

Entwined with Shamisen

TANG DANIAN

Tang Danian is a filmmaker, screenwriter, and producer. He graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1989, majoring in screenwriting.

His screenwriting credits include *Good Morning, Beijing* (1990), *Beijing Bastards* (1993), *City Paradise* (2001), *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), and *Caught in the Web* (2012).

His directing credits include *Jade* (2000), *City Paradise* (2001), *Adolescence* (2006), *Miss Mom* (2020), and *The Three Strings—Exploring Dazai* (2022).

He also served as producer for *Hiding in the Dark* (2016).

Entwined with Shamisen¹

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I

They said we were “looking for Osamu Dazai,” but that was only a pretext. Where were we supposed to look? He had been dead for seventy years. We could do little more than wander through the places where he had once stayed. The places would remain, the people would be gone—and even the places themselves would have changed, altered in appearance and flavor. Nor did we intend to make a biographical film about Dazai. We were no experts on him, and none of us knew Japanese. Plenty of films about his life must already have been made. A bunch of half-trained amateurs like us had no business joining the clamor.

What we were really filming was Gouzi. A man of his particular shape and temperament, visiting Japan for the first time, turning up in its streets and alleys, eating and drinking, talking about Dazai, and talking about the “ultimate questions” he pursued all day long—death, suicide, relations between men and women, and so on. A person set down in unfamiliar surroundings; one country facing another; one writer facing another; the present facing the past: those tenuous, half-visible connections were bound to be interesting.²

Laolang and Gouzi had grown up together, and I had known them for nearly thirty years. We had spent a good many days knocking around together. We were close, relaxed, knew one another inside out, and could talk about anything. Laolang and I had traveled together many times. He was an excellent companion: considerate on the road, easygoing, attentive. He and Gouzi embodied two very different ways of living. Since we were making a film, the contrast was useful.

We wanted no production crew, and we were not afraid of rough edges. We used the barest equipment: one Sony camera and one external microphone. We had also brought a wireless lavalier microphone, a stabilizer, and a tripod, but quickly discovered that none of them was of any use.³

While planning the itinerary, I had originally wanted to spend a few nights in a capsule hotel in Tokyo. Apart from sleeping, everyone in a capsule hotel uses common areas; the guests come in every possible type, something amusing might happen, and the place would offer fresh visual material. Gouzi rejected the idea out of hand. It had to be a hotel, and he had to have a private room. He was afraid he would not rest properly.

1 The Chinese title 缠绕《三味线》 permits more than one defensible rendering. This translation uses *Entwined with Shamisen*. 三味线 (Japanese: *shamisen*) denotes a three-stringed plucked instrument; in the essay it also functions as the title of the film project. *Entangled with Shamisen* would be a more literal alternative.

2 The friends' nicknames are transliterated rather than domesticated: Gouzi (狗子, literally “Doggie”), Laolang (老狼, “Old Wolf”), Laochi (老弛, “Old Chi”; elsewhere identified as Zhang Chi), and Laohei (老黑, “Old Hei”). Their intimacy and comic roughness are part of the original register.

3 小蜜蜂, literally “little bee,” is a common Chinese nickname for a compact wireless lavalier-microphone system.



Wolf, Dog, Ox—Shamisen. Photograph by Tang Danian.⁴

In Laochi's telling, Gouzi followed a complete morning ritual and would not leave the house until every step was finished. He had to smoke enough cigarettes, drink his fill of tea, empty his bowels properly, then sit in a daze, read the newspaper, and listen to the radio. Only after moving methodically through the sequence would he begin the day. Laochi may have exaggerated a little, but judging from our life together in Japan, this was more or less accurate.

What sort of habit was this? His eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind all had to be brought into motion before he could see anyone or start the day. If that rhythm and those habits had come from a previous life, then Gouzi had probably been an aristocrat. His former station could hardly have been lower than Dazai's.⁵

II

I knew who Dazai was, of course, but I did not know his work well.

