

Turning the Tables on Humanity: Consuming Progress and the Planet in Miyazawa Kenji’s “Chūmon no ōi ryōriten”

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What do we mean by “progress”? And does our incessant pursuit of progress harm our relationship with nature and our fellow creatures, both human and non-human animals, on this planet? Such questions resonate deeply with us today, as we confront the climate crisis, rising nationalism and insularity, and the unprecedented effects of rapid technological change. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered lockdowns of bustling metropolises and a global recession, challenging us to reassess our lifestyles, values, and priorities. This paper explores these questions through an analysis of “Chūmon no ōi ryōriten” (“The Restaurant of Many Orders”), a *dōwa* by Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933).¹⁾

Inspired by translations of Western children’s literature in the late nineteenth century, the genre of *dōwa* was developed after what Karatani Kōjin (1993, 114) described as the “discovery of the child” by the Romantic school. Despite its initial rejection by the literary establishment in 1924, the self-published “Chūmon no ōi ryōriten” was rediscovered posthumously after World War II, perhaps owing to the resonance of its universal themes as Japan sought to reconfigure its place in the global community. Focusing on the metaphors of food and consumption, with comparisons to other classics on the “eat or be eaten” theme, I discuss this short story’s parody of Japan’s “progress” in the early twentieth century, which offers insights into

1) In this paper, I have substantively reworked ideas that I first proposed in my doctoral dissertation (Kitaoji 2011). All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

some of the most pressing ecological, social, political, and ethical dilemmas of our time.

Consumed by Money: Capitalism and the New Breed of Human

In “Chūmon no ōi ryōriten,” two Tokyo gentlemen lose their way while hunting in the mountains. Their local guide has wandered off, and their dogs drop dead. Hungry and anxious, they notice a Western-style restaurant. Inside is a series of doors with instructions they follow until they realize they are preparing their bodies to be eaten by talking wildcats. Rendered speechless, they cry helplessly until the dogs reappear and tear through the final door. After a commotion, the restaurant vanishes and they are reunited with their guide.

Incongruous in this traditional setting, “deep in the mountains” (*yamaoku*), these gentlemen are “decked out to look like British soldiers,” carrying shiny rifles (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 28), in stark contrast to the elderly protagonist in the “once upon a time” (*mukashi mukashi*) realm of the Japanese folktale. They remain nameless *shinshi*, never *otoko* (men), *ryōshi* (hunters), or *heishi* (soldiers). This neologism for a Western concept is composed of two kanji characters: *shin* (紳, gentleman), which is a homophone of “new” (新), and *shi* (士), a suffix for people with certain qualifications, which also means “samurai/warrior.”

This new type of human’s priorities are clear as they lament their dogs’ deaths:

“That’s a 2,400 yen loss for me,” said one gentleman, casually flipping his dog’s eyelids back.

“Well, it’s a 2,800 yen loss for me,” said the other, cocking his head to one side and looking annoyed. (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 28)

Giving up the hunt, one gentleman remarks that they could “just buy some game birds,” and the other replies, “it’s all the same in the end anyway” (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 29).

After centuries of isolation, Japan had embarked on a mission of

modernization (i.e., Westernization) and urbanization in the Meiji era (1868–1912). By the Taishō era (1912–1926), Japan appeared to have transformed itself into a modern, industrialized nation-state, having assiduously imported and adapted technology, institutions, knowledge, and culture from the West, and the World War I business boom produced a *narikin* (nouveau-riche) class (K. Ohno 2017, 84). Yet the economic, cultural, and social gap continued to widen between urban and rural areas.²⁾ Keenly aware of his own family’s privilege as pawnshop owners in Tohoku—an impoverished northern region hampered by its harsh climate, frequent natural disasters, and distance from major ports—Kenji advertised his 1924 publication thus:

This is the story of two gentlemen who go out hunting and lose their way, entering “The Restaurant of Many Orders,” where they find themselves obeying the orders of its mysterious owners. It is the uncontrollable antipathy of hungry, impoverished village children against urban civilization and the arrogant, self-indulgent class. (Miyazawa 1995b, 12(2): 11–12)

Notably, these children, the invisible other whose marginalized rural voices are unheard in society, remain absent from the story itself.

