

## Seeking the Sensuality of Shitamachi in Modern Tokyo

Justin Hall

Before the ascendancy of technology, worldwide fashion and pop culture fabrication, some of the occupying forces fell in love with Japan as a neighborhood, a sort of family. Perhaps Japan was more intimate then, appreciable as both aged and pre-adolescent. The garb and customs here were more deeply distinctive and a young man from Castlerock Colorado would have found much that was essentially human in the seemingly alien manner of these surviving Japanese. But over time in spite of their isolation these people that the likes of Edward Seidensticker had loved, they aged fast and hard and seemingly, perhaps, in reverse—becoming the reflective surface for the play fantasies of the world. Now we have Shibuya and Harajuku, and even Roppongi: pageants and romping grounds for the young, hungry and curious, but perhaps without some of *inaka* (the old country) flavor, the parenting, sense of destiny that might have been lingering in a country that intended to rule Asia. Or perhaps what might have been appealing was the crucible effect—what was left here after so many had died and so much was burnt away. A foreigner could sift out the remaining elements and these would seem like treasures, saved, for a time, from reconstruction. The foreigner had a chance to join in this strange, seemingly private club country; a role to play as curator, just before the great paving.

Edward Seidensticker made many leading contributions in this way, translating, amongst other things, the world's first novel the *Tale of Genji* from the Japanese into English. His cultural excavations put him on the faculties at Stanford, Michigan and Columbia University in America; he has worked a long lifetime to share the true and beautiful from Japan.

For his recent talk at the Club, his subject was not translation, or Japanese literature, or famous people he has known from Japanese history (though those sorts of

questions were all addressed to him). Those things are fixed in time. Rather he sat before us, an august guest, and shared a very personal and pleading view of a place he had loved, withering as we speak. 'Shitamachi in Decline'—the home of older Japanese values, older human values eclipsed and foreclosed on by its senior, wealthy cousin, the uplands, the Yamanote, and progress. Shitamachi, the low-city. We walked though this Eastern part of Tokyo, just behind this ambling cane-toting guide as he reeled off the names and placements of particular old pleasure quarters. He summed up his sentiments, as he had drawn the boundaries of old and new Tokyo; 'I like the weak and poor more than the rich and powerful.' And the weak and poor, perhaps, lived in Shitamachi. But, 'it wasn't just a po' folks place—Nihonbashi, the commercial part, was populated by [vendors] as well-heeled as Mitsui.'

Shitamachi was the subject of his remarks to a room full of journalists and business people and the culturally curious who likely know more of old Japan because of this white boy from the American suburbs. It was roaming around parts of Japan where occupying forces were not to tread, as detailed on a map for visitors, precisely the most interesting places verboten. These locations drew him in and showed him family and community and things he said were lacking in Castlerock Colorado. It was the Shitamachi, just after the war. And this Navy-language school trained Japanese neophyte found himself wandering the streets between black markets and kabuki shows, a mix of folks swaggering and parenting. Seidensticker described lovingly a place where the human fabric was knit by small streets. Old pleasure quarters and entertainment districts, both where Japanese families might pass a stroll in the street and where some mystery remained between human flesh, alcohol and money. What is must have been to come from Castlerock to this

