

## Article

# A Sign of Good Taste: Mori Ōgai, Mitsukoshi, and the Concept of *Shumi*

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to situate the notion of *shumi* as a rhetorical device used by modern Japanese department stores as part of their marketing strategies. Although often equated with the concept of ‘taste’, I demonstrate how *shumi* both overlaps with and differs from the concept of taste, as it is often discussed in critical theory in the context of consumerism. I do this by examining how *shumi* was used in the PR-magazines of various department stores and other related forms of print media. Special attention is paid to the PR-magazine of Mitsukoshi, which is perhaps the most innovative department store in modern Japanese history. Subsequently, I analyze three short stories by Mori Ōgai (1862–1922) published in Mitsukoshi’s PR-magazine between 1911 and 1912. Mitsukoshi printed short stories by acclaimed authors in their magazines, mostly as a form of lighthearted entertainment and branding. Yet, when read closely, Ōgai’s three stories also form a profound observation of the skewed moral reality of a market-driven economy. Each of the narratives under scrutiny in this paper shows the human cost of a system in which social relations are dictated by consumer objects. The cultivation of the urge to consume was carefully framed around the rhetoric of *shumi* and was thus not merely a marketing tool to increase profit margins but also a mechanism to manipulate the desires and anxieties of consumers. A reading of Ōgai’s three short narratives reveals the ambivalent morality produced by the rhetoric of *shumi*, which in turn engendered and validated the identities of an emerging middle class through the consumable object-as-sign.

**Keywords:** Mori Ōgai; Mitsukoshi; print media; *shumi*; consumption; PR-magazines



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## 1. Introduction

Perhaps the most overlooked platform of literary production in the study of modern Japanese literary history is the department store PR-magazine. The PR-magazine was one of the department store’s most powerful promotional tools. But the PR-magazine was by no means a mere medium to notify customers of the latest products. Rather, it formed the intersection of modes of production and consumption, of capitalism and modernity, and of commercial enterprise and the construction of high culture.

Of all the major department stores in early 20th century Japan, Mitsukoshi was no doubt the most aggressive in creating a brand that both shaped and validated people’s identities through the act of consumption. Mitsukoshi made effective use of the PR-magazine not only to position itself as a commercial leader in a rapidly expanding marketplace but more importantly as a guide to social etiquette and cultural enlightenment for members of a burgeoning middle class. Their marketing campaigns were carefully structured around the discourse of ‘good taste’, or *shumi*, which was often in opposition to the idea of ‘fashion’, or *ryūkō*. Cultivating the customer’s tastes became an essential part of Mitsukoshi’s commercial strategy. To this end, Mitsukoshi consistently associated its brand with actors and institutions of high culture. The deployment of literary fiction and essays within the platform of the PR-magazine written by prominent literary authors and intellectuals was one of the most potent forms of this type of marketing.

Before Mitsukoshi became the modern department store we know it to be today, it was a dry goods store in Edo, established in 1673 by Mitsui Takatoshi (1622–1694), specializing in

fabrics and clothing. Echigoya, the name by which the store was known at the time, always defined the cutting edge of innovation. In his overview of Mitsukoshi's management strategies, Takahashi Junjirō mentions that Takatoshi's most significant innovation was his restructuring of the system of buying and selling. In the early days, most dry goods stores had store clerks who visited the homes of wealthy aristocrats and took their orders (*misemono akinai*) or brought an assortment of products from which their clients could pick (*yashiki-uri*) and settled their entire bill once or twice per year, when the aristocrats received their annual salary. However, after moving to Suruga-chō, the merchant district of Edo, Echigoya's clientele shifted to townsmen and merchants. This change would lead to Takatoshi's restructuring of the way people consumed products. First, customers were expected to settle their bill on the spot and in cash (*tanasaki gengin-uri*). Second, Takatoshi introduced fixed prices and abolished price negotiations, thereby creating an image of affordability and reliability.<sup>1</sup>

However, this public image was completely turned around in 1904, when the store took its official name of Mitsukoshi Gofukuten and declared itself a modern department store in all the major magazines and newspapers. This so-called *depātomento sutōa sengen* (Department Store Declaration) was the start of an entirely new type of store, one that focused not on affordability but on luxury. From this moment forward, Mitsukoshi started to position itself not only as a leader in the retail industry but also as a public guide to social etiquette through consumption. Three men in particular were instrumental in this transformation: the first general manager of the store, Takahashi Yoshio (1861–1937),<sup>2</sup> his successor, Hibi Ōsuke (1860–1931),<sup>3</sup> and Hamada Shirō (1873–1952), the first head of marketing at Mitsukoshi. All three belonged to the cultural and economic elite and studied business in the United States and Europe. Based on their Western counterparts, these three men would change the face of Mitsukoshi forever, and their main focus was consumer psychology and the ways to influence it through aggressive marketing campaigns. For this paper, the most significant marketing tool in their arsenal was the PR-magazine, in which products were marketed at targeted audiences, playing on the insecurities of the new middle-class consumer in a modernizing society.

Among the long list of famous names attracted by Mitsukoshi, one particularly stands out: that of Mori Ōgai (1862–1922). Not only was Ōgai a contributing member of the so-called Ryūkōkai—an assembly of important cultural and intellectual figures tasked by Mitsukoshi with gauging and creating the latest trends—but he also published literary works themed around Mitsukoshi in its PR-magazine. Besides a short poem entitled 'Ryūkō' and a play written specifically for a performance at the Imperial Theater entitled 'Onnagata', Ōgai published three short stories: 'Saezuri' (Mori 1911b, in March), 'Dengaku dōfu' (Mori 1912, in September) and 'Ryūkō' (Mori 1911a, in July).<sup>4</sup> Each narrative captures the protagonist's (in)ability to interpret the images and signs of an emerging consumer economy, and the consequences of their success or failure to appropriate and use them to their advantage. The notion of *shumi* thus became its own form of social currency. While many of the literary works published in *Mitsukoshi* by other authors move between lighthearted entertainment and branding or product placement, Ōgai's stories are different in that, read together, they form a kind of metacommentary that both elucidates and problematizes the morality of an intricate system of social relations centered around the consumable object-as-sign. An examination of this dynamic not only adds to our understanding of the commodification of literature but also encourages us to reassess the position of the author in this process of commercialization.

Ultimately, this paper aims to situate *shumi* as a critical category. The word *shumi* is, often rightfully, translated in English as 'taste'. Yet, as a concept, it has much broader connotations, ranging from an aesthetic quality of a landscape to the notion of a pastime as a form of self-cultivation or the ability to make judgments concerning the beauty of an object.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore important to assess how *shumi* relates to the idea of taste as it has been used in critical theory. Using *shumi* as a lens to examine the mechanism of consumption reveals the ambiguous nature of its effects on the moral constitution of larger

social structures. As such, the paper is structured into two parts. In the first part, I attempt to demonstrate how the concept of *shumi* was used by Mitsukoshi as a rhetorical device to frame their marketing campaigns and to promote a culture of unbridled consumerism. Building on this discursive framework of consumption, I demonstrate how the notion of *shumi* helps situate Ōgai's three short stories. Even though, on the surface, these stories seem to engage simply with a superficial economy of fashion (*ryūkō*), I show how a reading through the lens of *shumi* reveals a much more complex moral reality inherent in a system of human relations dictated by consumer objects.

## 2. An Amuse-Bouche: Situating *Shumi*

*Shumi* is a complex word. In contemporary Japanese, we often take it to mean 'hobby'. But the term has many other connotations: 'taste', as mentioned, is one of them, but also 'inclination', 'aesthetic charm', and 'essence', among others. Nonetheless, many scholars who in some way interact with the concept of *shumi* often exhaustively equate it with the word 'taste', an assumption which subsequently forms the foundation for their argument. This is true in the fields of philosophy and sociology, where the word is used as a translation for Kant's idea of *Geschmack* and Bourdieu's notion of *goût*, respectively. The same goes for the field of material culture: for example, Jinno Yuki's research on the significance of *shumi* for Japanese department stores, to which this paper is highly indebted, as well as Terada Takao's research on music education in modern Japan, who both trace the inception of *shumi* as 'taste' back to the historical moment directly following the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905), in which Japanese dictionaries started to include the English word 'taste' in its definitions for the entry for *shumi*, thereby expanding on its existing meaning of 'flavor' (*ajiwai*) in its broadest sense. Following this line of argument, *shumi* should be understood as one of the translation words (*hon'yakugo*) introduced in the Meiji period as symbols of a modernizing nation-state, alongside such stable and enduring markers as *jiyū* (freedom), *kenri* (right), and *ren'ai* (romantic love).

However, a closer examination of primary sources written after the Russo-Japanese war undermine the stability of the word *shumi*. In the first instalment of the magazine *Shumi*, the more accessible sister magazine of *Waseda bungaku*, published in 1906, Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935) states the following concerning the notion of taste after quoting historian and critic Thomas Carlyle on the subject.

This word taste (*tēsuto*) can be translated as *shumisei* 趣味性 or *shikō* 嗜好, or as *fūshō* 風尚 or *kanshōryoku* 鑑賞力, or as *shōgansei* 賞翫性. Generally speaking, it seems like a person is able to distinguish the quality of an object mainly through the faculty of his intellect, but it is really his taste (*shumisei*) that enables him to do this. . . . The reason we emphasize literature as a means to change our traditions and practices for the better, is because it is the most significant mechanism by which taste is cultivated, and because the ability of the people to judge good and bad, beauty and ugliness, in other words the foundation of their ideal establishment is completely dependent on the quality of their taste. . . . In short, because taste is what is at the basis of our ability to broadly judge and distinguish good from bad, the beautiful and the ugly, we must give our utmost attention to its cultivation in times of great transition such as these. (Tsubouchi 1906)

The short essay, entitled 'Shumi', provokes several questions concerning the term *shumi*. While Shōyō affirms the intimate relationship between *shumi* and taste, the fact that he offers various alternative translations of the English word 'taste' shows that, at least in early 20th century Japan, there was no singular translation for this word<sup>6</sup>. The fact that the idea of taste cannot be exhaustively contained within its translation as *shumi* compels us to examine how the terms relate to each other, especially in their practical applications. Second, we notice that Shōyō directly connects the cultivation of taste to the immediacy of Japan's modernization project following the Russo-Japanese war.<sup>7</sup> This is further evidence of the broader connotations of *shumi*, beyond that of taste in the context of consumption, as

merely a marker, or reinforcement, of an already existing notion of class, as it is commonly conceptualized in critical theory. The aim of my discussion of a few of these theoretical precedents below is not to arrive at a comprehensive definition of the word *shumi* but rather to examine particular instances of its usage in order to shed light on its function in specific social contexts and the agendas of the actors and institutions it served through a reflection on the notion of ‘taste’ as it appears in critical theory.