The restaurant parodies the *mayoiga* (wandering house) of Tohoku legend (Shimizu 2007, 258–9),³⁾ which can materialize before someone lost in the mountains. Inside, a fire might be burning and a banquet laid out. In one tale, popularized by the folklore scholar Yanagida Kunio’s anthology *Tōno monogatari* (*Tales of Tōno*), greedy villagers follow a young man “deep into the mountains” (*yama no oku*), where he had seen a *mayoiga*, but they return empty-handed (Yanagida [1910] 1973, 39). In another tale, a woman

2) See Akieda Miho (1986) on the *narikin* connection. Exploring Kenji’s use of *shinshi* here and in an earlier *dōwa*, Sakuma Yasuaki (1999, 55) identified the *narikin* figures of the era on whom these characters were modeled.

3) This connection was also highlighted in Ōtsuka Eiji’s (1997) manga *Hokushin denki* (*Legend of Hokushin*), in which Yanagida and Kenji appear as characters.

who fled from a *mayoiga* is washing clothes in a river and finds a magical bowl that never empties of millet:

From that time, this house was blessed with good fortune and became the prosperous Miura family of today.... It is said that the bowl in question came floating to the woman because she did not show any greed by taking anything from the house. (Yanagida [1910] 1973, 38–39)

Miyazaki Hayao's (2001) *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*) similarly elaborated the ideological tensions between traditional values and capitalist imperatives. City dwellers Chihiro and her parents lose their way in the mountains and find a feast in a seemingly abandoned village. Chihiro's parents start feasting despite her protests, and her father boasts that he can "pay" for it all, flashing his cash and credit cards. Yet like Kenji's gentlemen, they have crossed a boundary into a world of different rules. After the adults are turned into pigs by the mountain spirits, Chihiro is forced to work in a bathhouse to save them from slaughter. Noting Miyazaki's admiration for Kenji, Susan Napier (2018, 210) explained that this anime was created at a time when Japanese society was attempting "to allay a debilitating sense of spiritual emptiness through incessant consumption."

Do the gentlemen in Kenji's story learn a lesson? The *narikin* class they represent diminished after the postwar bubble burst in the 1920s, as most went bankrupt amid several banking crises (K. Ohno 2017, 85). While the reader may enjoy a certain *schadenfreude*, the gentlemen are saved by the dogs whose deaths they had so callously dismissed. They express neither gratitude nor regret and buy game birds on their way home. Nonetheless, their (hitherto undescribed) faces have crumpled like the "wastepaper" that is money, and no amount of bathing (i.e., purifying) back in Tokyo could rectify this (Kitaoji 2011).

Consuming Desires: The West as Cultural Capital

“Chūmon no ōi ryōriten” plays on the three major aspects of lifestyle change in Japan’s embrace of modernity — *i shoku jū* (dress, food, housing)— which became symbols of civilization and enlightenment. The government formed the Seikatsu Kaizen Dōmeikai (Alliance for Lifestyle Improvement) in 1920 and “established a new order of manners and rituals” (Kashiwagi 2000, 73) to transform society.

Engaging in the exclusive pastime of hunting, Kenji’s “young and plump” gentlemen in Western clothing resemble the parasitic leisure class of the First Gilded Age (1890–1923) in the US. In economist Thorstein Veblen’s ([1899] 1994) anti-capitalist critique, “conspicuous leisure” is the non-productive use of time and effort to display wealth, power, and status, but as urban life demands more opulent, overt displays, the focus shifts to “conspicuous consumption,” the purchase of goods for more than their actual value.⁴⁾ In this regard, dress and physique signal social and financial status, though ideals differ across time and place—the gentlemen’s plumpness indicate sufficient prosperity to avoid manual (productive) labor.

