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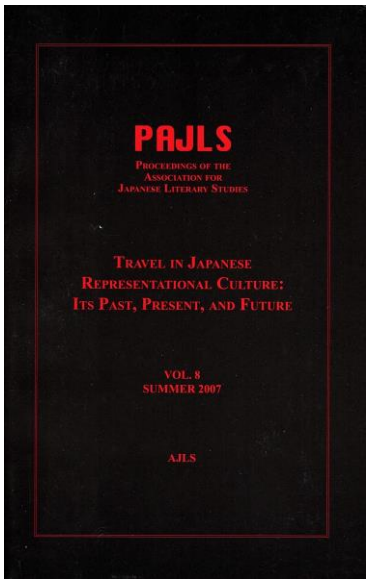

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HIRABAYASHI TAIKO'S SYMBOLIC REALITY

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Like many writers of her generation, Hirabayashi Taiko was always a woman on the move. In 1923, the year of the Great Kanto Earthquake, she spent even more time than usual living in transit. This is what happened to her that year, as far as we know:

On 1 September 1923, the day of the earthquake, she was a month short of her eighteenth birthday. She and the man she was living with, nineteen-year-old Yamamoto Torazo, went out to look at the disaster and were tossed into prison for vagrancy; on the first night there, the only night they were able to spend together, she got pregnant. They were released from their separate imprisonments twenty-nine days later on the condition that they leave Tokyo. After passing through Shimonoseki, they arrived in January 1924 at the home of Yamamoto's older half-brother in Dairen, Manchuria. Yamamoto got a job through his brother, working for the South Manchurian Railway, but became involved with friends' inflammatory activities and sentenced to two years in prison. Taiko, unwilling to depend on her unpleasant brother-in-law, gave birth that June in a Dairen charity hospital but lost the baby, a girl named Akebono, shortly after to malnutrition and beriberi. In October, she left Yamamoto behind in prison and returned alone to Japan.

She wrote three pieces dealing with these experiences: "Throw it away!" from 1925, "In the Charity Ward" from 1927, and a portion of the novel/autobiography *Flower in the Desert* from 1955–57. (The latter, while hovering frustratingly between fiction and fact, is as close as we have to a detailed, objective record of Taiko's life in the 1920s and is valuable for this reason; as a literary work, however, it lacks the power and immediacy of the two short stories.) "In the Charity Ward," as its title suggests, focuses mostly on the circumstances surrounding the birth and death of the baby, touching briefly on the path leading to the charity hospital and emphasizing the heroine's left-wing sympathies. "Throw it away!" is not as well known, and probably less focused and finished as a short story, but important, to my way of thinking, in the history of women in proletarian literature. It follows Taiko and Yamamoto from Shimonoseki out to Manchuria and eventually back to Japan. "In the Charity Ward" can, in fact, be seen as a single expanded scene from "Throw it away!".

We have to look at these stories to understand what kind of interpretation Taiko herself gave to her own experiences. This process is both our analysis of the works and our attempt to answer some of the issues Taiko's existence raises. Why do I say "Taiko's existence" and not "Taiko's work"? The experiences which Taiko lived and then turned into works of literature were the facts of her life, without a doubt, but it's important to see them also as a potential metaphoric expression of her times in a larger sense. Taiko's life itself can be interpreted like a literary text. The fictional works which grew out of her actual experiences can be read as her own interpretations of that text from various angles.

Taiko's travels not only shaped her own life but drew a sketch-map of her time. I want to consider in particular her experiences during the year from September 1923 through August 1924, based on the historical facts and her fictional writings.

First of all: why was the Nagano-born Taiko in Tokyo for the earthquake in the first place? Third daughter of a good Shinshu family fallen on hard times, Taiko spent her elementary school days reading novels while minding the family's small store. Unlike her sisters, who had left school to work in factories and then marry, Taiko wanted to go on to further education, but her parents could ill spare the money. On condition that she take first place in the exams—which she did—Taiko was permitted to enter Suwa Girls' High School. However, for a girl who read the socialist magazine "The Sower" and corresponded with big names in socialism like Sakai Toshihiko and his daughter Magara, the "good wife, wise mother" education offered at Suwa Girls' under Tsuchiya Bunmei was hardly ideal. Taiko was restless. Her first escape attempt was during a school trip, but a frightened classmate spilled the beans and she was immediately brought back. The second time was the day of her high school graduation, and this time no one tried to hold her back. Her father carried her luggage as far as Kami-Suwa Station for her, telling her (or so the story goes) "If you're going to end up an Amazon, be a first-class one!"[1]

Taiko in Tokyo, an Amazon at sixteen. March, 1922. She got a job as a switchboard operator, meanwhile studying English and hanging out with socialists, meeting Sakai Toshihiko's Bolshevist colleagues and going to meetings of Sakai Magara's leftist women's group, the Sekirankai. Through these connections she met the young anarchist Yamamoto Torazo.