When discussing taste, one name that immediately comes to mind is that of Pierre Bourdieu. In his seminal study *Distinction*, Bourdieu sets out a rather rigid notion of taste. For Bourdieu, taste is always an inherent part of the habitus, which in turn is produced by the conditions of existence. He argues that taste simultaneously is structured by and structures the habitus, and subsequently engenders a set of classified and classifying practices (Bourdieu 2010, pp. 166–67). Taste, in this way, ‘transforms objectively classified practices, in which a class condition signifies itself (through taste), into classifying practices, that is, into a symbolic expression of class position . . . [and] is thus the source of the system of distinctive features which cannot fail to be perceived as a systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence’ (Bourdieu 2010, p. 170). This linear conceptualization of taste as a mere consequence of one’s social position resulting from one’s habitus has been criticized by, for example, Jacques Rancière, who argues that engagement with the aesthetic offers the possibility for social mobility and emancipation (Rancière and Engelmann 2019). Although Bourdieu recognizes that one’s habitus may be reconditioned when one’s social position changes, one’s tastes are still only the result of the expectations placed on the individual along the lines of that position. Bourdieu thus imagines taste functioning as a sign, a classification of the practices associated with the lifestyles of a certain class.

The idea that tastes function as signs, in other words, as an intersection between sociology and semiology, is where Bourdieu overlaps with the early work of semiotician Jean Baudrillard. Combining Saussurian linguistics with Marxist materialism, Baudrillard argues that the advent of the age of consumption meant a shift in the prominence of the object. No longer should its function be explained in terms of use-value or exchange-value but as a sign-value. Baudrillard argues that the sign-value of an object no longer refers to the object’s physical qualities, its utility, or its price, but rather to the forms of social status and prestige that are attributed to it. In such a hierarchical structure, signs imply difference. On the surface, consumers are presented with choice: an opportunity to differentiate themselves from others through the act of consuming sign-objects. But as these signs and images only refer to themselves instead of a material reality, property, or value, such a system creates an insatiable pursuit for more. As a result, the roles of the subject and the object are reversed. According to Baudrillard, the consumer object takes on a form of subjectivity, which may supersede the agency of any individual subject. In his work *Passwords*, Baudrillard clearly expresses this point when he explains that his initial fascination with the object came from the insight that it ‘could leave behind the passivity of its use to acquire a kind of autonomy, and perhaps even a capacity to avenge itself on a subject over-sure of controlling it’ (Baudrillard 2003, p. 4).<sup>8</sup> In such a context, consumer objects reign dominant in the realm of social relations. The collective of signs and images functions like a language, through which consumers interact and communicate. What is presented as choice is thus simply an interpretation of the language of consumption that elevates the social position of the consumer. Yet, this indefinite pursuit ‘impels the consumer on to definitive dissatisfaction’ (Baudrillard 1998, p. 62). Finally, in perhaps his most famous work *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard (1994) postulates that in the end, sign-objects lose the connection to any material reality and only refer to each other as an endless string of free-floating, self-referential signifiers.

While for Bourdieu taste is thus an inevitable expression of habitus and for Baudrillard it is a form of interpretation of what he calls the ‘code’, the collective of sign-objects, both theories understand it as a language through which people communicate. Both, in this sense, presuppose the existence of certain structures (living conditions, networks of signification) that can produce these tastes. By contrast, German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–

1940) observed a very different function of the notion of taste, understanding it instead as a concept that may be used to manipulate consumers into a state of dependency and complacency:

Taste develops when commodity production clearly surpasses any other kind of production. The manufacture of products as commodities for a market ensures that the conditions of their production—not only societal conditions, in the form of exploitation, but technological ones as well—will gradually vanish from the perceived world of people. The consumer, who is more or less expert when he gives an order to an artisan (in individual cases, he is advised by the master craftsman himself), is not usually knowledgeable when he acts as buyer. Added to this is the fact that mass production, which aims at turning out inexpensive commodities, must strive to disguise bad quality. In most cases, mass production actually benefits when the buyer has little expertise. . . . As the expertness of a customer declines, the importance of his taste increases proportionately—both for him and for the manufacturer. For the consumer, it serves as a more or less elaborate masking of his lack of expertness. For the manufacturer, it serves as a fresh stimulus to consumption, which in some cases is satisfied at the expense of other consumer needs that would be more costly for the manufacturer to meet. (Benjamin 2006, p. 131)

As Benjamin argues, taste is much easier to control than expertise. Appealing to the consumer's tastes meant taking away their independence, instead fostering a sense of complacency and dependency on the expertise Mitsukoshi claimed to possess. Yet, the consumer justifies their choices based on the perceived possession of a refined and discerning taste. In reality, however, the idea of an active differentiation of an individual identity through what is presented as choice is, as Baudrillard also argues, nothing more than a passive interpretation of the language of the collective body of sign-commodities.

*Shumi*, in the context of an emerging consumer culture in early 20th century Japan, cannot be perfectly equated to one singular notion of taste. It does not, as in Bourdieu's imagination of taste, presuppose a certain habitus as the result of one's education and upbringing, but rather produces these conditions where they did not exist in the first place. Neither are tastes free-floating signifiers as in Baudrillard's semiology, but they instead function to help solidify certain markers of a modern, civilized social identity. As we shall see below, *shumi* is used mainly as a marketing tool by department stores such as Mitsukoshi in order to maximize profits and play into the emotions, desires and anxieties of the consumer, making them dependent on their tastes, as in Benjamin's observation, but at the same time, it functions somewhat counterintuitively as a mechanism to rationalize excessive consumption. Although *shumi* thus shows similarities with the notion of taste as it moves between the various theoretical conceptualizations briefly outlined above, it nonetheless has its own properties, usages, and effects. We must therefore place it in its concrete historical context.

When we examine the history of Mitsukoshi, it becomes clear that this department store was not in the business of selling products. Instead, its focus was on constructing a universe of consumable signs, which were framed around the concept of *shumi*. As mentioned in the introduction, the business was transformed from an affordable store for townspeople into a luxury brand aimed at an emerging middle class. What immediately captures the attention when examining this metamorphosis is Mitsukoshi's intense focus on consumer psychology. Not only did they thoroughly update and expand their inventory, modernize the internal organization of the store into smaller departments with dedicated staff, and have acclaimed architect Yokogawa Tamisuke (1864–1945) design the new Mitsukoshi building in the same Western Renaissance style in which he had constructed the building for the Imperial Theater, while incorporating elements from department stores in the United States and Europe, such as glass show cases and display windows on the outside of the shop.<sup>9,10</sup> More importantly, through their shrewd and aggressive marketing campaigns, Mitsukoshi was able to instill in the consumer a desire for social status and



prestige and a feeling of anxiety of having to keep up with the neighbors.<sup>11</sup> Consumption no longer referred to the act of buying a product for its utility. It was becoming a language, a way of interacting and communicating through the commodity-as-sign, to be consumed, appropriated, and interpreted in ways that would elevate the social position of the consumer.

Such a culture of conspicuous consumption needed to be justified and rationalized. Mitsukoshi did this by positioning itself not just as a leader in retailing but as a necessary institution with cultural capital and expertise that existed to guide the consumer through the daunting world of social etiquette in a society with quickly shifting norms. One way of creating the outward appearance of expertise was the establishment of the Ryūkōkai, which is an advisory assembly made up of leading figures in the realm of culture and literature who advised Mitsukoshi on the latest fashion from abroad and new trends in the domestic sphere under Hibi's slogan of *gakuzoku kyōdō* ('the unification of the learned and the layman'), stressing Mitsukoshi's mission to educate the public. Mori Ōgai was one of its most prominent members. From this assembly sprung other, more specialized groups, such as the Jidō yōhin kenkyūkai, which consisted of specialists from newly emerging fields in academia such as child psychology and education studies. These assemblies were tasked not only with judging and advising on the latest trends in their respective fields but also with creating them.<sup>12</sup> They organized large-scale exhibitions around children's culture and the latest toys, held competitions in categories such as 'healthiest baby in Japan' or 'prettiest woman in Japan', but also art exhibitions, and competitions for the best poster design or best literary work themed around the Mitsukoshi brand. To the outside world, Mitsukoshi's association with these cultural and academic experts provided the brand with a form of scientific legitimacy. The large cash prizes attached to these competitions mobilized the public to participate in the allure and glamor of the Mitsukoshi empire.<sup>13</sup> This shows that the more the brand grew, the stronger Mitsukoshi's hold on people's everyday behavior and perception became.

The (no doubt intended) result of this trend was the cultivation of an easily controllable consumer. By taking away the necessity for the consumer to acquire their own knowledge about the quality, provenance, or value of commodities, that person is deprived of a form of agency, of the tools that are required to make one's own value judgments. This became the exact blueprint for Mitsukoshi's commercial strategy. Below, I shall demonstrate how this world of consumable sign-objects was constructed through the discourse of *shumi*, which was used in contrast to the notion of *ryūkō* within the platform of the department store PR-magazine, through which Mitsukoshi was able to assume the position of expert and leader in the fields of fashion and culture.

### 3. *Shumi* and *Ryūkō*: The PR-Magazine as Framework for Consumption

One of the department store's most powerful marketing tools was the PR-magazine.<sup>14</sup> The first magazine that Mitsukoshi produced was called *Hanagoromo*, which was a one-time edition published in January 1899. It was the first PR-magazine ever published by a Japanese dry goods store. It was beautifully designed and contained a total of around 350 pages filled with essays, literary works, and, for the most part, product listings, which included order forms. Hibi, who at that time also fulfilled the role of editor of the magazines, wrote in the foreword to this first publication: '... We live in a world in which we can buy and sell things from a great distance now, even if those things come from faraway countries, we can order them by mail from thousands of miles away. As such, for the convenience of its beloved customers, Mitsui want to make products widely available for those close by and far away, and so in order to keep up with the times we wish to introduce new designs and simultaneously get ahead of the latest fashions [*ryūkō*] by creating it and bring it to our loyal customers' doorstep. ... But in order to avoid this becoming a collection of advertisement, we have invited the great intellectuals of our time to contribute essays and short stories and the sort ...' (Hibi 1965). In short, Mitsukoshi's circulation of *Hanagoromo*, and its many successive publications, was the store's answer

to a growing demand for fashion items and clothing in the countryside, which was the home of a growing clientele with increasing disposable means<sup>15</sup>, as well as an attempt to establish itself as a leader in the world of fashion and retail by, among other things, associating themselves with members of the cultural elite. There are no statistics on the actual number of copies that were printed, but Sezaki Keiji infers that it must have been ‘several tens of thousands’ (Sezaki 2000a, p. 63). Following the publication of *Hanagoromo*, Mitsukoshi continued to produce similar one-time PR-magazines, such as *Natsugoromo* (June 1899), *Harumoyō* (January 1900), *Natsumoyō* (June 1900), *Himokagami* (June 1901), and finally *Miyakoburi* (November 1903). All these magazines were printed in black and white, except for very colorful, lushly decorated covers. The magazines were not for sale but most likely distributed among importers and other important customers.

In August 1903, however, Mitsukoshi had already started the publication of its first periodical entitled *Jikō*, which ran until May 1908. During this period, each edition of this monthly magazine counted around 16,000 copies and cost around 12 Sen at the start, which was later revised to 18 Sen. The format was that of a standard size newspaper and contained between 50 and 100 pages. It often contained short pieces on the latest fashions, domestic and abroad, as well as announcement for events or exhibitions and the occasional short story. Interestingly, the advertisement in *Jikō* was not exclusively for products from Mitsukoshi, but ad space was also sold to other, sometimes competing, stores and businesses. This changed with the arrival of *Mitsukoshi taimusu*, the successor of *Jikō*, in which Mitsukoshi exclusively printed ads related to their own products and events. The magazine ran from June 1908 to April 1914 but was subject to significant changes along the way. Initially, the magazine was meant to introduce customers to Mitsukoshi’s activities as well as notify them of sales events. But with the establishment of another magazine entitled *Mitsukoshi* in March 1911, the role of *Mitsukoshi taimusu* was reduced to that of product catalog. Its price was between 5 Sen when it was printed as a seasonal magazine counting only 8 pages using thin paper, and 18 Sen using thicker paper when it was turned into a monthly magazine but was later no longer for sale and was distributed for free from January 1910. Throughout this period, an estimated 50,000 copies were printed with each issue. This magazine ran in opposition with the publication of a PR-magazine of Mitsukoshi’s largest competitor Shirokiya, a magazine entitled *Ryūkō*, which displayed product listings in the top and bottom margins and introduced the latest products along with short essays by notable intellectuals and other famous names of the day explaining to the readers what to buy and how to wear it.