The gentlemen marvel at the *seiyō-zukuri no ie* (Western-style house), built of “white brick from Seto” with “double glass doors” (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 30), which is nothing like the *mayoiga* modeled on the traditional *magariya* house of Tōno (see Kitaoji 2011, 52). Their entry is symbolic, given that *bunka jūtaku* (culture houses), the new Western models for living at Tokyo’s 1922 Peace Exposition, were displayed as objects for viewing with entry by special invitation only, and few could afford such houses until after World War II (Sand 2000).

Western food was another status marker in the 1920s. The restaurant’s sign reads:

4) Having studied agricultural science, Kenji was no doubt familiar with the agricultural economist Nitobe Inazō’s (1900) bestselling treatise *Bushidō*, which discussed Veblen’s (1899) *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (translated by Ohno Shinzō in 1924).



(Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 29)

Seiyōryōriten (restaurant) was a neologism composed of *seiyō* (Western), *ryōri* (cuisine), and *ten* (store), denoting an establishment that served European cuisine.⁵⁾ With *yamanekoken* (wildcat house), it may allude to the white-brick Tsukiji Seiyōken Hotel, an overt symbol of cultural enlightenment that opened in 1872.⁶⁾ Located on a “boundary” like the *mayoiga*, the *kyoryūchi* was the only residential area for Western traders and missionaries in major cities until the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1899 (Kitaoji 2011).

Accumulated cultural knowledge is also a source of social inequality, as those with “cultural capital,” Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued, gain social power and become arbiters of taste. The gentlemen affect knowledge of Western customs, reassuring each other that this is the etiquette of civilized countries and establishments with very important patrons. They dutifully remove their clothes and rub the strangely tasty cream into their face, hands, and feet.⁷⁾ Western cuisine and furniture were only widely adopted in homes after World War II (Kumakura 2000, 59). Illustrated books introduced the concept of dining at high tables with tablecloths and silverware (e.g., Ikemura 1901), but European-style fine dining remained a fantasy for most people (Tsuiji 1983, 306). Yet, what mattered, observed Carol Gluck (1985,

5) The more common term for a Western-style restaurant was *yōshoku-ya*.

6) The story’s sign is similar to that of a Seiyōken branch in Kenji’s hometown, Hanamaki (Abe 1997, 74).

7) This could be read as emasculation, as they remove the symbols of masculinity (military uniforms and rifles) and prepare “their bodies with oils (cream) and scent (vinegar) for consumption” (Kitaoji, 65); see Aoyama (2000) on food as a metaphor for gender roles.

137), “was the idea of the West that the Japanese had created for purposes of self-definition.”

Even writing about food was new, as classical Japanese literature contains few such references for reasons of etiquette (Higuchi 1996, 90; Seligman 1994, 168). Aoyama Tomoko (2000, 165) described the use of food in 1920s literature to represent the boundaries “between reality and fantasy, and between Japan and the West,” such as in Edogawa Rampo’s *Yami ni ugomeku* (Squirring in the darkness, 1926). An artist is trapped in a cave underneath his Western-style hotel in the mountains, where the owner is stashing humans to eat (Edogawa 2007b).⁸⁾ Kenji’s gentlemen, dressed only in the “form” (*katachi*) of British soldiers (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 29), are similarly ensnared by their own Western pretensions (Kitaoji 2011).

According to Veblen ([1899] 1994, 52), the waste of time, effort, and money is not motivated by consumption itself, but emulation of social superiors: “the standard of expenditure which commonly guides our effort ... is an ideal of consumption that lies just beyond our reach.” In the Taishō era, “the consumption of dream images,” Jordan Sand (2000, 101–2) asserted, “ran far ahead of the consumption of goods.” The gentlemen’s urge to hunt and eat are metaphors for this unsated desire for endless consumption.

Such desire underscores the lack of critical thinking represented by the two (not one) nameless protagonists, who jump to conclusions based on what they want to see and ignore evidence in a manner that exemplifies what we now call groupthink and confirmation bias.⁹⁾ Like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the fat brothers dressed for battle in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), they are mirror images (Okuyama 2002, 101–2)—

8) Edogawa Rampo (2007a, 275) mentioned that Jules Verne’s *The Survivors of the Chancellor: Diary of J. R. Kazallon, Passenger* (1875) inspired his cannibalism theme.