When I was in middle school, Fang Wen recommended *The Setting Sun* to me, but I could not get into it. Ten years ago I bought another copy and finished it in fragments while sitting on the toilet. How could I possibly have understood a book like that in middle school, I thought. Unless you had seen people laboring simply to stay alive, struggling like blades of grass, how could you understand the pain of the people in it?

For this film I bought a pile of Dazai's books. I read *No Longer Human*, his semi-autobiographical novel. I read *Tsugaru*, written during the war and concerned with his home region; the final chapter, in which he meets his old nurse again, is moving. I also read Villon's

4 The source caption reads “狼狗牛，三味线,” without enough punctuation or contextual information to establish the three identities with certainty. “Wolf, Dog, Ox” is a conservative reading of what appear to be nicknames.

5 The list “eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind” names the six sense faculties in Buddhist thought (Sanskrit *ṣaḍāyatana*). Tang humorously recasts them as parts of Gouzi's morning activation ritual.

Wife, among other works. Particularly useful was the Dazai special issue of the Chinese periodical *Zhi Ri*, which gave me a general sense of the man and his writing.⁶

Dazai did not live long. His life was not especially complicated, and he lived in relatively few places.

I developed a Buddhist way of looking at him. Buddhism teaches reincarnation: every living being has undergone countless births and deaths. It also speaks of six realms—gods, asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. Judging by Dazai’s personality and psychology, the fellow had probably been born into the human realm for the first time, or at least had not been here often. In ordinary life one meets many people full of “human flavor.” They are at home in human life and human relationships: capable, natural, practiced, harmonious, and tactful with others. For people like Dazai, however, human life is a burden. It is hard for them from birth, full of anxiety, fear, and maladjustment. Situations that seem perfectly normal to most people cause them profound discomfort, inexplicable distress, and timidity. Broadly speaking, the theme of Dazai’s life was the desire to “escape.” In Gouzi’s words, he always kept a suicide button close at hand; in his deck of cards, the joker was called Suicide.⁷

What is Dazai most famous for, if not “suicide”? At least five attempts are well known, and there were reportedly several others that were half in jest or difficult to classify. More peculiar still, in three of the five he dragged a woman along with him; two of those women died. This is why I suspect he came from the realm of hungry ghosts—a clever little ghost. “Forgive me for being born”: would it not be perfectly natural for a ghost to say such a thing? The words were borrowed from someone else, but they fit him so precisely that they became his unmistakable label.⁸

The Armenian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff said in the last century that human life is borrowed money: whenever you spend a portion of it, you must repay it at once, or you will end up ass-deep in debt and never know peace. Dazai belonged among those who had accumulated too much debt. In the end he repaid it through suicide, recovering, for himself at least, a measure of dignity. It is difficult to imagine a man who talked about suicide every day dragging himself on into his seventies or eighties.⁹

Dazai’s prose resembles that of Chinese writers in the 1930s and 1940s. Its lines of development, structures, and techniques are simple, and it often reads like the personal essay. In my view, he became famous not because he wrote especially well, but because he possessed a uniquely sickly emotional register and exposed it with disarming candor. Yet there was a trace of

6 Standard published English titles are used for Dazai’s works. The source identifies a Dazai special issue of the Chinese periodical *Zhi Ri* (知日) but supplies no issue number, publication date, or editor; a complete Chicago-style bibliographic record could therefore not be established.

7 The six realms are the realms of gods, asuras (jealous gods or demigods), humans, animals, hungry ghosts (*preta*), and hell beings. The source uses this cosmology speculatively and comically, not as a doctrinal argument.

8 The Japanese phrase 生れて、すみません。 (*Umarete, sumimasen*, rendered here as “Forgive me for being born”) appears as the subtitle to Dazai’s 1937 “二十世紀旗手” (“Standard-Bearer of the Twentieth Century”). Biographical accounts commonly trace the one-line poem to the obscure poet Jutarō Terauchi, so Tang’s statement that Dazai borrowed the phrase is consistent with the received account. Osamu Dazai, “二十世紀旗手,” Aozora Bunko, accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000035/files/234_19994.html.