For our discussion here, however, Mitsukoshi’s most important PR-magazine was *Mitsukoshi*, which ran, with intervals, from March 1911 to April 1933. It contained advertisements, interspersed with essays on fashion and culture, as well as a generous helping of literary works by the hand of some of the biggest names of the day, including Mori Ōgai. Prices around that time fluctuated from free for the first few three or four months of its publication to 25 Sen between July 1911 and December 1921 and had a circulation of 50,000. The ornate covers were designed by Sugiura Hisui (1876–1965). In line with his slogan *gakuzoku kyōdō*, Hibi framed the publication of the magazine and Mitsukoshi itself as a form of guidance, spiritual and cultural enlightenment, and as a way of giving back to society. Hibi states in the first edition of the magazine that “is not to compete for mere profits, but to elevate the tastes [*kōshō*] of a generation, to purify the tides of the current age, and to thereby contribute to society” through a collaboration with “specialists from all fields” and “the most brilliant artists of the day.”<sup>16</sup>

In this way, the PR-magazine became one of the most effective ways for Mitsukoshi to signal its expertise to the greater public. The external experts Mitsukoshi attracted to their brand, both in- and outside of the Ryūkōkai, were deployed in two ways. The academic experts wrote essays, columns, articles and reports on the latest fads and fashions to which the readers were to conform. The cultural experts—the artists and fiction writers—wrote short stories, poems, *rakugo*, etc. all themed around Mitsukoshi. Both were, of course, intended to encourage people to buy products and engage with the Mitsukoshi brand.

When we examine the content produced by the former category of experts more closely, we notice that much of their rhetoric is framed around two specific concepts: *shumi* and *ryūkō*. These terms are by no means exclusive to Mitsukoshi but had by the early 20th century firmly planted themselves in public discourse and were used widely. It is no surprise then that the terms *ryūkō* and *shumi* both frequently feature in all magazines published by Mitsukoshi from *Jikō* onward as well as magazines of its competitors. Titles such as “Which clothes are symbolic of new tastes [*shin-shumi*]?”, “Things I would like to make popular [*ryūkō sasete mitai mono*]”, “So-called Edo tastes [*Edo shumi*]”, “This thing called fashion [*ryūkō*]”, “Taste [*shumi*] and utility”, “Japanese taste [*Nihon shumi*] before bushido”, “Essay on my opinions on fashion [*ryūkō*] abroad”, “Pictures of the latest fashion [*shin-ryūkō*] in Germany”, and “The psychology of taste [*shumi*]”, prevailed in the PR-magazines of Mitsukoshi and its competitors. One column that helps elucidate these terms is a short essay by Hatoyama Haruko (1861–1938), one of the founders of women’s higher education in modern Japan, entitled “Fashion and taste [*ryūkō to shumi*]”, which was published in *Ryūkō*, the PR-magazine of Mitsukoshi’s biggest competitor Shirokiya. There, she argues that people who have a hard time keeping up with the latest fashion trends often find it difficult to match these fashion items with their existing wardrobe. It is not enough, Hatoyama states, to merely buy whatever is popular abroad, but one also must consider one’s own complexion, the colors and design of the clothes with which one wishes to match the item, the lighting, and the occasion at which the item will be worn. People who are bad at matching look foolish, she states:

これ結局は自分をさし置き世間の流行にはばかりあごかれた罪で、また一方より申せばまだ々々衣服に対する趣味が稚かいのぢやあるまいかと思ひます... 日本服になりますと、第一柄や模様、その他の附屬物が多いので調和もはかり難いことでしやうかその苦心が衣服の趣味の高下する所かと思ひます。(Hatoyama 1908, pp. 12–13)

People who do this make the mistake of completely ignoring themselves and only aspiring to what is popular in the world, and at the same it means that their taste in clothes is still undeveloped... In the case of Japanese clothes, the most important are the pattern and design, and because there are many accessories it is difficult to find the right balance, but those efforts are what indicate one’s level of sartorial taste.

Hatoyama’s essay makes readily apparent the importance of these buzzwords to frame and brand consumer products. In addition, an important distinction is being made between the two terms *ryūkō* and *shumi*.<sup>17</sup> Here, *ryūkō* refers to that which is always in flux, an anxious attempt to keep up with the times producing a never-ending rat race to acquire the latest clothes and accessories available, which are often imported from or modeled after the styles that were in vogue in European capitals. On the other hand, *shumi* is less flexible as a concept. It is presented as a constant, a skill that can be honed and cultivated, most conveniently through the act of consumption.<sup>18</sup> *Shumi* was therefore a much more stable social marker associated with images of good social standing, education, prestige, and a firm grasp of the unwritten rules of society’s upper ranks. Jinno Yuki argues that a rhetorical shift occurred from a focus on *ryūkō* to an emphasis on *shumi* in the *Ryūkōkai* for exactly this reason. *Shumi* helped mask the contradiction of a department store that pretended to provide a cultural education for the general public but simultaneously spurred on lavish consumerism through the idea of *ryūkō*, which in reality was only available to the lucky few (Jinno 1994, p. 203).

But while public discourse was quickly saturated by these terms, some intellectuals were not uncritical toward the effects they had on a society that gradually became more and more governed by mass consumerism. Take for example ‘Fashion without Taste’ (無趣味なる流行), written by Katō Totsudō (1870–1949) in 1919. In this short piece, Katō laments the fact that people’s tastes are underdeveloped and that they simply imitate without understanding (無理解に模倣せられ). He mocks those whose lavish spending on



expensive clothing gives them a sense of entitlement and indicates the department store as an accomplice in this trend.

彼等は金さへ使へば立派なものと心得、飾り立てさへすれば上品なるものと考え、高雅なる服装は獨り高價なる支拂によつてのみ得らるべきものとした世間見ず、成り上り者、之れが流行の源泉となつて溢れ出たのであるから、慾望即趣味、趣味即慾望と解して羽毛を染めて孔雀を學ぶ呆鵝の如く、塗り立て、飾り立て、成るべく金目のものを身につけて、高慢顔するのを以て當世と心得、あゝでもないかうでもないの結果、流行の源泉は却つて呉服屋の手に移り、何か新しいものを案出すれば、一つでも多く身に纏ふことになつて上へ上へと重ねることになつたのではあるまいか。(Katō 1919, p. 190)

They think that if only they spend money, they are stylish, and if they dress up, they are refined, they are posers who do not understand the world and they mean something because they paid a large sum for lavish clothing. This has become the source of fashion that has spread all around us, and so desire has become equated with taste, and taste with desire. Putting on arrogant airs, like a crow who has painted his feathers to liken a peacock, they think they are with the times, and after trying one thing after the other, in the end the origin of fashion is relinquished to the department store. Whenever they come up with something new, people want to have it. Has this not led us to this endless spiral?

From Katō's argument, it becomes clear that *ryūkō* was understood as something vulgar, related to lavish and mindless spending. On the other hand, *shumi* connoted something far loftier: a form of aesthetic understanding as well as a type of social agility. It thus gains an air of exclusivity, something that exists outside of the masses and is not available to everyone. Katō was annoyed by the fact that good taste had become similar with the type of endless consumption that was encouraged by department stores such as Mitsukoshi, in which *shumi* had become synonymous with desire.

Katō's observation and critique of the way the notion of taste is used in the rhetoric of department stores is highlighted by the writings of Mitsukoshi's management. A clear-cut illustration of this is a short essay by Hamada Shirō, the first head of marketing of Mitsukoshi mentioned earlier, in which he overtly links the cultivation of *shumi* with the instilment of desire.

顧客か其買はんとする品に就て無趣味ならしめは、賣るには便利ならんも、こは價の低廉なる場合にのみ限らる。少しく高等なる品物を需むる人は、必ず相當の趣味あるものに限らるゝなり。陳列場は開放せらるゝ之かために顧客か比較研究の便を得、其趣味を向上せしむるは店主に取つて非常に幸あり。(Hamada 1908, p. 27)

When a customer has no taste concerning the product they are seeking to purchase, even though it is easy to sell to them, this only works with items of a lower price. People who seek to purchase slightly more expensive item, they usually have impeccable taste. Since the introduction of our display showcases, the customer can compare products and improve their taste, which in turn is extremely fortunate for the shopkeeper.

*Shumi* thus became a radically important concept to justify Mitsukoshi's overt promotion of lavish consumption. But, as Jinno also argues, while the discursive shift from *ryūkō* to *shumi* functioned to obscure the objective of making profits, Hamada unmistakably asserts that tapping into the desires of customers through *shumi* directly translates to larger profits for the company. It is no coincidence that such statements were not published in Mitsukoshi's own PR-magazine, but in *Shōgyōkai*, a commercial magazine about business strategies aimed at entrepreneurs and captains of industry. From the excerpts of both Hamada and Hamada cited above, we may thus conclude that *shumi* functioned to control the effects of *ryūkō*, of the endless and aimless pursuit of rampantly reproducing signifiers that refer only to each other, presenting consumers with a false sense of individuality

through differentiation and through the act of appropriating and interpreting the totality of sign-values, i.e., through consumption. The rhetorical framework of *shumi*—with its connotations of taste, of a cultivated ability of aesthetic judgment, and of social prestige—provided the illusion of stability, of a mastery over the sign-commodities that were always changing and in flux. The deployment of *shumi* in this context was a discursive strategy, an attempt to constrain the otherwise freely floating signifiers of the perpetually moving wheels of fashion and consumption. If *ryūkō* is a general indicator for the fluid nature of consumption, a content that is constantly subject to transformation, then *shumi* is its more stable (yet still malleable) formal counterpart.

The rationalization of conspicuous consumption was even further intensified by the deployment of literary works in PR-magazines. Throughout its history of publication, Mitsukoshi was able to tie many leading authors of the day to its magazines. Starting with the publication of a short story written by Ozaki Kōyō (1868–1903) and one of his disciples entitled *Musōri*,<sup>19</sup> Mitsukoshi proceeded to print numerous short stories and essays by the likes of Kōda Rohan (1867–1947), Yosano Akiko (1878–1942), and many others. It goes without saying that these relationships were mutually beneficial: literary authors were able to expand their readership significantly, while Mitsukoshi could grow its customer base by delivering new forms of entertainment. Obviously, associating with the harbingers of the literary landscape also helped solidify Mitsukoshi's reputation as leader and guide in the world of culture and fashion against the backdrop of a newly emerging middle class. Nevertheless, representations of Mitsukoshi in these literary works often never went beyond overt or even blatant forms of branding and product placement.<sup>20</sup> The greater public was also strongly encouraged to become involved with the brand, as Mitsukoshi issued literary competitions<sup>21</sup> for all genres with cash prizes up to a total 3000 Yen, with 100 Yen awarded to every winner in each category.<sup>22</sup> Those who were able to incorporate the spirit of Mitsukoshi and *ryūkō* the most skillfully not only received a monetary reward, but, following the 1913 competition, had their work published collectively in one volume under the title *Bungei no Mitsukoshi* in 1914. In this way, literature became just one more component in the justification of consumption without restraint wrapped in a veil of harmless entertainment.