9) Inspired by George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eight-Four*, psychologist Irving Janis (1971, 43) led early studies on groupthink, which occurs “when concurrence seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive ingroup that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action.” Confirmation bias was first described by Peter Wason in the 1960s as the tendency to seek out, favor, and interpret information that confirms one’s beliefs or values (Plous 1993, 233).

one never speaks without the other. From their initial misreading of the warning that “this is a restaurant of many orders,” they proceed through corridors and brightly painted doors like Carroll’s Alice. George Wallace (1998) compared the deceptive nature of language and the mind in this story to Alice’s question, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things,” to which Humpty Dumpty replies, “The question is ... which is to be master—that’s all” (Carroll 1998, 186).¹⁰

Eat or Be Eaten: Meat, Militarism, and Power Games

Why are these gentlemen wearing British military uniforms? Observing other Asian nations in the late nineteenth century, Japan’s leaders recognized the threat of political and economic encroachment by the West. They believed survival hinged on building a strong economy and military and carving out their own overseas empire to access raw materials and resources. Consequently, Wagatsuma (1983, 313) explained, Japan “attempted to become as powerful as, or even stronger than, the major Western nations and to act like them.” This included adopting the uniforms of military powers such as Britain. After the government decreed that soldiers, police officers, and other civil servants adopt Western dress, uniforms became a significant identity marker, a culture that still thrives in Japan today (Mitamura 2016).

The new national identity, therefore, was not only formed by feelings of cultural inferiority; the Meiji government disseminated an ideology to achieve its goals: “Building a Rich Nation and a Strong Army” (*fukoku kyōhei*) and “Civilization and Enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*) (Wagatsuma 1983, 311). In 1873, universal military conscription was mandated for men. The army, equipped by and modeled on those of the West, defeated Qing forces in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), and Taiwan was ceded to Japan. Some—primarily socialists and Christians—spoke out

10) “Eat or be eaten” is also a recurring motif in Wonderland. For example, Lovell-Smith (2004) noted that Alice is repositioned in the food chain each time her size changes (see also Boe Birns 1984, 462).

against aggression, but victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) was celebrated as establishing Japan’s standing in the world (Huffman 1998, 215). Patriotic fervor escalated with the annexation of Korea in 1910, and military ambitions continued even after the carnage of modern warfare in World War I.

The gentlemen’s military appearance and entry into a foreign building parody Japan’s emulation of British colonialism. Moreover, when one gentleman wonders at all the doors, the other replies, “It’s Russian style” (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 30). Taken with the wildcats and “bear-like” dogs, this recalls European and US political cartoons of Russia as a (brutal, clumsy) bear and Britain as a lion in their strategic power struggle (the Great Game) in Central Asia in the early twentieth century (see Kitaoji 2011, 68). A socialist reading that flips the savior and enemy might explain this story’s rejection by the influential journal *Akai tori* (Red bird) in 1923. Editor Suzuki Miekichi reportedly said, “Sir, you know I am an Imperial Loyalist and patriot. You better take a manuscript like this to Russia or something” (quoted in H. Satō 2007, 40).

Kenji’s social consciousness has drawn comparisons with proletarian writers (Yasuda 1983, 223), but he was not overtly political. Rather, as a devout Buddhist, he joined a Nichiren society called the Kokuchūkai, whose leader’s advice he noted earnestly:

Creation of *hokke bungaku* [Lotus literature] as suggested by Chairman Takachio. (Miyazawa 1997, 13: 563)

From then on, Kenji aimed to spread the message of the Lotus Sutra through his writing, including his *dōwa*. Buddhism also shaped Kenji’s view of food, which he fused with a scientific perspective.¹¹ His story “Bijiterian taisai” (Grand vegetarian festival, 1931) features a debate between vegetarians and