9 No exact published English or Japanese source was located for the “borrowed money” formulation attributed here to G. I. Gurdjieff. It is therefore treated as Tang’s paraphrase rather than as a textually verified quotation.

cunning in that candor. He knew, at least in part, that he was confessing what others dared not confess—and that confession could win affection.

A film needs something to pick at; a little conflict makes it more entertaining. So I often contradicted Gouzi on purpose. I mocked Dazai for being immoral, forever dragging some woman along to die with him. In *Toward the Light*, he seduces Shizuko Ōta: affected, sour, and self-indulgent. I also disparaged Dazai's writing from time to time, saying it was not good enough. Gouzi always fought hard in his defense.¹⁰

Gradually I understood that what Gouzi felt for Dazai was not liking but love. Love may have no reason that can be explained. It is a resonance in the innermost depths, beyond reason and language. Most readers find Dazai defeated, decadent, and painfully contorted. Gouzi told me that reading him gave him strength.

Later, in many places in Japan, we heard people say that Dazai resonated because so many readers were as timid as he was: they saw themselves in his work and felt consoled.

Dazai's hometown, Kanagi, is remote countryside. Traveling there from Tokyo requires at least three changes of train.

Aomori produced another cultural celebrity, the artist Shikō Munakata, many of whose works draw on Buddhism. A monumental set of his woodcuts was displayed in the station concourse: a standing bodhisattva.

The small train to Kanagi was called the “Melos.” It took its name from Dazai's story “Run, Melos!” A complete edition of Dazai's works had been placed at the front of the carriage for passengers to read.¹¹

Kanagi was not only remote but declining. The streets were deserted; hardly a person could be seen. There was almost no commerce, and many houses stood shut, as though no one had lived in them for years. The entire town had only two taxis, which had to be summoned by telephone.

The Tsushima family home where Dazai was born has been renamed Shayōkan. It is both his former residence and a memorial museum. “Osamu Dazai” was a pen name; his family name was Tsushima and his given name Shūji. In those days the Tsushimas were local magnates—great landowners who also ran a bank. The front of the house was used to collect rents and conduct business; the family lived in the rear, where there was also a garden. Some rooms were

10 The Japanese work is Haruko Ōta, *Akarui Hō e: Chichi Dazai Osamu to Haha Ōta Shizuko* (明るい方へ 父・太宰治と母・太田静子), first published by Asahi Shimbun Publications in 2009 and issued in paperback in 2012.

Toward the Light follows the Chinese title given in Tang's source; a closer literal rendering of 明るい方へ is *Toward the Bright Side*. Asahi Shimbun Publications, “明るい方へ,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://publications.asahi.com/product/10714.html>.

11 The train name is verified: the Tsugaru Railway rolling stock is known as the 走れメロス号 (*Hashire Merosu-gō*), after Dazai's story. The presence of a complete Dazai edition for passengers is retained as an eyewitness observation but was not independently confirmed. Aomori Prefecture, “津軽鉄道,” Amazing AOMORI, accessed July 31, 2026, https://aomori-tourism.com/photos/detail_1082.html.

Japanese in style, others Western—much like the houses of many wealthy Chinese families of the same era, where East and West were combined.¹²

For all its fame, Shayōkan has little architectural beauty. Compared with the great residences of Kyoto, it is rather provincial.

Dazai took considerable pride in the old family house. According to the memoir of his wife, Michiko Tsushima, when she first accompanied him to Shayōkan during the war, Dazai asked what she thought. “It was several times grander than what I had been told,” she replied. “But even when I said I was astonished, he still seemed dissatisfied. Perhaps I should have said that my knees had gone weak with fright.” From the sound of it, Dazai must have bragged like hell to his wife.¹³

According to our guide, Dazai was oppressed even in this ancestral home. He was only one among many children; he could not even sit at the main table for meals. The eldest son alone would inherit the family enterprise.