So far, our discussion of *shumi*, not dissimilar to the theories of taste I discussed at the beginning of this paper, may give the impression of a device that generates an unequal relationship between a manipulating, malevolent producer, and a defenseless, naïve consumer. However, Mori Ōgai's three short stories, especially read together, problematize this simplistic dichotomy. They stand out from most other literary works published in *Mitsukoshi* in that they do not merely advertise a brand but challenge the morality of a consumption-driven culture. When read together within the context of a culture of consumerism produced by the rhetoric of *shumi* through the marketing campaigns of Mitsukoshi and their counterparts as I have sketched it out thus far, Ōgai's short stories demonstrate the morally complex entanglement of producers and consumers in such an environment.

#### 4. 'Saezuri' and the Image of the Ideal Consumer

Although *shumi* is never used explicitly, its fundamental mechanics are nonetheless at the heart of Ōgai's three short stories 'Saezuri', 'Dengaku dōfu', and 'Ryūkō'. Each in their own way, these narratives demonstrate how the commodity-as-sign is interpreted through the act of consumption. Having a sense of *shumi*, in this context, is a determining factor in one's public identity. It is more than an allusion to a set of personal preferences but a determinant for one's social life, or, in the case of the protagonist in 'Dengaku dōfu', social death. As such, *shumi*, as a social function, produces its own morality. Ōgai's stories, read together, both elucidate and call into question a morality that is driven by consumption and problematize the ethics of the position of both the consumer and the author within the framework of the department store PR-magazine.

First, I shall discuss ‘Saezuri’, which was published in *Mitsukoshi*’s March issue in 1911. The narrative is a representation of a total submission to a world whose social relations are regulated entirely by the sign-value of consumer objects. The story is framed as a conversation between two young, unmarried women named Umeko and Yuriko. Although the story is categorized as a *shōsetsu*, some of the explanations preceding the opening scene read like stage instructions, forecasting the performance that is about to unfold:

洋室。卓。椅子。長椅子。瓦斯爐。○家の娘梅子卓の上の灰皿などの位置を直してゐる。束髪。お召の不斷着。小間使。(登場。) 入らつしやいました。(退場。)(續きて客百合子戸口に現る。手縫の青色の薔薇の花を着けたる、黒の大帽子。黒のpaletot式外套。鼠色の毛皮襟巻。同じ色のマッフ。鼠色の肘まである手袋。ヲラン附小形の蝙蝠傘を持つ。)

A Western room. A table. A chair. A chaise longue. A gas heater. The daughter of the house Umeko is adjusting the position of the ashtray on top of the table. She has her hair up. She is wearing an informal dress. A maid. (Enters.) “The guest has arrived.” (Leaves.) (Then, the guest Yuriko appears at the door opening. She is wearing a large black hat with a hand-stitched blue rose affixed to it. A black, *paletot*-style overcoat. A grey fur scarf. A muff of the same color. Grey gloves that reach up to the elbow. She is holding a small umbrella with frills.)

The opening passages signal the social status and wealth of the two young women. Both Umeko’s hairstyle (*sokuhatsu*) and the fact that there is a maid who announces the arrival of a guest are indications of the wealth and status of Umeko’s family. Although we know little about Umeko’s clothing, Yuriko’s attire is described in detail. Her entire wardrobe consists of luxury, often Western-style, clothing. We soon learn that she owes her sense of style to a two-year stay in various European countries, an experience which forms the basis of the conversation between Umeko and Yuriko that is about to ensue. The phrase that initially hints at Yuriko’s long stay abroad is short but effective: ‘(She took a good look at Yuriko’s appearance.) You look great. And I’m surprised you haven’t forgotten how to speak Japanese.’ The ability to speak foreign languages is yet another sign of an upbringing and a high-level education. Yuriko then goes on to comment on the changes Umeko’s family have made to the structure of the house: ‘Your house looks completely different. You’ve built a Western room’. These brief comments on outward appearance not only prepare the reader for Yuriko’s detailed account of her adventures abroad but also, through a constant emphasis of Western-style products and architecture, frame both young women as being ‘civilized’ members of the upper (middle) class.

The question-and-answer rally that follows positions Yuriko as an expert witness of Western European culture. It soon becomes clear that she spent most of her two years abroad in Paris, which is quickly labeled by Umeko as a fashion hub: ‘But it is the fashion capital of the world, so surely you wore many nice clothes’. Yuriko’s reply is a detailed account of the Parisian world of fashion and the precarious nature of the social life that is attached to it. It also incorporates the only instance in all three stories that expresses an overt form of brand placement for *Mitsukoshi*:

さうね。それは随分憂身を憂すのよ。三越のやうな家へ行つて、梯子を上がつたり降りたり、勘定して見たら、何里あるか知れない程歩いて、何か選り出すとなると、膝の所で縛られてゐるやうな着物を着て一時間も立つてゐて、やつと見附けると、そこを出て、又外の三越のやうな家へ行つて、又同じ事をして、草臥れたやうな顔もしないの。それから為立屋へ行くでせう。東京では飯島がまだ一軒しかなくつて、少し好いのを拵へるとなると、横濱のイギリス人のみる店まで出掛けなくてはならないでせう。それがパリイでは立派なの出来る内が何百軒あるか知れないわ。

“Yes indeed. You’re completely swept up in it. You go to a large place like *Mitsukoshi*, and you walk up and down stairs all day long. When you add it all up, you’ll have walked I don’t know how many miles, and when you finally chose something, you have to stand there for a hour while you wear a piece of

clothing that binds your knees together, and once you've finally found the right item you go out, and go to another place that resembles Mitsukoshi, and you repeat the process, all without a hint of fatigue. And then you go to a tailor, right? In Tokyo you only have Iijima, but if you want to have something made of any quality, you're forced to go all the way to the shops run by the Englishmen in Yokohama. Well, in Paris there are hundreds of stores that make the most beautiful clothing . . . "

On the surface, 'Saezuri' is an innocent conversation between two young women who are catching up after having been apart for some time. One can imagine that, knowing the story was published in a PR-magazine, its main function was to serve as a guide to its readers about the state of affairs in the high societies of Western urban spaces.<sup>23</sup> Not only do we as readers get a glimpse of what it is like to live in such distant and exotic places, but we are also informed about what people who are in a position to visit such foreign places wear, how they talk, and how they live. In turn, the detailed descriptions of luxury accessories and items of clothing are a form of product placement. The repeated mention of Mitsukoshi leaves no doubt that the story functions, at least in part, as advertisement for the store, especially since it is equated multiple times to the high-quality luxury stores that one finds in Paris and contrasted with more common outlets found in Japan's city centers.

However, when we consider the conversation between Umeko and Yuriko more carefully, 'Saezuri' reveals a great deal about the nature of *shumi* and *ryūkō*. Both Umeko and Yuriko have become integral parts of the consumption machine. They have been completely absorbed in the mechanisms of *shumi* and *ryūkō*. They are hyperaware of the fact that participation in the consumption economy influences the way one is perceived by others and affects the level of one's prestige. They represent images of the ideal consumer, both in their outward appearance and in their speech and behavior. They do not communicate through a subjective sense of self but by means of the objects with which they have surrounded themselves. This is also related to a distinct absence of personality. Perhaps it is not strange in a story of this length for characters to lack any psychological depth, but in 'Saezuri', this lack is purposeful. They are devoid of any distinguishing subjectivity and instead serve as empty vessels who can only communicate through the images and signs of the luxury products around them. Clearly, the value of these items is not determined by their utility or price (i.e., their use-value or exchange-value) but rather their sign-value: the images of prestige associated with these commodities. This image is not only upheld in the objects themselves but also in the demeanor of the characters and their interaction. Take for instance the second half of the conversation, in which Umeko asks Yuriko about various feminist movements that are active around Europe, which Yuriko witnessed during her stay abroad. At first, the reader may get the impression of a nuanced view on Yuriko's part, when she differentiates between numerous strands of feminism in different countries and their varying degrees of success. Yuriko's insights seem to have an educational element that counterbalances Umeko's more conservative opinion of a woman's place in society. However, understood as a sign among signs, the entire conversation on feminism becomes itself a hollow image, projecting an ideal to the reader of how people belonging to a certain class should behave and speak. It is not the content of the conversation that is given significance but its form. What at first seemed a moment of erudition in the form of activist rhetoric thus ends up becoming as superficial as the luxury commodities that inform the identities of the young women. At the end of the first chapter of her book *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan*, Barbara Sato asks the question: 'Did the new middle-class women's culture emerging within the context of consumerism reflect any concerted attempt for autonomy, contradictory though the fruits may have been?' (Sato 2003, pp. 43–44). It would seem that, at least based on our reading of Umeko and Yuriko, the answer to this question is 'no'. Autonomy is simply the veneer, an outward projection of an ideal public image for women belonging to the new middle class, mediated through the act of consumption as a display of social dexterity and a carefully curated aesthetic

sensibility. Their chatter is no more than the clamorous chirping of birds, as the title of the story suggests: beautiful on the surface but devoid of any deeper meaning.

Although at first glance, ‘Saezuri’ seems to be a story about the latest fashions and trends (*ryūkō*), a closer reading exposes the unwritten rules of social engagement regulated by a sense of *shumi*. Umeko and Yuriko demonstrate great sensitivity to their own social positionality. They are representations of a complete immersion in a world in which social relations are mediated by one’s ability to develop a type of aesthetic sensibility. Not only is their communication moderated by the commodity-as-sign, but they themselves, through the literary work as commodity, become signs. The social awareness that results from a cultivation of *shumi* is a way of sustaining and stabilizing the whirlwind of consumer objects driven by the rhetoric of *ryūkō* and subsequently of deferring the anxious pursuit of things away from themselves and onto the reader, who now is made to perceive a gap between the image of the ideal consumer in the characters of the story and a lack of such an aesthetic sensitivity in themselves. Appropriating, cultivating, and exhibiting a sense of *shumi* thus imbues one with a set of tangible boundaries within which an infinite rotation of objects may take place. The mechanism of *shumi* thus turns the pursuit for more from an empty quest for superficial material luxury into a reaffirmation of one’s refined aesthetic judgment within a broader social structure.