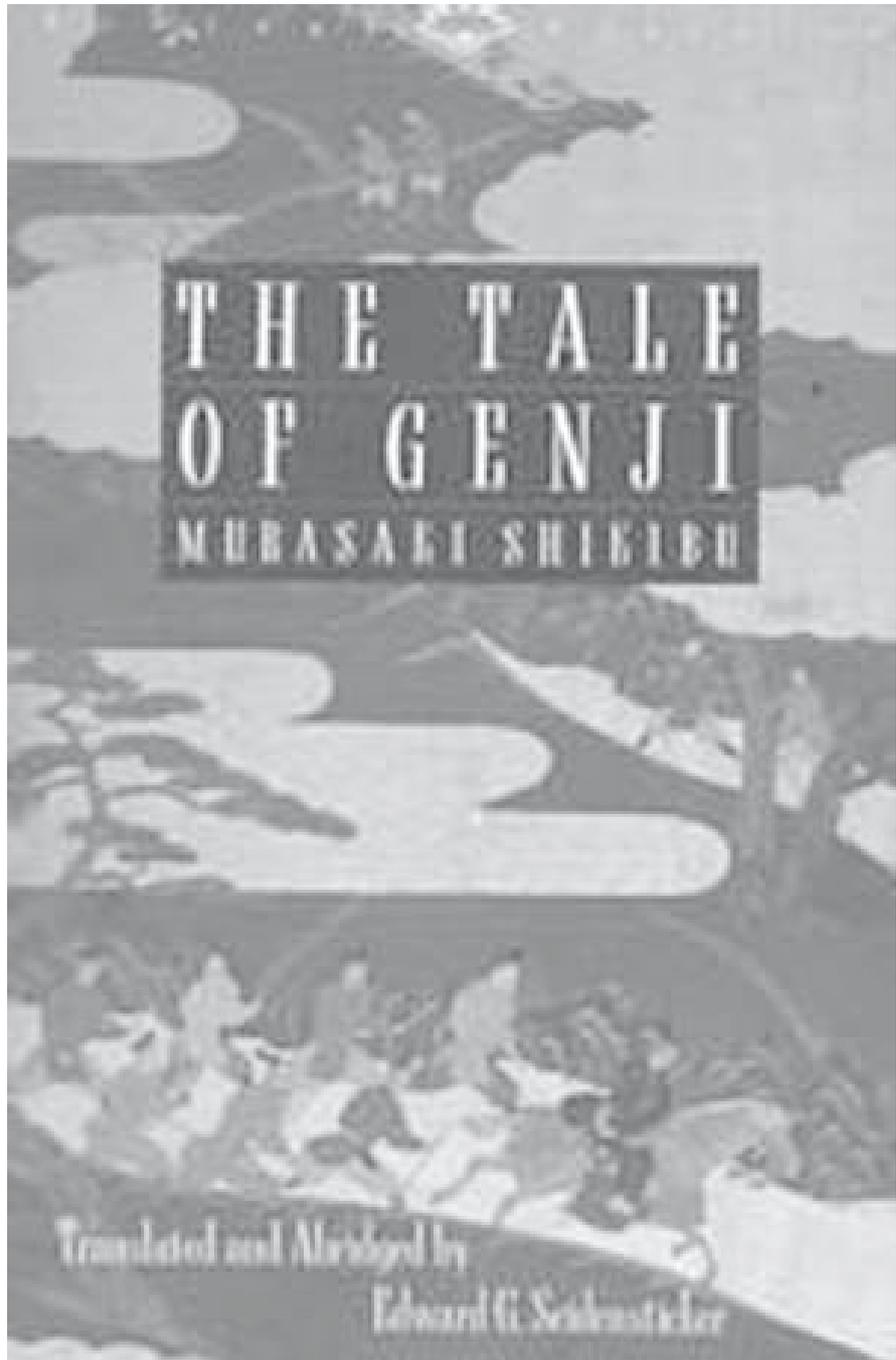
place where the otherwise bowing and polite Japanese were here boisterous, loose, participating in culture. The Yamanote, he observed, had money to keep alive academic traditions like Noh theater. In the Shitamachi, they made it up for themselves. *Ukio-e*, *kabuki*, 'strips' and women's swordsmanship ('another kind of erotic dance'). And many of the great writers with their Akasuka phase. The best *matsuri* (festivals) were in the Shitamachi, he continued. To illustrate what must have been, Seidensticker decried the current events, where police expressly separate those in the ritual, creating spectators where before there were none. It was precisely the blurred boundaries of this place that gave it some magic, he seemed to be saying, where class distinctions didn't hold, everyone drank and everyone walked and everyone worked to look their best. Costume was grand in the streets.

This was before TV arrived and people moved indoors, 'watching the fool Giants instead of talking to each other.' And, one audience member from warm, wet Philadelphia area noted, the advent of air conditioning helped the exodus from the streets. The young people stopped coming to Shitamachi—of twelve four-year colleges in the Tokyo area, only the Merchant Marine school is in the Shitamachi. He suggested, when asked, that they should put the United Nations University there. But they just laughed at him—no one from the rest of Tokyo could take that idea seriously.

It was a man lamenting a life, the fate of an old friend, unserved by its community, Shitamachi allowed to dwindle by *nihonjin* (Japanese) who prefer TV, and the status-obsessed afraid to mix in a bit of the low city with their materialist self-improvement. So now, he said, we have none of that family structure undergirding play in the streets that he saw when he came. Only some simulation perhaps, the polite and plastic renditions of what used

to be a participatory, common, unique culture.

While the Shitamachi spirit he celebrated was acknowledged by all, some in the audience wondered if there might not be other parts of the city that provide at least amusement and collective culture-making, if not the tough love of old parents from Tohoku ('Sorry if I offend everyone—the nicest Japanese are from the north. They brought the best of [their culture] with them to Shitamachi. The business of rearing children was a community effort; if there was a boy in the street misbehaving, an old man, a stranger, might come up and give him a slap on the head.' Seidensticker announced with a firm sense of propriety.) During Q&A, the critics worked to validate today's Tokyo: for street theatre you can't beat those places where young people here gather; an immense spirit of identity experimentation rules. His eyes widened, 'I think many of the young people you see in Shinjuku and Shibuya are perfect frights.' But, as he pointed out, 'you must have young people, even if you don't like them.' And so it seemed to be left for the successive visitors to take Seidensticker's map of forbidden zones and redraw the lines to find family and the chance to participate in something as sensual as the old Shitamachi. ■



It is a classic work of Japanese literature attributed to the Japanese noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu in the early 11th century, around the peak of the Heian Period (794–1185). (Author)



### Justin Hall

Mr Hall creates and explores stimulation and intimacy in digital culture. Active on the Internet since 1988, he began publishing his web site *Justin's Links from the Underground* in January 1994. He spent much of 2001–03 living in Tokyo, expanding his understanding of electronic entertainment in Korea and Japan. In 2004, he enrolled at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television, Interactive Media Division. His articles covering independent digital production, fringe interactivity, and ethics in new media have appeared in publications including *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Wired Magazine*, the *South China Morning Post*, and *Salon*.