From Aomori to Kanagi, Dazai was everywhere: Dazai lunchboxes, Dazai biscuits, Dazai handkerchiefs, Dazai matches. . . . Gouzi was dejected. How had the great writer he carried in his heart become a tourist calling card? Yet that is often how the world works. Whether or not your hometown nurtured you, once you become famous you are expected to contribute to it. Several places even compete to claim Pan Jinlian.¹⁴

In Kanagi we booked a Japanese-style inn outside the town, about fifteen minutes away by car.

When we opened the window, we saw a broad expanse of rice paddies. The seedlings had just been transplanted, their neat rows submerged in water that reflected the sky and clouds: a perfect rural scene.

The next morning, squeezed together in a taxi on our way into town, Gouzi said, “The weather is too fucking good. I opened the window this morning—the sky crystal clear, the sun thin and bright—Jesus, I couldn’t take it. My legs went weak. I shut the window at once.”

“Why?” I asked.

He kept saying he could not stand it. “What the fuck is this clear weather, all this goddamned sunshine? I can’t take it. Clear skies scare me. I like overcast days. Better still if it rains a little. Then I can settle down.”

12 Goshogawara City identifies the building as the residence commissioned by Dazai’s father, Tsushima Gen’emon, completed in 1907 and later converted into the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum “Shayōkan.” The city also records Dazai’s own description of it as “merely large,” with “no charm.” Goshogawara City, “太宰治記念館『斜陽館』,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://www.city.goshogawara.lg.jp/kyouiku/bunka/syayokan.html>.

13 The memoir is Michiko Tsushima, *Kaisō no Dazai Osamu* (回想の太宰治; Tokyo: Kodansha, 2008), 333 pp., ISBN 978-4-06-290007-2. The Chinese source provides neither page number nor Japanese wording for this passage; the quotation is therefore retranslated from Tang’s Chinese. National Diet Library, “回想の太宰治,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://ndlsearch.ndl.go.jp/books/R100000002-I000009302815>.

14 Pan Jinlian is a notorious adulterous woman in the Chinese literary tradition, appearing in *Water Margin* and centrally in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Tang alludes to modern localities competing to claim her as a cultural-tourism figure.

I had read an account by Mika Ninagawa—who had just directed a new film version of *No Longer Human*—of the moment she learned that her father had died. She was getting into a taxi and happened to look up: “The sky was so beautiful it seemed intent on killing someone.”¹⁵

Was it the same for Gouzi—the feeling that fine weather might kill him?

As I have grown older, I too have become more sensitive to weather. If I wake to an overcast day, a faint displeasure rises in me; a clear day feels much easier. Yet I once spent several months in Southern California, where the sky blazed furiously blue every day and dazzling sunlight was everywhere. That, too, could make a person feel insane.



The view from the Japanese-style inn in Kanagi. Photograph by Tang Danian.

Gouzi had already ruined his stomach with drink. Even beer had to be heated before he could swallow it; this had become part of the Gouzi legend. His own explanation was that when he was young he could not speak to people unless he drank something first. He also said he had been raised by his maternal grandmother and had never called anyone “Dad,” “Mom,” or “Sister” at home. Such forms of address were unimaginable to him; he could not force them out of his mouth.

Most of the times I saw Gouzi, we were at a drinking table. Usually he would arrive, sit down, and say nothing. Then he would rapidly drain glass after glass and begin to grow excited. Holding up his cup and preparing to speak, he would stand, sit, sit, stand, never quite complete a

¹⁵ The exact Japanese source and wording of the Mika Ninagawa quotation could not be identified from the information supplied in the Chinese text. The sentence is therefore presented as a retranslation of Tang’s Chinese quotation, not as a direct quotation from a verified Japanese publication.

sentence, and drink a good deal more. Soon he would collapse into unconsciousness. Once again, there was nothing to say.

During filming we would stop people at random and ask them questions. The most important question in Gouzi's regular repertoire was: "Why do you think Osamu Dazai killed himself?"