In this way, *shumi* becomes its own morality. In this context, the mention of Maupassant’s short story *The Necklace* (Maupassant 2004) gains importance. It tells the story of Madame Mathilde Loisel, who, despite her low social standing and her marriage to low-paid clerk Monsieur Loisel, aspires to be a rich aristocrat. When they receive an invitation to a high-society function, Monsieur Loisel spends his entire savings on a dress for his wife to keep her happy. But Madame Loisel complains that she has no jewelry and ends up borrowing a diamond necklace from a friend. After the party, she notices that the necklace is missing. Without telling the owner of the necklace, they buy a similar one at a high price with high-interest loans. To pay off the loan they move into a shabby apartment and Monsieur Loisel takes on extra work while Madame Loisel does housework and lets herself go. After ten years, when the loan is finally returned in full, she confesses to the owner of the necklace what has happened, blaming her for the ten years of hardship she has had to endure. At that moment, the owner of the necklace reveals that the necklace was a fake, and hardly worth much money at all. Maupassant’s short story has evident moral themes: do not lie or deceive, and do not be fooled by outward appearance. But this morality is completely absent in ‘Saezuri’. Instead, the outward appearance itself becomes the frame of reference for moral action. To own and display expensive things is a sign of belonging; to have a great deal of money as a man is a sign of being marriage material; to be able to discuss world affairs is a sign of education. In other words, the essence of morality as seen in Maupassant’s short story is reversed, and the outward appearance, the act of consuming and the knowledge of how to consume, becomes the new moral standard. In turn, this morality reflected in the ideal of consumerism is used to manipulate the restless desires of the reader.

## 5. Failure to Comply: ‘Dengaku Dōfu’ and the Repercussions of Misinterpretation

If ‘Saezuri’ is the exemplification of the ideal consumer, then ‘Dengaku dōfu’ serves as a warning to those who resist the pressure to conform to the tastes of the time.<sup>24</sup> The narrative was published in the 1912 September issue of *Mitsukoshi* and tells the story of Kimura, a prideful translator of foreign literature. The story opens with Kimura reading the papers and his wife calling him from the kitchen, asking whether he was planning on visiting the botanic garden today. He replies that he is, but that he is currently reading the reviews of his latest translation. Although his translations are generally praised, he often receives the criticism that he translates because he is unable to produce work of his own. When he finally does publish his own work, it is often judged in a negative way: he does not show enough of himself, or he does not have enough of a personality to confess anything at all.<sup>25</sup> Other works are often misinterpreted or mislabeled as a genre: his philosophical



dialogues are said to miss an element of excitement and his realistic descriptions of crimes are labeled detective novels. The appearance of a young critic means a turn for the worst for Kimura, as he judges that even Kimura's translation work is full of mistakes. Kimura soon gains the reputation of 'bad translator'. But instead of feeling discouraged, Kimura is vain and arrogant, claiming that these critics have misunderstood him. His wife hates this arrogance, which is a feeling that becomes clear in the following passage:

實際木村の高慢は、笑談が交つてゐるにしても、随分劇しい。例の誤譯退治の時、細君が『あなた本當に間違つてゐるのではないなら、なんとか云つてお遣なさい』と云ふと、木村は『ところがなんとも云はないね』と云つた。『では間違つてゐたの』と云ふと、『間違なもんか、間違へたつて、蛙の見附けるやうな間違はしない』と云ふ。こん度の蛙は餘り毒々しいので、最初は細君も賛成し兼ねてゐたのだが、木村の空嘯いた顔が憎らしいところから、とう々々此蛙にも賛成しさうになった。

In reality, although it was always uttered with a smile, Kimura's arrogance was quite fierce. When he was bashed as a terrible translator, too, his wife told him: "If you really didn't make any mistakes, why don't you speak up?". Kimura replied: "But I won't say anything". "So you did make mistakes then?" she said, and he replied: "Of course not, and even if I did, I wouldn't make mistakes that any of those toads would catch". In this case, the toad was extremely poisonous, so his wife didn't agree with it at first, but because she detested his attitude of feigned ignorance, in the end she was inclined to side with the toad.

The conversation then flows into an argument about a straw hat. Kimura wants to wear it when he goes to the botanic garden. His wife says that the hat has been out of style for some time since Kimura bought it three years earlier. She argues that although the wide band on the hat, which was unfashionable the previous year but has now regained popularity, is acceptable, the brim of the hat is too wide and not in sync with the times. Kimura retorts that all he must do is wait for the wide brim to get back in style, and that a plate-like narrow brim would not befit his large face. After some back and forth about the budget for a new hat, Kimura puts on his old straw hat and leaves for the garden.

On his way to the garden, he passes by a hat shop in Maki-chō, but, as his wife predicted, he sees nothing but hats with wide bands and wide brims. Upon asking whether the shop sells any hats with narrow brims, the shopkeeper laughs at him. He then sees a large pile of wide-brimmed hats and asks the clerk about them:

『こゝに好いのかあるぢやないか。』『それですか。それは檀那方のお被りなさるのではありません。』小僧の笑は一種同輩に對するやうな、馴々しいになった。自分が揶揄はれてゐると思つたのかも知れない。『どんな人が被るのだ』と、木村は眞面目に問うた。『労働者の被るのです。』頗る要領を得た答である。『かう見えて己も労働してゐるのだ。それを一つくれ。』木村は蝦蟇口を出した。小僧はちょっと躊躇したが、笑談でもなんでも錢を拂へば好いと思つたと見えて、すなほに帽子を取つてくれた。紺と白とを綯交にした、細い麻絲で鉢巻がしてある。品の好い帽子である。小僧に言はれてから氣が附いて見れば、なる程荷車を推したり挽いたりする男がこんなのを被つてゐた。日を除けるために夏帽子を被ると云ふことを、まだ忘れない人達が被つてゐたのだ。手に取つて見ると、パナマのやうに疊むことは出来ないが、なか々々柔かで、被つて見ると、被り心地が好い。木村は好い物を手に入つたと思つて喜んだ。

"You have some good ones here, I see!" "Oh, you mean those? Those are not for someone like you to wear," said the store clerk, laughing with an air of familiarity, as if they were friends. He felt as if the clerk was perhaps making fun of him. "What kind of person would wear such a hat, then?" asked Kimura with a straight face. "Those are for laborers." The answer was succinct. "You wouldn't tell by the looks of me, but I also perform labor. Give me one of those." Kimura pulled out his wallet. The clerk hesitated for a moment, but all jokes aside, as long as the

customer paid, he did not seem to care, and he politely took out a hat. It had a navy and white band with a fine stitch. It was a product of high quality. After the clerk pointed it out to him, he noticed that men and pushing freight carts were wearing similar ones. Apparently, there were still some people who had not forgotten that a summer hat was made to block the sun. In the hand, you could not fold the hat like a Panama, but it was pliable and easy to wear. Kimura felt happy with his purchase.

He then proceeds toward the garden, which he used to visit during his student days. We learn that the reason for his visit to the garden is that he is an avid gardener. He uses his modest garden to plant flowers that do not need much care, even during the winter. Although he is used to working with flowers and plants indigenous to Japan, most of the available seeds at the market are from the West. As he is unfamiliar with the seeds, he has trouble identifying the flowers. His visit to the botanical garden is therefore to find the plants and flowers that appear similar and to read their names from the name plates attached to the plants. The plates remind him of fried tofu with miso on top (*dengaku dōfu*, a reference to the title of this short narrative). But before he enters, he is stopped by a voice that comes from a dark office. As it is a bright and sunny day, Kimura cannot initially make out who is speaking to him. The man, who turns out to be a guard who is employed at the garden, seems to be holding a stick with what again looks like a piece of fried miso tofu (*dengaku dōfu*) attached to the end of it. He uses the stick, which turns out to be a fly swatter, to point to a box where Kimura must deposit his ticket. Kimura secretly makes fun of the official, who is too lazy to get up or speak and instead uses the swatter to gesture what he means.

To Kimura's dismay, the garden does not have many of the Western plants that he came to see, and those that are there often do not have a name plate. The garden is old and scruffy. A sign that says 'this way for more gardens' leads to a muddy pond overgrown with weeds. The story ends with Kimura sitting down, looking at the various areas of the garden being taken over by children playing and studying, and feeling at peace with his situation. The last sentence reads: 'It seems that, as of late, Kimura has become an extreme optimist'.

How do we interpret 'Dengaku dōfu'? From the outset, Kimura's social ineptitude is made clear through the depiction of his inadequacies as a translator. At first, Kimura is praised for his translations but criticized for the fact that he is unable to produce any work of his own. Yet, with the arrival of a new critic on the literary scene, even his translations are branded unfit and full of interpretational errors. This theme persists throughout the narrative. He is unable to categorize and name the plants and seeds he buys from the market, where the availability of commodities has shifted from Japanese to Western plants. When he visits the botanical garden in the hopes of finding the plants that he is seeking to name, he is not even able to properly identify the labels that are attached to the plants containing their origins and official categorization. Instead, he identifies it by a material object that is familiar to him: a block of plain white tofu. He makes the same mistake regarding the guard's flyswatter, which he finds similar in appearance to the explanatory cards.

An important theme is thus Kimura's inability to interpret the world around him. Not only are his abilities as a translator put into question, but his failure to absorb criticism is judged negatively by those around him. Even his wife, who is initially on Kimura's side when he is publicly criticized in the newspaper for his bad translations, resents his defensive attitude. Kimura's wife is also put off by his passive attitude toward the slander he receives and his indifference to its consequences for his reputation. When he visits the hat store, we are once more confronted with Kimura's stubbornness when he dismisses the clerk's fashion advice. A miscommunication ensues between the clerk, whose advice is based on a grasp of the latest fashion, and Kimura, who is only interested in the hat's usefulness rather than its appearance, even when the store clerk mocks him. During his interaction with the guard in the garden, we are witness to a similar breakdown of communication.

Initially, blinded by the sun, Kimura is not even able to see the guard but is only able to discern what to him looks like a floating block of tofu. Kimura secretly ridicules the guard who, instead of using words to communicate, repurposes (*ryūyō*) his flyswatter as a tool to signal to Kimura where to put his ticket. Kimura's inability to understand the guard's signals further emphasizes his resistance to the social cues around him. By not adapting to his environment and dismissing the critical gaze of others, he becomes ostracized. The critic publicly tarnishes his reputation, his wife has lost respect for him, the store clerk derides his sense of fashion, and the guard at the garden practically dismisses his presence altogether. These palpable tensions create a divide between Kimura and his surroundings and give the reader the impression of a changing world and a bitter, aging man who is unable to keep up, stubbornly holding on to a past that has lost its meaning.

Thus, in contrast to Umeko and Yuriko, Kimura shows an utter lack of awareness of his own position in society. His understanding of the world is grounded in its materiality. We see this when Kimura argues with his wife about the cost of a hat. The wife places a higher degree of importance on being in tune with the times and picking a hat that shows one's sense of good taste. But Kimura is fixated on price and bickers with his wife about the cost of a new hat. When Kimura mocks the way in which the guard repurposes his flyswatter, his fixation is on the materiality of the swatter itself and the initial purpose of its design and thus demonstrates a rigid interpretation of the objects around him and an exaggerated attachment to their utility. The same is true for the hat he eventually decides to purchase. Even after the clerk has expressly states that the type of hat Kimura wants is now worn by laborers, he still decides to wear the hat for its utility. When he sees that indeed the laborers in the street are wearing hats like his, he praises them for their understanding of the hat's material usefulness: 'There are still people wearing this hat who have not forgotten that a summer hat is for blocking the sun'. Kimura is thus unable to see the hat in terms of its sign-value: something that connotes class, social status, and (a lack of) prestige. He is not even able to correctly identify the class to which he himself belongs and fancies himself a laborer, too: 'You wouldn't tell by the looks of me, but I also perform labor'. He is also completely unaware of the fact that the garden, which he observes with a feeling of nostalgic contentment, has fallen into decay and as a result has been repurposed as a playground for children. The garden as he knew it no longer exists. An old sign promising to lead to another garden instead points to a puddle of mud and weeds. This final scene is especially ironic. For all his ignorant mocking of things being repurposed and reassigned a different role conforming to changing social settings, he seems oblivious to the fact that things that are not tended to, i.e., that are not kept up to date, will eventually fall into decay, become irrelevant, or are reused for different purposes. The final scene therefore takes on an added significance. As readers, we are left with the image of a silly caricature of a man, clinging on to a hat that is not for him, who does not understand the changing world around him or his own position in it. Kimura's arrogance haunts him and, although he is himself unaware, leads to his social demise. The reference to the school for the blind appears in jest, as Kimura is himself blind to the consequences of his social impotence. The last line of the text, in which he is labeled an excessive optimist, should therefore be understood as a sarcastic remark on his stubborn personality and his unwillingness to see the indefensibility of his own stance toward the world around him. And yet, 'Dengaku dōfu' should not be read as a personal attack on Kimura nor as a critical comment on the absence or impossibility of the manifestation of agency in the consumer. Rather, consumers can acquire agency through a 'correct' interpretation of the sign-value ascribed to consumer objects. It is not that Kimura is not able to consume (as, in the end, he does buy a hat). But because his understanding of the world is fixed in its material utility, he becomes a comical representation of a man who is unable to decipher the social cues implied in this materiality. The story is thus a humorous yet compelling warning for those unable to acquire the right sense of *shumi*.

