

The ‘Soseki Series’ of Kosaka Misuzu

by Damian Flanagan

The Three-Cornered World is the fourth book since the relaunch of the works of Natsume Soseki by Peter Owen in 2005 to be adorned by the artwork of the Kobe-based calligrapher Kosaka Misuzu. The project has given birth to a fascinating series of art works, the ‘Soseki Series’, which now warrants some commentary in its own right.

In 2002, when I was living for many months of the year in Kobe, I happened to see an advertisement for a demonstration of *shodo* (calligraphy) to be given at the Kobe Club. It all seemed a rather twee and conservative affair: a translator introduced the calligrapher, who was dressed in a kimono and appeared modest and pleasant, smiling and with a good sense of humour. When she started to demonstrate her works, however, it was immediately obvious that here was an artist who produced something utterly different from the pre-ordained schools of calligraphy. She was not enslaved to traditional modes of calligraphy but was giving free expression to her own unique creativity. Her work seemed more like modern art, full of curious distortions and symbols. She seemed miraculously able to get the characters to represent their deeper meaning.

At that time my book about Soseki in London was soon to be published, and the publishers had prepared a cover with a dream-like image of the Tower of London and the characters for ‘Tower of London’ in Japanese (*Ron-don-to*) on the front. Unfortunately, even I could see that these characters had been somewhat clumsily written. I felt we could do something better so thought about asking Kosaka Misuzu and called at her flat in north Kobe.

In my naïvety, I had in mind that she would just quickly draw the characters on a sheet of paper while I was sitting there and in return I might give her a small present. But, over copious cups of tea, long pauses and a little awkwardness, I began to realize that Kosaka considered the request as a commission that would take several weeks. I couldn’t understand how drawing three characters

could possibly take her so long, but I decided to leave it to her and returned home to England for the summer.

When, some weeks later, the calligraphy arrived in the post, there were four versions of the characters. Three were fairly standard calligraphy, but the fourth was something different entirely. It transformed the characters into a symbolic representation of the Tower of London itself. In Soseki's story, he describes the inscriptions left on the walls by the prisoners in the Tower while they waited for their day of execution. Now, within the characters there appeared to be everything from a portcullis and gallows to all manner of instruments of torture, crucifixes and gaping mouths. All the horrors of the Tower of London seemed to have been captured within these three characters.



Frontispiece calligraphy for *The Tower of London*

I had no idea whether Kosaka's style was entirely unique, but I was beguiled and certainly wanted to use this calligraphy in the book. But, at the same time, I realized that this piece would not really fit into the scheme of the front cover. So we decided to use two versions of the calligraphy, a more standard (albeit beautifully

drawn) one on the front cover and then the symbolic representation of the Tower as a frontispiece to the book.

When the time came for new editions of the English translations of *Kokoro* and *The Gate* to be published with new critical introductions, it seemed like a good idea to have Kosaka's artwork on the front cover and as the frontispiece for each book once more. Each time we waited with some anticipation to see what type of art she would come up with. I could hardly imagine, for example, that she would be able to produce anything particularly interesting while drawing such a simple character as *mon* ('gate'), but the frontispiece perfectly captured the mood of the book. The two sides of the character were made to resemble the heads of a man and woman facing one another. They were at once two different parts of the



Frontispiece calligraphy for *The Gate*

same whole, just as Oyone and Sosuke are described in the novel as being 'one organic unit', sitting facing each other over the brazier every evening. Looking at the character there is also something slightly melancholic and yet intimate about it, which is entirely appropriate to the mood of the book.