The Japanese people we asked became hesitant at once. They murmured and paused, sinking into thought, as though trying to place themselves inside a particular situation and feel it from within. Most answered speculatively and haltingly. Very few simply opened their mouths and blustered whatever came to mind. This left a deep impression on me. Perhaps it showed a reverence for matters of life and death.

Gouzi interviewed people just as he spoke in ordinary life: in fragments, stammering, rarely producing a complete sentence. His thoughts wandered wherever they pleased. I could not tell whether this was his own peculiar interview technique or simply his habitual way of speaking. For the first few days it did not matter. After a week, however, I was increasingly exhausted. Holding the camera all day left my whole body aching, and Gouzi's inexplicable drifting off, blank staring, and falling silent during interviews began to infuriate me. I had long known that fear can make people angry without their noticing. This time I learned that physical fatigue can do the same. Once I understood what was happening inside me, the feeling mostly passed; I never truly became angry over any of it.

III

A long-winded digression is necessary here to explain how this filming trip to Japan came about. It is a long story indeed.

That year marked the seventieth anniversary of Dazai's death. Gouzi heard from some unknown source that Dazai's daughter, Haruko Ōta, had written a book called *Toward the Light*. Xiju Bookshop therefore approached New Star Press, which arranged for the book to be translated and published. Li Hao, who handled rights contacts for New Star, got in touch with Asahi Shimbun Publications and, through the publisher, with the author. It seemed possible that we might interview her on video while in Japan.

What sort of book was *Toward the Light*? Begin with its author. Haruko Ōta was the daughter born outside marriage to Osamu Dazai and Shizuko Ōta, and she became a writer herself. The book tells the story of her father and mother.

Shizuko Ōta was a young woman devoted to literature when Dazai took up with her. A descendant of a fallen aristocratic family, she was remarkably innocent. While carrying on with Shizuko, Dazai encouraged her to keep a diary, recording her life, circumstances, and feelings. She did so conscientiously and handed the diary to him. Dazai then used it as the basis for his masterpiece *The Setting Sun*. The novel took him to the summit of his literary career. In the dispirited atmosphere of postwar Japan it won a large following whose members were called the "Setting Sun tribe" (*shayō-zoku*). Shizuko's diary was published much later as *The Setting Sun Diary*; no Chinese translation had appeared at the time of our trip. Haruko Ōta, the daughter of Dazai and Shizuko, was likewise called the "daughter of *The Setting Sun*." Yet even while Shizuko was writing the diary, Dazai had already taken up with another literary young woman, Tomie Yamazaki, who would later drown with him. By the time Haruko was born, Dazai had long since lost interest in continuing his relationship with Shizuko, so the newborn daughter

never saw him. At least he acknowledged her in a letter before his death and gave her the name Haruko.¹⁶

As we know, *The Setting Sun* did not bear Shizuko Ōta's name and made no mention of her diary. Nor did she receive a penny of the royalties. After Dazai's death, representatives of the Tsushima family visited Shizuko, gave her a very small sum, and declared the relationship severed: from then on she would have nothing further to do with the family.

Zhang Chi and Gouzi took the interview very seriously. I did not. Even when we departed, no date had been confirmed, and New Star Press had not yet printed the book. Gouzi sent me an electronic copy of *Toward the Light*. I read it in fragments as we traveled and slowly developed a respect for its author. A daughter born outside marriage who had never seen her father wrote about her parents' relationship and her mother's life after abandonment with truthfulness, candor, and no resentment.

When we reached Tokyo, the interview date was still unsettled. Our original plan had been to finish filming in Tokyo, go on to Aomori, and then return to China. Since the interview date was still uncertain, we filmed first in Mitaka and Kichijōji, went to Aomori midway through the trip, and then doubled back to Tokyo. All along the way, Gouzi, Laolang, and I kept talking about the book.

We had assumed the interview would take place at the offices of Asahi Shimbun Publications. Instead, we were invited to Haruko Ōta's home. We were delighted: a home would naturally offer far more atmosphere than a tedious conference room.