11) Kenji became a vegetarian during college in 1919, which Satō Takafusa ([1951] 1994) suggested was partly prompted by his shock at the screams of animals being slaughtered in the veterinary department.

carnivores:

The classification of bacteria as plants and amoebas as animals is merely a scientific convenience we have imposed.... In the end, life is one continuum. (Miyazawa 1995a, 9: 214)

He emphasized, however, that:

If one life must be taken in order to save the lives of many, you must accept the situation, and you may eat, weeping [*nakinagara*]. However, this acceptance must hold even if that one life were your own. (Miyazawa 1995a, 9: 209)

Meat consumption in Japan was first prohibited in 675, about a century after the introduction of Buddhism. Prohibitions and taboos were widespread for centuries, based on the Buddhist compassion for sentient beings and the notion of transmigration, as well as that of *kegare* (impurity) in Shinto. Hunters in the mountains ate wild game, but animals were not widely bred and raised as a food source. Sanctions only came in the Meiji era, when an appetite was cultivated for animal flesh. The government developed infrastructure and regulations, and even published a book on how to eat beef in 1871 (Seligman 1994, 176). Prominent educator Fukuzawa Yukichi ardently promoted meat (Warren 2018), which became equated with progress and civilization.¹²⁾ Majima Ayu (2002) argued that meat and imperialism were deeply intertwined, as the government incorporated meat (and milk) in soldiers' diets to build up their physiques. *Yōshoku* (Western food) became so popular that the army and navy advertised it on their

12) Kanagaki Robun's (1871) novel *Aguranabe* (Crosslegged [around the] pot) satirized the nation's *bunmei kaika* and the commodification of beef. In one vignette titled "Seiyōzuki" (Admirer of the West), a man calls beef "clean" and proclaims, "We really should be grateful that even people like ourselves can now eat beef, thanks to the fact that Japan is steadily becoming a truly civilized country" (Keene 1956, 32).

menus to encourage conscription (Seligman 1994, 172).

In a similar vein, Kenji's gentlemen are lured by the prospect of a free Western (carnivorous) feast until they realize they are not the subjects (consumers) but the objects (consumables). A classic tale of the hunter being hunted was published in January of the same year as this story—"The Most Dangerous Game," which won Richard Connell a second consecutive O. Henry Memorial Award in 1924. In Connell's story, Sanger Rainsford is sailing to the Amazon on a big game safari, which was a popular pastime for wealthy Americans in the 1920s. He declares:

"Who cares how a jaguar feels?"

"Perhaps the jaguar does," observed Whitney.

"Bah! They've no understanding."

"Even so, I rather think they understand one thing—fear. The fear of pain and the fear of death." (Connell 1982, 4)

Rainsford responds, "The world is made up of two classes—the hunters and the huntees. Luckily, you and I are the hunters" (Connell 1982, 4). Soon after, he drops his pipe, reaches "too far," and falls into the "blood-warm waters of the Caribbean Sea" (Connell 1982, 5). The hungry hunter washes up on an island inhabited by General Zaroff, who enjoys hunting men for sport. When Rainsford calls this "murder," Zaroff laughingly assures him that he is "a gentleman and a sportsman" (Connell 1982, 29). Zaroff adds:

"Life is for the strong, to be lived by the strong, and, if needs be, taken by the strong. The weak of the world were put here to give the strong pleasure." (Connell 1982, 22)

Rainsford becomes the prey, but they agree that the loser will be fed to the dogs and the winner will get the master bedroom. Rainsford, the free-thinking "avatar of the new century" (Thompson 2011, 203) wins by outwitting the outdated Russian aristocrat. The political subtext might be clear, but the ending is morally ambiguous—Rainsford "had never slept in

a better bed" (Connell 1982, 41)—did he merely take Zaroff's place as the supreme hunter?