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[1] Taiko: "*Watashi no rirekisho*," 1966.

This trip to Tokyo was Taiko's first geographic/symbolic journey. Coming from Suwa to Tokyo meant, in the simplest sense, coming from her family's values and the constriction of marriage to socialism and free love. She was an example of so many left-wing young people coming to the center of socialism at the time: the compilers of her favorite magazine "The Sower" from Tsuchizaki in Akita, Sata (Kubokawa) Ineko from Saga, Hayashi Fumiko from Onomichi, Tsuboi Sakae and company from Shodojima in Kagawa, Itoh Noe from Fukuoka, and so on. The ideological and emotional power drawing them in to the possibilities of the capital can be seen in Taiko's escapade too.

So there she was in Tokyo, living with Yamamoto, when the earthquake happened. How did that disaster on an unheard-of scale affect her? The two of them—unemployed, constantly in trouble with the police for their left-wing leanings, living hand-to-mouth—survived the quake itself unhurt. Then, according to *Flower in the Desert*, Taiko's literary curiosity exploded, and she dragged a reluctant Yamamoto out to observe the ruins. 'Not far away, next to the Imperial Hotel, was a building sending up particularly brilliant flames. 'What's that?' I asked the man standing next to me. 'That's Police Headquarters.' 'Yay! Hurray!' Itoh (Yamamoto) and I clapped our hands and celebrated, paying no attention to what the people around us might think. How terribly satisfying for the wretched police to be ablaze! 'We're all equal now. It's not just the two of us who are miserable any more.'" [2]

For Taiko, the experience of the earthquake bore no relation to the general tragedy, expressed by Gotoh Shimpei as "The glories of yesterday have suddenly plunged into the lowest depths."[3] Rather, she was thrilled to find the familiar territory of the depths full of new and interesting scenery. "I said to Itoh, 'This kind of big event doesn't come along but once in a century. Let's go out and look at it properly!' "The two of them spent a little too much time wandering around and got themselves arrested. " 'Hey! You throwing the woman in with the man?' one of the jailers demanded in exasperation. The other one, obviously the senior, shrugged. 'Who cares? They're married, right?' From this I understood that the shock of the earthquake had caused a state of emergency, overthrowing all rational rules, even here."[4]

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[2] Taiko: *Flower in the Desert*, 1955.
[3] Gotoh: "*Fukkyou ni tsuite tenka no seinen ni atau*," 1923. Quoted in Suzuki.
[4] Taiko: *Flower in the Desert*.

Taiko's experience of the earthquake was not tragedy but an overthrowing of all order. The confusion after the quake provided fertile ground for atrocities like the government-sponsored mass murder of Japanese Koreans, the Kameido police murders of Hirasawa Keishichi and six other labor activists, and the murder by MPs of Osugi Sakae, Itoh Noe and Tachibana Soichi.

Like Taiko and Yamamoto, Osugi and Noe were arrested as husband and wife, and murdered in the flurry along with Osugi's seven-year-old nephew Soichi. And yet, as far as Taiko and Yamamoto were concerned, the overturned order of things was overturned one more time and the confusion led to new life instead of death. In the single night that Taiko was with Yamamoto in prison, she became pregnant.

After being confined (separately) for twenty-nine days, Taiko and Yamamoto were released on the condition that they get out of Tokyo. With their unborn daughter, they wandered down as far as Shimonoseki, and eventually, hoping for support from Yamamoto's half-brother who worked for the South Manchurian Railway, took ship to Dairen.

This journey from Tokyo to Dairen is the most broadly significant of all. Tokyo: a city of contradictions even before the earthquake, and even more so after, for its left-wing children. The heart of the empire, the most meaningful place of struggle, a giant publishing house for half a hundred (over time) left-wing newspapers and magazines of all kinds, the place where socialist and feminist movements came to fruition, the one city young socialists from all over the country had to come to before they could grow up—the "center of culture, the capital and the capital of thought, the most productive space for action," as Katayama Sen put it twenty years before the earthquake.[5] And at the same time, the heart of the empire, the most tightly restricted environment, the most closely under the Emperor's unforgiving eye, the center of power for the "Special High" officers (better known in English as the thought police), the birthplace of the Peace Preservation Law of 1925, the seat of an increasingly fascistic government. The center of authority holding in itself the physical/geographical center of the possibility of freedom, like a woman getting pregnant in a jail cell.