Haruko lived far from central Tokyo. I have forgotten the name of the city, but the train ride took more than an hour. For once, all three of us changed into slightly more formal clothes. We also arranged at the last minute for a second camera so that we could film with two cameras. When we left the train, an editor from Asahi was waiting in front of the station to lead us to her home.

It was an ordinary apartment building by the street. We arrived ten minutes early. The editor pressed the intercom, and Haruko's voice came through in Japanese. Our interpreter told us that she had apologized: she was still tidying up, and we should come upstairs in ten minutes.

I had not expected the apartment to be so small. Since it lay so far from central Tokyo and she had invited us to her home, I had imagined a large place. But once the three of us—together with the editor, the interpreter, and the second camera operator—were inside, there was scarcely room to put down a foot. A narrow passage opened into a sitting room with a dining table at its center and two plates of refreshments set out for guests. A floor-standing photocopier stood beside the table. Along the walls were cabinets with books and picture frames piled haphazardly on them. By the window were a small sofa, a low tea table, and a wicker chair. One or two people could barely stand among the furniture. Beyond a sliding door, two small tatami rooms were visible, both packed with books. More than a year had passed, so my memory must be wrong in many particulars, but the impression of simplicity and disorder cannot be mistaken. She

16 Asahi Shimbun Publications confirms that Haruko Ōta was the daughter of Dazai and Shizuko Ōta, never saw her father, and was named by him with the character 治 shared by his pen name 太宰治 and his given name 津島修治. The 2025 Chikuma edition combines Haruko's *Akarui Hō e* with Shizuko's *Shayō Nikki* (斜陽日記). Asahi Shimbun Publications, “明るい方へ,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://publications.asahi.com/product/13881.html>; Chikuma Shobo, “明るい方へ 父・太宰治と母・太田静子 / 斜陽日記,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://new.chikumashobo.co.jp/product/9784480440303/>.

had said through the intercom that she was tidying, though there was no visible sign of it—she had surely tidied, of course.

She did resemble Dazai somewhat. Sixty years old, perhaps? Her hair was disheveled, and she spoke very quickly. As soon as we sat down, she talked at length about an article she was writing against militarism. Some people in Japan, she said, were advocating constitutional revision and the establishment of armed forces. She was a pacifist and could not agree.

During the interview she said that her mother had often declared that the person she had wronged most was “the wife”—meaning Michiko, Dazai’s wife. Yet her mother never married and raised Haruko alone. Haruko insisted that what her mother and Dazai had shared was genuine feeling. At one point in Haruko’s childhood they lived in desperate poverty; when hunger became acute they even searched through rubbish bins. Haruko gathered some seashells, and her mother innocently imagined that the beautiful shells could be sold. Haruko still remembered the expressions on people’s faces when mother and daughter knocked from door to door offering them.

When the conversation turned to writing, she explained that she also taught, wrote art criticism, and lectured on artworks in museums. These activities made her economically independent and allowed her to write freely, without catering to editors or readers.

She mentioned that her daughter had once lived with her. The apartment looked like the home of one person; perhaps the daughter had married, perhaps she lived independently. Haruko never mentioned a husband. Was this another story of a single mother and daughter? This was only my idle speculation.

After we left Haruko Ōta’s home, all three of us, for reasons we could not quite explain, felt deeply moved by the writer.



Taking leave of Ms. Haruko Ōta. Photograph by Tang Danian.

IV

One evening in Mitaka we unexpectedly came upon a sign marking the former site of the place where Dazai had spent time shortly before his suicide. He had rented the second floor of an eel restaurant as a writing room. Seventy years earlier, on that rainy night, he and Tomie Yamazaki drank there, wandered to the Tamagawa Aqueduct, and threw themselves into the water. Today the water is shallow—by sight, it would not reach the waist—but the rain had reportedly swollen it that night. Yamazaki was resolute and bound the two of them together with a red cord. This time Dazai finally achieved what he had wished for.¹⁷

The eel restaurant had vanished, and the dirt path had become a pedestrian bridge over a broad street. “This was the final place of Dazai’s life,” I said. “Gouzi, you have to give us something here.” Gouzi wrapped a headband printed with Dazai’s name around his head, took a can of beer in one hand, jumped onto the steps, and began like Hamlet: “You have to stay alive; dying can’t guarantee your dignity. . . .” He addressed the empty air as though Dazai were there, as though two drunks at the same table had struck up a conversation.