When it came to *Kokoro* the task seemed even more difficult because Kosaka was being asked to draw not a Chinese character (*kanji*), an ideogram with an intrinsic meaning, but rather three phonetic syllables (*hiragana*) with no meaning outside of the word they spell. Whereas the three syllables ko-ko-ro would ordinarily be written in a vertical column, Kosaka fashions both compositional balance and depth and complexity of meaning by enmeshing the

three characters together. At the top of the work we have two twin characters, which appear almost to be racing and in competition with one another. The second stroke from the top looks like a darting sperm, indicating perhaps that what these two characters represent are the two testosterone-charged male protagonists, the young Sensei and his best friend K. They are at once exact contemporaries and close friends turned into bitter rivals by the intrusion of a third, feminine force, the woman who would ultimately become Sensei's wife. In Kosaka's representation the surging spermatozoa tail back into a



Frontispiece calligraphy for *Kokoro*

receiving 'feminine' character that swirls us around into a long-drawn-out gash at the bottom of the picture, a line of blood hinting at the explosive suicide of K, the dark secret at the heart of the book.

It was with great expectation, therefore, that we waited to see what artwork she would produce for the new edition of *The Three-Cornered World*. After all, this is the most overtly 'artistic' of all Soseki's novels. And again, Kosaka's vivid imagination did not disappoint. For the front cover, again depicted in more 'standard' calligraphy, the bottom half of the top character *kusa* ('grass') plunges downwards into the heart of the character *makura* ('pillow') beneath. The central image of the novel, that of the drowning Ophelia gliding along on a stream, is evoked as the upper character – arms outstretched, legs together – seems to be caught in a stream of downwards motion, the upper part or 'crown' of the character



Cover calligraphy for *The Three-Cornered World*

being almost cast aside by its violent speed (ironically, this character without its top 'crown' actually means 'speed').

The bottom character is what this runaway body is hurtling towards. Fortunately, this character means 'pillow', and the sides have been 'opened up' from the top down into a receiving V, so might it be that it is about to catch the falling Ophelia and provide her with a soft landing? Yet there is also a sense that the falling body is simply going to push aside completely the two sides of the bottom character and keep on hurtling through – thus the pillow of 'artistic detachment' might not be enough to stop the flood of emotion from coursing ever onwards.

If there is this much depth of meaning in the cover calligraphy, then in the artistic frontispiece things get considerably more complex. This is surely a masterpiece. Watching such a work taking shape in the mind of its creator is rather like observing the traditions of Japanese calligraphy go from bearing mere hints of metaphor to being completely transformed, fusing with the art of masters such as Kandinsky, Miró and Picasso to produce something spectacular, profound and new.

Now we are presented with a cross-section of streams of consciousness in which the same two characters are repeated in endless distortion, adaptation and evolution. Nothing now could be further from the doughty traditions of Japanese schools of calligraphy that require characters to be drawn in certain, predetermined ways.

Quite the reverse: Kosaka is asserting the very falsehood of such conservative strait-jackets. Every character, like every object in the universe, is being reassessed and reseen at every moment by the unique perspective of the observer at any given time. Kosaka gets to the bottom here not just of Soseki's vision in *Kusamakura* but to the key idea at the heart of his *Theory of Literature*, that both the subject matter of the world and the way it affects us is in constant flux. Moreover, the artist – and the artist inside all of us – is constantly at work reordering and reimagining the subject matter of the world, fusing it with memories, dreams and moods, until something is created that captures an inner truth both about the object itself and the people observing it before the work is instantly cast back into the flow of collective consciousness and reborn in an infinity of new forms.



Frontispiece calligraphy for *The Three-Cornered World*

There is now not one but multiple Ophelias being carried along in the streams of emotive consciousness, just as there are multiple *Kusamakuras*, constantly finding new readers or rereadings, new interpretations and providing new inspirations.

And what of that blank square in the top right-hand corner? Japanese reads from top to bottom and from right to left, so this is clearly the starting point. Is Kosaka saying that we all have different starting points that are a blank and cannot be defined, or is she saying that we all have one thing in common, that in our pursuit of the artistic and the beautiful we, too, inhabit a three-cornered world that will always have one corner missing, the corner that belongs to mere common sense?