The protagonist of 'Dengaku dōfu' is presented as a deterrent, laced with a good dose of irony and humor, for those who resist change and are inevitably left behind. Although

Mitsukoshi is never explicitly mentioned in this short story, it is no coincidence that in the original publication in Mitsukoshi's PR-magazine, the story is preceded by a full-page ad containing a large picture of a Western style shoe accompanied by the text: 'A time in which we should become familiar with Western fashion'. The advertisement works in tandem with the story, which in turn serves as another sign-object, a consumable product ready to be interpreted, appropriated, and repurposed by Mitsukoshi's customers.

## 6. Interrogating the Evil Master: 'Ryūkō' and the Complicit Consumer

Finally, we arrive at the analysis of the last story, entitled 'Ryūkō'. Published in *Mitsukoshi* in June 1911, 'Ryūkō' is told by a first-person narrator, who finds himself in a humid, dark hallway that is designed in a Gothic style. The narrator's mind is hazy, and he cannot remember why he is there. He only remembers that he has been there before. After a few moments, a door opens and a black servant ushers him into a bright, spacious room decorated in an art nouveau style. He is greeted by the master of the house, who seems familiar to the narrator. While he talks to the master, who nonchalantly leans against his desk during the conversation, he notices that the servants coming and going are never the same people. The master explains that the servants rotate and are never around for longer than one part of a day. Moreover, to the narrator's surprise, these servants give the master money before they leave. The master reveals that anyone who wants to become part of the latest trend or has the desire to popularize something must serve this master before it becomes so. Anything he touches or graces with his presence becomes fashionable (*ryūkō*). In the final scene, a clerk from Mitsukoshi comes to the villa to present the new summer collection. The narrator notices that the pockets of each item are sown shut. Upon opening them, the master reaches into the pockets and pulls out one hundred Yen bills, which he proceeds to throw away. The master turns to the narrator and says for the second time: 'you're worried about the morality of it all again, aren't you', before the narrator is suddenly awakened by loud thunder and finds himself leaning over his desk, where he had fallen asleep, looking at a book on how to become a dandy.

As in the case of 'Saezuri' and 'Dengaku dōfu', the exaggerated and pastiche-like representation of the department store as a facilitator of extravagance and decadence makes 'Ryūkō' a highly entertaining narrative. Indeed, entertainment may well have been its primary aim. But when we read closely, it becomes apparent that 'Ryūkō' is a cynical observation of the absurdity of an economy driven by consumerism and its rationalizations, in which consumer objects dictate social hierarchies. If we assume that the discourse of *shumi* produces aesthetic communities, then we may contend that Umeko and Yuriko are at the center of such a community, and Kimura is at its periphery. However, the morally problematic relationships that develop between the characters in 'Ryūkō' push the rhetoric of *shumi* and *ryūkō* to its extremes and shed light on the ambiguities inherent to such a system's ethically questionable consequences. As such, it is a form of metacommentary on the moral cost of such a dynamic and the consumer's complicity in it. This becomes clear in the following scene, in which the master proposes a plan to keep up with the heavy demand of producers to be in his presence:

「なんでもかう流行らせて遣らなくてはならない女が多くなつては始末に行けないから、流行希望の女に番號札を賣つて遣るのだ。その遣方は例のTetzelとか云ふ坊主が、San Pietro寺建立のお札を賣つたやうに、車に乗つて辻に立つて賣らせるのだ。その札を持った奴の爲めに、僕は面倒だけれど、日を極めて置いて、丁度アメリカの大統領の面會日のやうに、握手をして遣るのだね。番號順で僕の前をdéfiléをして通れば好いのだ。僕は只立つてゐてちよつかいを出して遣れば好いのだ。」

"It is not good if the number of women I must make popular become too many, so I will sell the women who aspire to becoming popular a numbered ticket. I'll stand on a cart in the middle of the road and have people sell tickets, much in the same way that friar Tetzel did with the construction of the San Pietro basilisk. Those people with a ticket, even though it is a hassle for me, will be assigned a

date on which they can come and meet me and shake my hand, like the way the president of the United States does. They can just form a defile and pass in front of me in the order of the number on their ticket. I can just stand there and make small talk.”

The scene depicts the distribution of human interaction driven by a market economy. The will of producers and consumers to grow their popularity and stay relevant is so strong that the master is forced to come up with a plan to streamline the demand. Whereas at first it would suffice to be in the service of the master’s household, now people are forced to buy a ticket and form a line as they pass by him. Both the religious and political references are indicative of the master’s plan: the master not only serves a symbolic role like a president, but he is to be worshiped like a god. The effect of affiliating oneself with the latest trends is like donating money to church funds in return for indulgences or shaking the hand of the president of a country, in that the pure association with such a ‘brand’ simultaneously provides redemption, prestige, and a sense of belonging. Consumers are presented the illusion of choice to assert some type of distinctive identity, when in fact they are simply reacting to the images of a consumer society.

In such a system, there is a shift in the value of money. This is especially evident in the scene in which the Mitsukoshi clerk arrives at the master’s house and tenaciously urges the master to examine a new product range, but the master finds the pockets of the clothes sown shut.

「開けないか」と、主人が號令をするやうな調子で云ふと、紳士は女の持つボンパドウルのやうな小草包の中から、剪刀を一本出して、紅白の絲を切った。

己は不思議に思ひながら見てみると、主人は例の不精らしい手附きをして、どの隠しからも、驚く勿れ、百圓札を一枚づゝ引き出して、卓の傍に置いてある、紙屑籠のやうな物の中へ抛り込んでみる。

“Could you open this?” said the master in a commanding voice, and the gentleman took out a pair of scissors out from a tiny pompadour-like bag, the type usually carried by a woman, and cut the red and white thread.

As I looked on in bewilderment, the master, again with his nonchalant hand gestures, started pulling out one hundred Yen bills from each of the pockets, one by one, and, I could not believe it, threw them into what looked like a waste basket that stood next to the desk.

In this scene, no longer does money function as one end of the balance of exchange-value. The master even sees the money as a burden, ordering the clerk from Mitsukoshi to not insert so many bills into the clothes as it takes up too much of his time to extract them. The master even throws the money into a waste basket next to his desk. Money is clearly not the goal for the master. Yet, he shows a keen awareness of its power. When asked by the narrator why he has his servants leave a sum of money on their way out, he replies that this is the least the staff can do for him in exchange for his time and attention. In the case of the indulgences, he does not give the tickets for his defile away for free but rather forces people to buy one. In the case of Mitsukoshi’s clerk, he does not reject the money he is offered but only throws it out and asks the clerk to streamline the process for the sake of efficiency. The master appreciates the fact that the circulation of money influences the symbolic value of both the consumer objects and the social status of those who consume and appropriate them. The cycle of perpetual spending thus reveals the inverse relationship between objects and subjects that such a system produces.

How should we understand the relationship between the master and the narrator? The master is an illustrious figure, and it is not immediately clear what his role is, although several scholars have speculated as to his significance.<sup>26</sup> At first sight, we are led to believe that he is an evil master who takes advantage of his staff. However, the existence of the master goes beyond that of evil tyrant. Rather, he serves to rationalize and justify the system of lavish spending. The master is, in this capacity, the embodiment of the notion of



*shumi*, which, as mentioned, was shrewdly and frequently used in Mitsukoshi's marketing campaigns and PR-magazines to rationalize the ongoing pursuit for newer and better things.

To make sense of the elusive nature of the master, we must first shift our focus to the function of the narrator. His presence is perhaps the most mysterious of all. Throughout the narrative, he maintains that he feels dizzy and drowsy. I return to the narrator's initial impression of the master:

一人の男が両手で額を支へて、卓に寄り掛つてゐたのが、不精らしく立ち上がつて、一步己の前に進んで来て、握手をした。涼しげな、明るい色の背廣を着てゐる。年は三十と四十との間である。... 己はその男の顔をちつと見た。貴族的な、立派な顔に、生活の受用から來たらしい疲れが、二三の鋭い線を刻み付けてゐる。此顔は度々見たことのある顔である。併し誰だと云ふことは記憶しない。それがきのふ別れて今逢つたやうに、極親しい物の言ひやうをする。己はそれを當り前のやうに感じてゐる。

The man who was holding his forehead with both hands and leaned on the desk stood up nonchalantly, took one step forward, and shook my hand. He was wearing a cool-looking, lightly colored jacket. He was between thirty and forty years of age. ... I stared at the man's face intently. The fatigue that comes from the enjoyment of life ingrained two or three deep wrinkles in his aristocratic, refined face. I have seen this face many times before. But I cannot recall who it is. He talked to me in a very familiar way, as if we had parted ways yesterday and now saw each other again. It felt as the most normal thing in the world to me.

Using his hazy state of mind, the narrator feigns innocence. He often comments on the problematic behavior of the master and the fragile position of the staff from the perspective of a virtuous bystander. This, too, is an effect of a dependency on the faculty of taste. Mitsukoshi's emphasis on *shumi* as a rationalization of conspicuous consumption was simultaneously a calculated way to deprive its customers of a sense of autonomy. As Walter Benjamin argued, taste, as a concept, is much easier to control and manipulate than expertise (Benjamin 2006, p. 131). The reliance on socially contingent aesthetic judgment effectively removed the consumer from knowledge of provenance and quality and propelled them into the opaque realm of malleable taste, which, as we have seen, is a hollow sign whose material content is always subject to change.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the development of *shumi* serves as a means to exclude the consumer from expert knowledge while packaging the act of consumption as a way to gain access back into it. Mitsukoshi thus cultivated a sense of complacency in its customers while establishing itself as a cultural leader of the growing socio-economic elite.