Near Ginza 4-chōme is a bar Dazai often visited, called Lupin. Its emblem is a monocled gentleman in a top hat with a slightly wicked expression, drawn from Arsène Lupin, the gentleman thief of French detective fiction.

The bar opened in the 1920s and was founded by a woman whose sketched portrait still hung on the wall behind the counter. By then the establishment was run by her son, who was older than even the bunch of us, all already past fifty.

The place was said to have teemed with famous people: Yasunari Kawabata, Sanjūgo Naoki, Yasujirō Ozu, and others were frequent visitors. Dazai, at the time, was at most a young writer beginning to attract notice. His famous photograph seated on a barstool was taken there. According to one story, the photographer had come to shoot someone else, and Dazai asked to be included—an opportunistic extra frame that became a masterpiece.¹⁸

17 Mitaka City records that Dazai entered the Tamagawa Aqueduct on June 13, 1948, and that the exact point remains uncertain. Official municipal materials verify the site and event but do not, in the sources consulted, verify the red-cord detail; that detail is retained from Tang’s narrative. Mitaka City, “市内の各スポット解説（三鷹駅前エリア）,” accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.city.mitaka.lg.jp/c_service/017/017073.html.

18 The Chinese source prints “川端康城,” an evident error for Yasunari Kawabata (川端康成); the verified name is used in the translation. Bar Lupin opened in 1928 and was frequented by writers including Kawabata, Sanjūgo Naoki, and Dazai. Dazai’s celebrated 1946 bar portrait was made by Tadahiko Hayashi. Time Out Tokyo, “Lupin,” January 16, 2015, <https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/bars-and-pubs/lupin>; Yokohama Museum of Art, “DAZAI Osamu in the Bar ‘Lupin,’ Ginza,” accessed July 31, 2026, <https://inventory.yokohama.art.museum/eng/5821>.



Re-creating Dazai. Photograph by Tang Danian.

The intersection of Ginza 4-chōme and Chūō-dōri must be one of the busiest street corners in the world. Almost every time I visit Tokyo, I come here to wander and buy two mame daifuku from a little shop on the corner.¹⁹

Gouzi stood at the intersection and read passages from *The Setting Sun*. It was nine or ten at night, but people still streamed past, many of them Chinese tourists. Almost no one stopped to watch. We did not look like street performers, so no one gave us money either. Gouzi read with complete absorption for a long time. The words became sound and mingled with the sounds of the street; their meaning blurred, but the feeling inside them remained, like music. Dazai could never have imagined that seventy years later a Chinese writer called Gouzi would stand here reading his novel in Chinese. The man named Osamu Dazai had died with his lover in the water seventy years before, yet the ripples he set in motion continued to climb and spread through time. Was this what he had hoped for? In any case, he could no longer take pride in it. As old Du Fu

¹⁹ *Mame daifuku* is a soft rice cake filled with sweet bean paste and studded with whole beans, commonly red peas or soybeans.

wrote of Li Bai: “A name for a thousand autumns and ten thousand years; lonely are the affairs that follow death.”²⁰

V

I took a very long time to write this short essay. Laochi kept berating me for my slowness and saying I was delaying Xiju’s various hundred-year plans. I began part of it in 2019 but never finished. Then, in 2020, COVID-19 swept the world and I was stranded in the United States.

Every day people lived amid panic, anxiety, rumors, ceaseless thought, and dread of the future. . . . None of it reached any conclusion.

“New York Lanlan,” who had been writing a continuing series about the pandemic in New York, was struck and killed by a truck while walking in the street.

On his phone, a Spanish doctor wept as he described being forced to remove a ventilator from a sixty-five-year-old patient so that it could be given to someone younger. The older patient would receive only sedatives to ease the pain and then wait for death.

