwill or the ignorance of the citizens of Minamata, Chisso knowingly and openly began dumping untreated mercury sludge into the “Hachiman Residue Pool,” which included Umawari no Tomo. So much was dumped there that even the company doesn’t know the total amount. I have here the Minamata Plant Newspaper for November 5, 1955. Under the headline “Massive Land Reclamation Project at Mouth of Minamata River: Construction of Sea Wall Nearly Complete,” it reports:

> 200 tons of carbide residue, or about forty trucks’ worth, are discharged from the plant every day. […] Together with the previously reclaimed land, the reclaimed area on the left bank of the Minamata River will consist of more than 100,000 *tsubo* [1] in area, a land area nearly as wide as the grounds of the old factory or the Minamata Main Plant, minus the Umedo section.

According to Yamashita Yoshihiro, a former Chisso employee, the carbide residue drained out into the shallow ocean through this Hachiman Residue Pool on the left bank of the Minamata River mouth contained not only mercury but other toxic substances as well. Once the outbreak of Minamata Disease was officially reported in 1956, and selenium, manganese, and thallium were identified as possible causes, Chisso began discharging into the Hachiman Residue Pool the waste water from its acetaldehyde acid factory, which it had previously discharged into Hyakken harbor in Minamata Bay. Constructing only the flimsiest of concrete barriers in the sea, it continued dumping the carbide residue without a single pause.

Partition strips were set in place, but the mercury sludge simply ignored these, flowing over the partitions directly into the sea water. On the left bank of the mouth of the Minamata River, a thick sediment of residue accumulated and hardened on Umawari no Tomo. The long embankment that once had floated under the evening sun was now pinned down under the “land” that Chisso Corporation had fabricated. From 1947 until about 1967 or 1968, this industrial waste—200 tons a day, forty trucks’ worth—was widely used in producing artificial land for residential purposes. Nobody knows the total amount dumped.

The 580,000 square meters of the Hyakken reclamation area have now supposedly been sealed off. An unfathomable horror lies in the 560,000 square meters of the Hachiman Residue Pool. Even now, toxic substances leak out and spread into the ocean—not just mercury, but also manganese, selenium, lead, tin, copper, and arsenic, among others. It seems only too likely that we will continue to see victims of mysterious diseases appear in the Shiranui Sea region. The attempt by Chisso Corporation to subdivide into separate companies becomes all the more pointed.

Hamatsuki Jinichi, Minamata fisherman at 83

The Living Treasures of Minamata

The survivors among those who were born with congenital Minamata Disease are now around fifty years old. Affected by methyl mercury through their mother’s placenta, they face difficulties in moving and speaking. They all have others among their parents, grandparents, or siblings who are affected by the disease. Their most earnest desire is to hold down a job so that they can become self-supporting and put their parents’ minds at ease.

There is, for example, Kaneko YÅ«ji. I was surprised to hear that he is already fifty—I knew him when he was little and still have the image of a young man. His father was an employee at the Chisso plant. Raised on a beach that was heavily polluted by mercury, the father loved the seashore and frequently ate shellfish; he then began to show acute symptoms and died a wretched death at the tender age of twenty-five.

Looking up at the manly image of his father in the family altar, YÅ«ji thinks, “I wish I’d had the chance to call him ‘father’ when he was still alive.
From any of the patients, you can hear such expressions of gratitude to the parents who gave them life. Around the time YÅ«ji was born, there was a wave of unusual miscarriages in this area. There were also many cases of infant death. Hotto House [2] has surveyed the number of survivors

among those who were recognized as being born with the congenital form of the disease. There were a total of 112 born since 1950. Of those, 79 are still alive today (33 have died). Among these, 53 have been born since 1990.

It is easy to spot those born with the congenital form. Their necks are unable to support their heads, so that even when you carry them on your back, their heads dangle down behind them. They are often misdiagnosed as having cerebral palsy. Once they start crying as babies, they never stop, as if they were going to cry themselves to death.

The father who died too young, meeting the cruelest of endings and leaving behind a son afflicted with congenital Minamata Disease. How much he must have wanted to live! Then there is YÅ«ji, born as his father's posthumous legacy. That we would have survivors among those born with the congenital form after so many miscarried when they were poisoned by mercury while still in their mothers wombs and so many others died after being born: it's a miracle of the human will to live. Sugimoto Eiko, the well-known *kataribe* (witness/storyteller) who is herself a patient of the disease, calls them "the living treasures of Minamata." A fisherman, she is now battling a serious case of bone cancer. [3]

With Eiko as its director, we hope at long last to launch "Hotto House," a small-scale, multi-purpose office focused mainly on supporting patients with the congenital (or infantile) form of the disease. It's part of a project that KatÅ Takeko has been carrying out for nearly twenty years together with the people who have the congenital form of the disease. They've placed their modest "dreams" and "hopes" in it.

The prospectus describes it as a place that aims to be "a gathering spot for the local community where children can come to play, where people can visit and work and see familiar faces, where they can eat and take baths and sometimes spend the night." Even if you've spent just a short while together with them, seeing their bodies and expressions, you can't help but shiver at the unaffected words they use in describing their "dreams" and "hopes."

Even such modest "hopes" will likely meet difficulties in the future. First of all, we must build a facility to house this. We need to gather both people and money.

They have started a trial paper-making project. They've started to press wild flowers to sell as ornaments for business cards and bookmarks. It's a first baby-step toward exchanging goods for money, toward having an actual "job." A few customers have begun ordering business cards from them. They've begun researching how they want the building to look and how they want to divide its space up into rooms.

They've been met with unprecedented warmth by the community where they plan to build the facility. Overcoming their physical handicaps, the patients have begun to visit local elementary and middle schools to speak on their own about "the history of Minamata Disease"—including the painful history of discrimination that they've suffered. Now, for the first time, local children come up to greet them when they happen to see them in town. This is a new experience for the patients who are going through something like adolescence at age fifty.

To celebrate the opening of the "Hotto House Project Office," Yoshii Masazumi, (the former mayor of Minamata), Yamaguchi Yasuhiko (a former city official), and Mr. and Mrs. Sugimoto donated wooden beams they cut from trees on their own land in the mountains. They want them used for the entryway and *daikokubashira* (central pillar) in the new building. According to Sugimoto Eiko, "Mountain trees have always served as landmarks for fishermen. Breathing the ocean breeze, adding new growth rings year by year, they are well suited to be guardian pillars for Hotto House."

Kaneko Yôji, Minamata Disease victim, being fed by volunteer at Hotto House

I feel I must carry all of this news to my strand along the shore. The wind that travels through the mountains, the waves that roll up onto the strand: they all breathe together.

Notes

[1] A *tsubo* is approximately 3.3 square meters.
[2] Hotto House, discussed again below, is a service agency for congenital Minamata Disease patients. Its name puns on the English "Hot House" and the Japanese word for feeling relieved (hotto suru).
[3] Sugimoto Eiko died on February 28, 2008, shortly after this article appeared.

Michael Bourdaghs is Associate Professor of Modern Japanese Literature, University of Chicago, and author of The Dawn That Never Comes: Shimazaki TÅson and Japanese Nationalism.

This essay was first published in the February, 2008 issue of the monthly journal Ronza. *It is published at* Japan Focus *on April 27, 2008.*

See also Ishimure's "Lake of Heaven, Dams, and Japan's Transformation."