It is precisely this complacency that we recognize in the narrator of Ōgai's short story 'Ryūkō'. From the outset, the narrator indicates that his mind is hazy and that he cannot remember how he got to the house of the master, only that he has been there before. In addition, he can vaguely recall having met the master before, but he cannot remember who he is or the circumstances of their previous encounter. As such, the master is not described as a man but as a collection of physical features: dressed in a stylish fashion, some wrinkles in his aristocratic looking face, nonchalant gesturing, etc. The haziness of mind and memory persists throughout the story and is vocalized by the narrator on multiple occasions. For example, when the master tells the narrator that the staff pay him instead of the other way around, the narrator thinks he has misheard or misunderstood the master on account of his diminished condition. The psychological state of the narrator is one of undefined unrest, a feeling of eeriness and sometimes even disgust at what the master is telling him. The outlandish nature of the narrative is, of course, supported by the fact that the narrator is in a dream state. Yet at no point does he attempt to escape or intervene in the scene. He is always in the position of the onlooker, who seemingly maintains both his innocence and moral superiority by detaching himself from the events that are taking place and criticizing the situation from a distance.

The position assumed by the narrator, then, raises some critical questions about his own morality. For one, we notice that it is not him but the master who points out the moral objections against the system of consumption, production, and *ryūkō*. The narrator's moral objection only manifests as a vague sense of nausea or discomfort. However, he never vocalizes his outrage. His emotions are internalized and never made concrete. Moreover, we must consider the fact that when he wakes up at his desk, he finds a package from England containing a guidebook on how to become a dandy. Not only do we know that the book is an existing publication that contains a scene in which the dandy is bribed with bills inside the pockets of clothing,<sup>28</sup> but the very fact that he owns the book tells us that the master is not someone who he despises but someone who he envies. He wants to become a dandy, a flaneur, in his own right. This further emphasizes the problem of the morality of his position. Because of the presence of the book on his desk in the last scene, we are made aware of the fact that the narrator is a complicit participant in the morally reprehensible system of consumption that he pretends to reject. The frequent references to his foggy state of mind are an expression of an inability to consider his own role in a culture of consumerism. He is, in other words, an unwitting consumer, only able to judge the world without consideration for his own position in it.

This inability to judge his own positionality and to process the implications of the events that are taking place in front of him shows that the narrator is not acting rationally but emotionally. He is, in a way, relying on his (dis)taste. The reader is reminded of this several times by the repetition of the term 'uncomfortable feeling' (厭な心持). The feeling of disgust and his inability to verbalize his emotions emphasize the fact that his agency, his judgment, is no longer his own but is deferred to elsewhere. For example, when the Mitsukoshi clerk shows the new collection to the master, the narrator states that 'they are no doubt nice clothes, but their quality is lost on me' (さぞ好い服だらうか、己にはちつとも分からない). His inability to act of his own volition is further reflected in the fact that he moves only when he is either told by the master or when a servant leads him into a room, but even when he does not want to move, he acts at the commands of the master: 'The idea of having lunch served here is making me feel uncomfortable. "You are thinking about the morality of it all again, aren't you?" The master spoke with a pitiful smile on his face. "Well, let's go to the dining room." I got up from my chair and shuffled around'.

There is, in this mechanism of *shumi*, an element of the sublime. It is something overwhelming, in some cases even disgusting, something so unfathomable that the only possible response is an emotional, visceral one. And yet, the narrator feels familiarity toward the master. His unwitting complacency, here expressed through a repeated emphasis on a loss of memory, obscures an awareness of his complicity. His vague recollection of the master and his house reveal the fact that the narrator is a repeat offender, which is a fact that he has conveniently forgotten in order to retain an air of innocence.

In essence, the master and the narrator are the same, one a mirror of the other. The master is both the catalyst of the corruption of capitalism and consumption, which preys on the emotions and desires of people to gain popularity or assert a position of social dominance, and simultaneously the voice of a moral conscious, one that the narrator senses but can never express himself. The narrator, in turn, is an accomplice, an unsuspecting participant complicit in the crime of conspicuous consumption. Although he feels moral objections toward the upside-down world of the master and his servants, he nonetheless engages in its process and does so repeatedly while conveniently forgetting his past transgressions. He wakes up to a book on how to become a dandy, a flaneur. It was Benjamin who noted that the department store was an extension of the cityscape, a last refuge for the flaneur, whose idiosyncrasies prevent him from being able to disappear into the anonymity of the urban landscape. The mirror effect both magnifies and subverts the dynamic of the department store as a social space. Seeing and being seen, driven to this extreme, locates both the unsightly nature and the elusive disposition of consumption in the Other as well as in the self. This effect is similar to that of Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* (Poe 1998), in which the narrator deems the old man, who is also depicted as a mere set of features, a thief,

an ungraspable, immoral entity, even though in the end he is perhaps only a mirror of his own restless desires. As in Poe's short story, the master and the narrator in 'Ryūkō' both become flâneurs, facilitators of, as well as outsiders to, a system toward which they feign ignorance and innocence. The sudden shift in attitudes toward consumption, from a valuation of objects rooted in utility to one based on their sign-value that took place in early 20th century Japan following the efforts of stores such as Mitsukoshi, who framed their marketing campaigns around the highly emotive concepts of *shumi* and *ryūkō*, was premised on the production and continued existence of such an unwitting consumer, whose complicity is always both implicit and deferred, often to an external entity (an expert) or force. Ōgai's story therefore never presents the image of a dichotomy between an evil producer versus the consumer as victim. Rather, the world of consumption, in which the interplay between objects and the value that they hold beyond their utility or material reality dictates social relations, is presented as a sphere of energy, a gravitational force that pulls everything and everyone into its universe, without fail.

When we see the master and the narrator in a mirror relationship, the phrase 'again, you are worried about the morality of it all' (君またモラルを考へてみるよね) becomes both a reflection of the master seeing through the mind of the narrator who is disgusted with the master's immoral treatment of his staff as well as a recognition of the narrator's own morally compromised position. The hypocrisy of consumption is therefore not only represented by the seemingly unfair way in which the staff is treated by the master of the house but even more so by the narrator's inability to recognize his own moral complicity within that system.

This raises the question of why Mitsukoshi published Ōgai's short story in the first place. As others have pointed out, at first glance, the narrative is rather critical of the system that Mitsukoshi helped create.<sup>29</sup> As mentioned, although there is repeated referral to its morally questionable outcome, consumer society is posed much more ambiguously in 'Ryūkō' than a binary 'evil master/victim consumer' dynamic. In my view, the fact that Mitsukoshi decided to publish 'Ryūkō' solidifies the assertion that Mitsukoshi was in the business of producing a system of signs before anything else. In this case, Ōgai himself, as a well-known figure of the cultural and intellectual scene at the time, functions as a sign, a product through which consumers could elevate their status by association. This sign carries more weight than the content of the story, which moves between light entertainment and critical observation. The mirror relationship therefore also functions on a metalevel: Ōgai himself is a cog in the Mitsukoshi machine, a contract that benefited both Ōgai and Mitsukoshi. Ōgai disseminated his work among a broader readership, while Mitsukoshi strengthened its reputation as a cultural guide for those who suddenly found themselves having increased disposable means. The short story as sign-object, then, also functions as a mirror for our unwitting selves, who are, as consumers, urged to rethink our own moral positionality. By extension, Ōgai himself is no innocent author–observer but rather an active producer of objects of literary consumption, which in turn function as signs of a middle-class subjectivity. He, too, is complicit in the construction of specific aesthetic communities that are formed based on these identities, communities to which on the surface all are invited, but which are only accessible to the happy few. In a similar fashion, the notion of good taste, in its double function as a device to play on the emotions of the consumer and a way to rationalize irrational spending, was used to regulate access to these communities based on wealth—but more importantly on a person's ability to understand the unwritten rules and social cues that govern those communities.

'Ryūkō' is an allegory of a complex reality. That is that we, despite the obvious moral objections against a system in which consumer objects rule, are all, directly or indirectly, benefactors of such a system and are thus invested in its continued existence. At first glance, the slavish behavior of the staff, not coincidentally represented by (colonized) minorities (black/Irish), is morally reprehensible, as they are stripped from dignity and agency and are instead made dependent on the whims of the master. Yet, at closer inspection, we must conclude that they are simply on the other extreme of the same spectrum: a group

of people for whom there is at least as much at stake as for the master. As a result, they cannot forgo participation in the mill of *ryūkō*, of perpetually changing fads and fashions, for the alternative is the fate of the protagonist in 'Dengaku dōfu'. But for the narrator of 'Ryūkō' to justify such a stance, in which the consumer positions himself as a victim of the system that created him, he feigns ignorance: a type of memory loss that makes him oblivious to the moral reprehensibility of his actions, which perpetuates the system in which he is a willing participant. In a sense, the problematic rhetoric of *shumi* is the consumer's psychological sedative, soothing his conscience with each purchase. It is this precarious position with which the perceptive reader is confronted in the first-person narrator as the phantasmagorical mirror function of the master, who appears before us as an old acquaintance whose past indiscretions we would rather forget.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to situate the concept of *shumi* as a way to critically interrogate the mechanisms of consumption in early 20th century Japan. The modern department store, most notably Mitsukoshi, played a vital part in the construction of a culture that, in part, shaped the identity of a burgeoning middle class. Using its PR-magazine as a way to position itself as a retail industry leader and guide to social etiquette, Mitsukoshi and others deployed the notion of *shumi* to frame its marketing campaigns. Through the discourse of *shumi*, Mitsukoshi played on the emotions of consumers by manipulating their desires and anxieties and simultaneously rationalized a continuous cycle of lavish spending.

An examination of the term *shumi*, compared with the notion of taste as it is conceptualized in critical theory related to consumer society, has revealed the ambivalent and precarious nature of these words, despite the insistence of some on their equivalence. While there is admittedly considerable overlap between *shumi* and taste, the former generates its own specific, complex moral reality. Tracing Mitsukoshi's shrewd marketing strategies in their PR-magazine has unveiled the pivotal role the concept of *shumi* played in framing a rhetoric that justified excessive spending. As a result of these inquiries, one might be inclined to think of the relationship between Mitsukoshi and its customers solely as that of an exploitative, dominant institution and an oblivious, dominated consumer, rooted in unbridled indulgence in unnecessary things that simply line the pockets of manipulative marketers, as is the case in the works of Bourdieu and Benjamin, and to an extent in Baudrillard. However, a more careful consideration of the function of *shumi* (and perhaps retroactively of taste, also) shows that this balance of power is much more intricate.