At precisely this moment, Laohei brought his wife and parents-in-law from Australia to Los Angeles by way of Hawaii, because the two children he was expecting through surrogacy—a boy and a girl—were about to be born.

The governor of New York rapidly became a celebrity by delivering, every few days, speeches with the sweep of Hollywood blockbusters, rallying residents, police officers, National Guard troops, and doctors to fight the epidemic.

On the steps before St. Peter’s Basilica, the pope held a prayer service and delivered an *Urbi et Orbi* address to an empty, rain-soaked St. Peter’s Square. Behind him stood a special crucifix. During the Roman plague of 1522, that crucifix had been carried through the city’s streets in a sixteen-day procession, after which the epidemic was said to have receded.²¹

From the weekend through Monday, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche held a three-day Dharma assembly and prayed for the plague to subside.

I had brought to America a book called *Japanese Iroke*, which described relations between men and women in the Edo period:²²

20 Tang’s Chinese text gives “千秋万代名,” but the received line in Du Fu’s “梦李白二首·其二” is “千秋万岁名，寂寞身后事。” The canonical wording is translated here, and the variation in the source is disclosed rather than silently retained. Du Fu, “梦李白二首·其二,” Wikisource, accessed July 31, 2026, [https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/夢李白_\(浮雲終日行\)](https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/夢李白_(浮雲終日行)).

21 The Chinese source says “St. Paul’s Square,” but the March 27, 2020 extraordinary prayer and *Urbi et Orbi* blessing took place before St. Peter’s Basilica, facing an empty St. Peter’s Square; the factual slip is corrected in the translation. Vatican sources also record that the crucifix of San Marcello al Corso was carried through Rome for sixteen days, August 4-20, 1522, during the plague. Holy See Press Office, “Extraordinary Moment of Prayer Presided at by the Holy Father before Saint Peter’s Basilica,” March 27, 2020, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/27/200327e.html>; Vatican News, “Pope Francis’ Twin Prayers for an ‘End to the Pandemic,’” March 15, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/pope-francis-mary-prayer-crucifix-coronavirus.html>.

22 Japanese *iroke* (色気) can denote sensuality, erotic charm, allure, or sexual atmosphere; no single English equivalent covers its full range. The Chinese source gives only the title *Riben Seqi* (《日本色气》, here *Japanese Iroke*) and does not identify the author, translator, publisher, or edition. The quoted passage therefore could not be checked against its Japanese or Chinese source.

Those men and women who, “worn thin by love, pitiable and even foolish,” could not free themselves from it were like cherry blossoms opening in splendor: they died together for love, their fragrance and beauty extinguished. Content to listen to shamisen accompaniment while surrendering themselves to fantasies of death, they vanished midway through both love and life.

For some reason these words gave me a little more “understanding” of Dazai—no, not understanding: “imagination.”

All right. This is where I stop.

Postscript

Dazai once said: “Half my life has been a history of drinking to drown my gloom. Why did I have to drink? Because I am a weak man. If I tried to hold a serious conversation without drinking, I would be exhausted after thirty minutes or so. I would grow cringing and timid and feel that I could not bear it. But once I drank, I could disguise my feelings; even if I talked nonsense, I did not reproach myself so harshly inside. It was an enormous help.”²³

I no longer remember when I copied down these words about drinking. I could not decide where in the essay to wedge them, so I have left them here.

23 The core of this quotation is verified in Dazai’s essay “酒ぎらい” (“A Dislike of Sake”), first published in *Chisei* 3, no. 3 (March 1, 1940). The Japanese text includes the passage beginning “私は、弱い男であるから” (“Because I am a weak man”), but the opening sentence in Tang’s quotation - “Half my life has been a history of drinking to drown my gloom” - was not located in that essay. It is retained and translated from the Chinese while the discrepancy is recorded here. Osamu Dazai, “酒ぎらい,” Aozora Bunko, accessed July 31, 2026, https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000035/files/18350_32522.html.