Food for the Soul

"The Most Dangerous Game" alludes to Darwin's theory of natural selection, which Herbert Spencer (1972) extended to the survival of the fittest in terms of social evolution. It is only when the strong hunter becomes the prey of another that he feels empathy with the weak:

The general was saving him for another day's sport! The Cossack was the cat; he was the mouse. Then it was that Rainsford knew the full meaning of terror. (Connell 1982, 33–34)

Kenji's gentlemen also experience the fear that humans usually inflict upon other animals. As they talk about wanting to put a few rounds into a deer's *yokoppara* (stomach/belly) and see it *taoreru* (keel over) (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 28), the leaves are rustling (i.e., talking), *kasa kasa*, underfoot. They have lost their way in the mountains and in life, and "they no longer had any idea of the way back" (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 29). Nature then speaks, marking the point where the gentlemen cross into a world that begins to assume a fantastic logic (Kitaoji 2011):

The wind came roaring, the grasses whispered, *zawa zawa*, the leaves rustled, *kasa kasa*, and the trees rumbled, *goton goton*. (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 29)

Unattuned to these voices, "they assume the characteristics of their prey" (Kitaoji 2011, 83): they are struck by hunger pains in their own *yokoppara* and feel as though they will *taoreru* (Miyazawa 1995b, 12: 29–30).

Barging ahead, these gentlemen symbolize the glib superiority of modern humans toward nature, believing in their own "progress," without looking back. When they finally sense something is wrong, they have reached the point of no return, as the doors behind them no longer open.

Upon being repositioned in the food chain, these humans lose the power of speech and can only cry. They are unable to communicate with the cats, and their voices only return after the restaurant disappears. As they cross back over the boundary of worlds, the wind, grasses, leaves, and trees speak again. In Japanese, the verb *naku* is a homophone transcribed by different *kanji* for the crying of a human (泣く) as opposed to that of a non-human animal (鳴く). All life has its language. The question is, do we hear it? Can we understand it?¹³⁾

In “Hansel and Grethel,” the fairy tale popularized by the Brothers Grimm in the late nineteenth century, the characters are lost and hungry but seduced by a gingerbread house. The tale’s horror lies in the harvesting of human beings for food, something that most humans do to other creatures without much thought:

When once they were in her power, she would feed them well till they got fat, and then kill them and cook them for her dinner; and this she called her feast-day. Fortunately the witch had weak eyes, and could not see very well; but she had a very keen scent, as wild animals have, and could easily discover when human beings were near. (Grimm and Grimm 1981, 53)

Here, the witch represents wild animals (uncivilized nature) and the children are innocent humans (civilization). While Kenji was inspired by such Western fairy tales, his wildcats are not presented as uncivilized or evil. This prevents a human-centric reading in which readers identify with the gentlemen.

Just as the gentlemen have become objectified and animal-like, the eerily human wildcats are heard behind the door, complaining that they will be

13) This awareness has its roots in ancient Japan: Tzvetana Kristeva (1995, 394) noted the “higher” status of herbs and trees, indicated by their ability to speak, in the *Nihongi* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720), which later led to “the *honkakuron* doctrine of the Jodo sect (12th C.) according to which not only human beings and animals can reach Buddhahood,” but also rocks, rivers, and plants.

blamed if the gentlemen don't comply even though their "Master" had written the bad instructions and would not give them so much as a bone anyway (Miyazawa 1995a, 12: 36). These wildcats are merely following orders, mirroring our social hierarchy because we have encroached upon their world. Wallace (2005, 66) noted how human beings have corrupted and disrupted the balance of nature in Kenji's "Kaeru no gomugutsu" (The frog's rubber boots), a story about three male frogs who fall out over a pair of rubber boots, a non-essential item for frogs. The objectives of economic progress are often in conflict with environmental concerns, and the plains and forested hills of Kenji's homeland were rapidly being destroyed by industrialization.

The story could be read as a lesson from nature. Just one year earlier, the Great Kantō Earthquake on September 1, 1923 had claimed more than 100,000 human lives and demolished over seventy percent of the homes in Tokyo and eighty-five percent of those in Yokohama. It also destroyed the Tsukiji Seiyōken Hotel. Such crises remind us of our vulnerability against the forces of nature. Moreover, many saw this unprecedented disaster as a divine punishment that "demonstrated the ephemeral quality of material possessions and wealth" (Schenkenberg 2013, 127).