Our analysis of three short stories by Mori Ōgai, published in Mitsukoshi's PR-magazine between 1911 and 1912, also emphasizes this intricacy. They demonstrate how the producers of *shumi* have much less control over the effects of their creations once they are in the world, while on the other hand, the complacency we seemed to recognize in the consumer is a concerted effort to forget their own complicity in a morally questionable system. The mechanism of *shumi* thus serves all those involved in the structure of consumption in unexpected ways, while producing its own ethical truth. Even though these stories, as others have pointed out, may be read as a critique of consumerism, Ōgai's narratives can in no way be classified as subversive. While each of them may be read as a commentary on a system of social relations held together by an anxiety to compare and compete, none of them present such a morality as completely black and white. Umeko and Yuriko function as hollow signs but are never condemned; Kimura loses his social credibility but is portrayed in a likable, comical manner; and although the interaction between the master and narrator is seemingly antagonistic, theirs is not presented as a dichotomy of evil versus good, but rather, it reveals the inevitably complicated relationship between consumer and facilitator. These characters are a reflection of the reader, who is constantly negotiating the morality of his own position in relation to the Other, thus forming a mirror of the reader's own positionality as a consumer. In turn, by participating in the Mitsukoshi brand, Ōgai himself is not an innocent bystander, observing events from

afar, but a complicit agent in the competition for more, forcing us to rethink the position of the author in the landscape of literary production.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a more complete overview of the early developments of Echigoya, see Takahashi Junjirō's history of Mitsukoshi's business strategies (Takahashi 1972, pp. 13–44). Additionally, in her discussion of great innovations that came out of the famous French department store Bon Marché, Rachel Bowlby argues that the notion of the so-called *prix unique* was both a way to get rid of the system of bargaining and price negotiations and stood for cheapness (Bowlby 1985, pp. 3–4). However, as Takahashi Junjirō rightly points out, the French department stores did not introduce their system of fixed prices until the middle of the 19th century, whereas Mitsui Takatoshi established the notion of *genkin yasuuiri kakene nashi*—which means 'cheap sales for cash without exaggerated prices,' whereby the term *kakene* refers to the inflated prices the merchants used as a starting position when bargaining with their customers—as early as the late 17th century. This means that Echigoya was far ahead of its European counterparts, installing capitalist policies even though they were operating under a feudal regime.
- <sup>2</sup> Takahashi was a prolific writer. His autobiographical musings provide many insights into his time studying abroad, his vision as a businessman, and the people he interacted with during his time at Mitsukoshi. See Takahashi's *Hōki no ato* (Takahashi 1933) and *Shumibukuro* (Takahashi 1935).
- <sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth overview of Hibi's background and his vision for the Mitsukoshi brand, see Hayashi (2013).
- <sup>4</sup> To the best of my knowledge, these three short stories have not been translated into English, but their titles would translate roughly to 'Chirping', 'Grilled Tofu', and 'In Vogue', respectively.
- <sup>5</sup> I examine the usages of *shumi* and their wider implications at length in my doctoral dissertation, tentatively entitled *Divisions of the Sensible: Shumi as Rhetoric of Pleasure, Self-Cultivation, and Consumption in Modern Japan* (to be submitted in early 2023), but for the sake of space and clarity, I shall refrain from discussing the topic in depth here.
- <sup>6</sup> Kurahito Tada (2020) mentions that the very first call to do away with all alternative translations for the word taste in favor of the term *shumi* first appears in a letter written by Yano Ryūkei in 1887, but the example of Shōyō's essay clearly shows a persistent ambiguity concerning the translation of the word. Terada Takao's survey of Meiji period dictionaries demonstrates that the first instance in which taste was translated as *shumi* or vice versa was in 1913 (Terada 2012, p. 144).
- <sup>7</sup> The connection between *shumi* as 'taste' being connected to a sense of nationhood or national cultural identity is not unique. Natsume Sōseki, for example, claims that taste (*shumi*) is locally produced (that is, within the traditions of the nation) and forms the basis for one's judgement of literature (Natsume 1994, p. 54).
- <sup>8</sup> This notion that objects of consumption take on a form of agency is at the heart of Baudrillard's thought. He delineates this line of argumentation very clearly in the introduction to his book *The System of Objects* (Baudrillard 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> For more detailed information on Yokogawa's work, see Yokogawa's autobiography annotated by Hasegawa Shūichi (Yokogawa 2010). For more background on the significance and impact of Yokogawa's ideas on the exterior and interior design of the Mitsukoshi buildings, see Hatsuda (1992). For more on the introduction of showcases and shop windows, see Tajima (1999) and Usui (2014).
- <sup>10</sup> The history of Mitsukoshi, and especially its transformation from an Edo-style dry goods store into a modern department store, has been told in a broad variety of sources with varying degrees of detail. In no particular order, they include: Jinno (1994, 2015); Wada (2020); Usui (2014); Takahashi (1972); Yamamoto (1999); Mine (1996); Hayashi (2013); Taniuchi and Katō (2018); Mitsuzono (2012); Tanaka (2021); Tipton (2012); Auestad (1998).
- <sup>11</sup> Hakuchō Masamune (1968), for example, reminisces about the allure that Mitsukoshi and the Imperial Theater had, especially in their capacity as cultural landmarks, linked by the marketing slogans produced by Mitsukoshi. Perhaps the most famous line of all was 'kyō wa teigeki, asu wa mitsukoshi' ('today the Imperial Theater, tomorrow Mitsukoshi'), which, by association with high art, was one of the phrases that put Mitsukoshi on the map as cultural leader.
- <sup>12</sup> Mark A. Jones has written extensively on the trope of children in Mitsukoshi's sales tactics and on the role of the various advisory committees and specialists that functioned as catalysts to rationalize spending. His chapter on Mitsukoshi to a great extent has informed my understanding of the ways in which lavish consumption was justified (Jones 2010, pp. 96–115). In addition, Jinno Yuki has written several studies on the historical development of Mitsukoshi's branding and products and includes detailed



information on the composition of the Ryūkōkai and other committees installed by Mitsukoshi (Jinno 1994, 2015). For more detailed information about the cultural and literary practices of these committees, see Sezaki (2013).

The organization of art installations and exhibitions also contributed to the allure and status of Mitsukoshi as a cultural leader. One acclaimed artist whose career was launched through participation in one of Mitsukoshi's design competitions was Hashiguchi Goyō (1880–1921). For a thorough examination of his oeuvre, including his entry for the Mitsukoshi competition, see Nishiyama (2015). For more details on Mitsukoshi and art, see Tanaka (2021) and Wixted (2017). For more on Mitsukoshi's role in the popularization of *mingei* in the Shōwa period, see Brandt (2007). For more on other various events organized by Mitsukoshi, see Tsuganesawa (1999).

For an overview of the various PR-magazines published by different department stores in early 20th century Japan, see Tsuchiya (1999). For an overview of Mitsukoshi's various magazines, their circulation and price, see Sezaki (2000a). For a visual overview of Mitsukoshi's PR-magazines, see Nishiyama (2014). The overview of Mitsukoshi's PR-magazine that follows is a summary of these three sources.

For a more detailed account of Mitsukoshi's growing customer base in the countryside and the numerous efforts to expand sales on a national scale, see Mitsuzono's chapter on the establishment of the Japanese mail order system.

While Nishiyama Junko interprets these words in a positive way (Nishiyama 2014, p. 33), Sezaki, in my view rightly, characterizes Hibi's phrases as a way to "obscure the desire to make a profit." (Sezaki 2000a, p. 67).

For a comprehensive overview of the history and usage of the term *ryūkō* from the Meiji period onward, see Sezaki (2008). For a similar account of *shumi*, specifically in the context of consumer culture, see Jinno (1994, 2015).

Curiously, Hans-Georg Gadamer makes similar observations concerning the relationship between taste and fashion in his seminal study *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 2013, pp. 32–39).

For a more detailed description of this work and the context of its publication, see (Sezaki 2000b).

For example, in the short story 「チエロオネ」 written by Mori Shige (Ōgai's wife), one of the protagonists says: "I'd love to go with you. There are lots of stores like Mitsukoshi abroad, but in Japan there is no store as splendid." (是非お供をいたしませう。あちらには三越の様なのが幾らもあるでございませうが、日本には外に類のない立派な店ですわ)。In 「お島」 by Okada Yachiyo, the opening reads: "As o-Shima came back from her trip downtown, she put a large package wrapped in a yellow *furoshiki* from Mitsukoshi on the slightly dirty floor of her room." (町から歸つて來たお島は、黄ろい三越の風呂敷に包んだ大きな包を薄穢ない寄宿の畳の上へドサリと置いた)。In 「歸り道」 by Osanai Kaoru, the protagonist states that he "went out to a certain dry goods store in Suruga-chō in Nihonbashi" and that the store "can without shame be called Japan's best." (私は日本橋駿河町の或呉服店へ出てみました。この呉服店はは先づ日本一と言っても恥づかしからぬ呉服店... )

Mitsukoshi issued two major literary competitions, so-called 懸賞文学, in 1907 and 1913, respectively.

By comparison, we know that Natsume Sōseki's salary as a lecturer at Tokyo Imperial University in 1907 was 800 Yen per annum.

Watanabe Yoshio interprets the conversation between Umeko and Yuriko as a guide to the reader on the latest affairs abroad as they unfolded (Watanabe 1989, pp. 94–95). Kaneko Sachiyo posits a similar interpretation, linking the conversation between Umeko and Yuriko, especially the segment about women's liberation, to Ōgai's detailed account of world affairs entitled *Mukudori tsūshin* (Kaneko 2011, pp. 349–68).

The only scholar who provides an in-depth analysis of 'Dengaku dōfu' is Sakai Satoshi, who argues that the name tags on which the names of the plants are written are symbolic for control (*kanri*) and the flyswatter is representative of destruction (*sesshō*). The story as whole, according to Sakai, therefore, signifies an oppressive political system to which Japan was subject during this period (Sakai 1991, pp. 36–37).

Naturalism was by far the most influential literary school in early 20th century Japan, but in the Japanese context, this movement gained the connotation of a need for 'confession', a mode of writing in which the author revealed his inner most thoughts. Not having something to confess is thus a harsh critique of both Kimura's writing style and his persona in general.

Yamasaki Kuninori's detailed article on Ōgai's relationship with Mitsukoshi and his role in the Ryūkōkai lists several sources not directly available to me overseas. According to Yamasaki, both Kobori Keiichi and Takemori Ten'yū understand the master as a mastermind who controls the seemingly free will of the people through consumption, to which Takemori adds that 'Ryūkō' as a literary work should be read as a piece of satire (Yamasaki 1989, pp. 176–77). Yamasaki himself sees in the interaction between the master and the narrator a type of schism in Ōgai himself, who was torn between his artistic self and his more commercial work for the Ryūkōkai (Yamasaki 1989, p. 178). Sakai Satoshi perceives the master as a personification of a sense of fashion, which usually exists as an invisible force within the masses (Sakai 1994, pp. 182–83).

Mark A. Jones has written extensively on the hiring of experts by Mitsukoshi in order to give legitimacy to the consumption of luxury goods. For example, children's toys were marketed with the backing of 'experts' from the then emerging field of child psychology who claimed that certain toys or objects were more beneficial for the child's development than others (Jones 2010, pp. 65–115).

Sagami Kumiko has written two articles on the significance of *D'Orsay or The Complete Dandy*, which appears in the final scene in which the narrator wakes up from his dream. Sagami demonstrates that this title is not a product of Ōgai's imagination but an

existing work. She goes on to show that contents served as a model for the master in 'Ryūkō' and introduces the structure of *D'Orsay* in detail (Sagami 2001, 2003).

- <sup>29</sup> Jinno also recognizes this critical undertone in Ōgai's short story but never fleshes out an argument about its possible implications (Jinno 1994, pp. 199–203). Her reading of 'Ryūkō' is mostly based on the detailed article on Ōgai's relationship with Mitsukoshi by Yamasaki to whom I referred earlier and on his interpretation of the story, who also understands 'Ryūkō' as a quiet critique against the way Mitsukoshi is building its brand and encouraging limitless spending. Sezaki Keiji shifts the focus from the master to the first-person narrator, whose psychology is torn between the two moralities of a consumption economy and its social consequences (Sezaki 2008, pp. 139–41). The only English language scholarship that mentions the existence of Ōgai's 'Ryūkō' is Noriko Aso, who understands the narrative as a warning against the excesses of "unbridled consumerism" (Aso 2014, pp. 188–89).

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