The government's promotion of more Western models of understanding over local customs meant the "people were no longer as strongly influenced by agricultural and seasonal rhythms" (Earhart 1983, 300). In Kenji's "Nametoko yama no kuma" ("Bears of Mt. Nametoko"), a *matagi*¹⁴ called Kojurō represents a culture in which human beings had more kinship with the natural world, taking from it with awareness, gratitude, and humility (Kitaoji 2011). He is a hunter out of necessity, but when he kills a bear, even the mountains scream in agony (Miyazawa 1995d, 10: 265). Kojurō explains to the dead bear that he has no other way to earn a living. He treats the bears with respect and listens to them talking among themselves. Finally,

14) Kenji used the term *yamaotoko* (literally, "mountain man") for these marginalized people who continued to hunt for subsistence in the mountains after the establishment of an agricultural economy in Japan.

he is killed by a bear himself. This time it is Kojurō's head that screams, and he hears "from somewhere far away, 'Aaah, Kojurō, I didn't mean to kill you'" (Miyazawa 1995d, 10: 271). The bears hold a midnight vigil around his frozen corpse.

Similarly, in "Chūmon no ōi ryōriten," the *senmon no ryōshi* (professional hunter) has "wandered off" somewhere and only reappears after the gentlemen's ordeal, wearing a *mino bōshi* (traditional cape woven from straw), rustling (*zawa zawa*) through the grass, at one with nature (Kitaoji 2011, 76). He comes bearing *dango* (rice dumplings). The gentlemen "finally felt relieved" (Miyazawa 1995, 12: 37), as their spiritual hunger, like the "hungry ghosts" in Buddhism, is sated by the true nourishment of this humble food. The importance of spiritual sustenance and a renewed connection with nature to address the disjunction of body and soul was highlighted in Kenji's preface to his 1924 *dōwa* collection, in which he expressed his hope that the stories would ultimately provide "crystal-clear food" for the soul (Miyazawa 1995c, 10).

Conclusion

First reprinted in 1947, "Chūmon no ōi ryōriten," has since featured in numerous anthologies and school textbooks. Kenji has risen from obscurity to become a posthumous cultural icon in Japan (see Pulvers 2007, 10; Rimer 1988, 145–8).¹⁵ His work has gained relevance at a time when identity and belonging are increasingly more complicated. Translator Sarah Strong (2002, 2) has noted that it inspires all kinds of people "who are seeking creative solutions to present problems and new pathways to the future."

Just as Jonathon Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) parodied the constant war games between England and France within the framework of popular travel narratives in the eighteenth century, "Chūmon no ōi ryōriten" is a parody within a parody, framing Japan's modernization within a traditional

15) There are also many English translations (see Bester 1993; Colligan-Taylor 2002b; Gardner 1996; George 2005; Gonzalez 2006; McNamara and Howlett 2004; Pulvers 1998; Smith 2010).

folktale, a genre that was recreated in the modern age under the influence of Romantic nationalism and the theory of social evolution. The story critiques the dehumanizing “progress” consuming the nation as it embarked on a relentless path of militarism and imperialism, aiming to beat others at their own game.

“Chūmon no ōi ryōriten” also resonates with contemporary concerns about cognitive biases and decision-making, especially with the growth of new forms of communication and information sharing facilitated by social media. The plot’s humor is driven by logical fallacies, and each sign highlights how the written word can be manipulated and misinterpreted. The gentlemen’s dialogue exemplifies what we now call groupthink and confirmation bias, characterized by the lack of individuality and critical thinking.

The status-conscious gentlemen are duped by their uncritical aspiration toward all things Western, an ideal just beyond their reach. They are left standing naked in nature as testimony that clothes do not maketh the man, and their crumpled faces foreshadow the increasingly corporeal nature of money and the monetization of life. Likewise, in the neoliberal consumerist culture of the twenty-first century, happiness is often measured by financial success and social status. Societies have “progressed” from measuring value in goods such as oxen or millet to gold, silver, coins, paper, and plastic. Indeed, with the rise of facial recognition technology for payment, we now literally seem to have become our money (Kitaoji 2011, 63).

Modernity is characterized by a culturally conditioned belief in unlimited progress, in terms of knowledge, science, technology, economy, and society. In modern Western binary thinking, if one is not progressing, one is declining or regressing, and so we avert our eyes from anything that contradicts this illusion of perpetual growth, even the natural decline of age, illness, and death. Yet GDP growth as a measure of progress does not take into account the long-term effects of environmental damage. In opposition to this social Darwinian view of progress as the survival of the fittest, Kenji’s story reminds us of ancient societies that viewed life in terms of cycles of growth and decay. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic

has exposed the gross inequity of the world in which we live (both between and within nations), the problems with our current model of production and consumption, and the vulnerability of even technologically advanced societies, prompting widespread calls to live more simply and consume less.

Focusing on the story's metaphors of food and consumption, especially its "eat or be eaten" theme, has enabled fruitful comparison with works by the Brothers Grimm, Lewis Carroll, and Richard Connell. What distinguishes "*Chūmon no ōi ryōriten*," however, is that the reader is not led to identify with the human protagonists but, rather, becomes attuned to the voices and interconnectedness of the natural world. This centers the voiceless stakeholders in our society. Kenji questions the modern myth of progress and addresses its spiritual emptiness. Almost a century after this story, we are destroying the planet's ecosystems at an unprecedented rate, exploiting our environment and our fellow creatures in the pursuit of short-term economic gains, status, and pleasure. Even conservation efforts (preserving certain species or "wilderness") are often based on the assumption that nature exists to benefit humankind in some way—we are either above or separate from the natural world, not a part of it. In our convenient, temperature-controlled, artificial world, we have come to expect our environment to suit us and assume that we can do what we want, when we want. Yet despite all our technological advances, we find ourselves humbled in the face of bushfires, earthquakes, tsunamis, pandemics, and other disasters.

As translator Karen Colligan-Taylor (2002b, 326) remarked, "we expect much and take much from the natural world: we place many orders—but Nature also has a request for us: that we live correctly, with respect for all other living things." "*Chūmon no ōi ryōriten*" serves as a timely reminder to reevaluate our dysfunctional, unsustainable relationship with each other and the planet and find ways to contribute toward a more sustainable, harmonious, and compassionate world.

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Abstract

What do we mean by “progress”? And does our incessant pursuit of progress harm our relationship with nature and our fellow creatures, both human and non-human animals, on this planet? This paper explores these questions through an analysis of “Chūmon no ōi ryōriten” (“The Restaurant of Many Orders,” 1924), a short story by Miyazawa Kenji.

Written in the modern literary genre of *dōwa*, this humorous tale features two arrogant young gentlemen from Tokyo who get more than they bargained for when they go hunting deep in the mountains. Despite its initial rejection by the literary establishment, “Chūmon no ōi ryōriten” was rediscovered after World War II, perhaps owing to the resonance of its themes as Japan was seeking to reconfigure its place in the global community.

Focusing on the metaphors of food and consumption, I explore this story’s parody of Japan’s “progress” in the early twentieth century, including its critique of the ideological tensions between traditional values and capitalist imperatives, modernization/Westernization as a form of cultural capital, the links between meat and militarization, and the impact of urbanization on the planet. Its “eat or be eaten” theme also bears fruitful comparison with works by the Brothers Grimm, Lewis Carroll, and Richard Connell.

What distinguishes “Chūmon no ōi ryōriten,” however, is its lack of a human-centric focus, as the reader is not led to identify with the human protagonists but, rather, becomes attuned to the voices and interconnectedness of the natural world. By questioning the modern myth of progress and positing a more sustainable, holistic, and compassionate relationship for humanity with nature, this story continues to resonate with some of the most pressing ecological, social, political, and ethical concerns of our time.