And Dairen? In the critic Yamaguchi Masao's words, "all cultures in all eras have created their own margins. The margins are condemned to life at the opposite pole from refinement and order, but also recreate the fertility of 'the other,' with its various meanings. That sense of the other, requiring a powerful life force to stay in existence at all, is sometimes

[5] Katayama: "*Tokyo-shi to shakaishugi*," 1902. Quoted in Sekino.

seen as the entropy which aims at the destruction of order."[6] This "other" of Yamaguchi's is very close to the nature of Taiko's existence—fertile and yet destructive of her own fertility, entropic, disorderly, full of a powerful life force. Cast out of Tokyo and leaving for Dairen, Taiko's status "on the margins" (as a girl who took off to Tokyo to the left-wing instead of staying home to get married and look after her mother, as a socialist and subsequently an anarchist in right-leaning prewar Japan, as Yamamoto's common-law wife, as a lifelong member of whatever minority she could track down, not least simply as a woman) was realized geographically. Marginalized both by choice and by force in Tokyo—in the center of everything—she and Yamamoto headed for the geographical margins of their world, the colonies—Manchuria, Dairen, tossed about among China, Russia and Japan for decades.

The architectural historian Yatsuka Hajime suggests, quoting feminist scholar Muta Kazue, that "the 'unity of husband and wife and the harmony of the family' emphasized by the Meiji government was easily adaptable in the national space to the center and the provinces, city and country."[7] In the rhetoric of the Japanese Empire at the time, Japan and Manchuria were often portrayed as a loving man and woman (the Man'ei films featuring Li Xianglan/Yamaguchi Yoshiko are representative—and bear in mind that Man'ei was later put under the direction of Amakasu Masahiko, the ex-MP responsible for the murders of Osugi Sakae and Itoh Noe). Recent cultural studies work suggests the same man/woman image, in a very different sense, for the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized (see Ann Laura Stoler's writings on Dutch Indonesia, among others). The colonies/Manchuria/Dairen are the "woman" in the man/woman equation of inner Japan and its territories, and Taiko's Manchurian destination represents her femaleness as well.

In Taiko's colonies—the Manchuria she depicts in the three stories I've named, which I want to read for metaphor without necessarily distinguishing between fiction and fact—two systems of dominance exist simultaneously, overlaid.

One is the system of colonialism itself, specific in that place and time to the dominant Japanese and the dominated Chinese. In this system, Taiko and Yamamoto (and their fictional counterparts) are on the dominant side. Until Yamamoto is imprisoned, he helps support the two of them by working for the railway. When Taiko (Mitsuyo in the stories)

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[6] Yamaguchi.
[7] Yatsuka.

goes into the charity ward, the doctors and nurses and her fellow charity patients are all Japanese. (There were in fact two charity hospitals in Dairen, the Dairen Jikei Hospital for Japanese and the Kozai Zendo in the poor Chinese quarters for Chinese. Even at the indigent level, the dominant and the dominated were distinct.)

However, Taiko, who spent her life aligning herself with the minority in various contexts, took no pleasure from belonging to the dominant side. In "Throw it away!" Mitsuyo's husband puts aside his anarchist beliefs without any significant struggle to bawl out the coolies working for him on the railway, in order to please his brother who arranged the job for him. When his brother demands "I hear you're a socialist, you must think badly of that kind of work, eh?" he "narrows his eyes and, nervously checking his brother's expression," can say only "Oh well, theories are theories, but I...".[8] Even with no deliberate intentions of becoming a colonialist, he does not refuse to join the dominant side when necessity calls. Mitsuyo, though, feels "a pain at the bottom of her eyes" when watching her husband abuse the coolies. Asked likewise by her brother-in-law "So you got together with him on account of socialism? You don't like using coolies that way either, huh?" she answers "briskly, as if to shake off all the discomfort" "Yes, that's right."[9]

There's no way of knowing whether this conversation actually took place, but we can be sure that the actual Taiko felt much as the fictional Mitsuyo does. One proof of that is her later short story "Track-Laying Train," which centers on the struggles of the coolies working for the railway.

Why did Taiko and Yamamoto have such different attitudes towards the colonial system? They had both taken part in the same anarchist activism, as far as their political ideology went. (Yamamoto, in fact, insisted later that "it was my influence that turned her into an anarchist," and he is probably at least partially accurate.)[10] A desire to protect one's own life and lifestyle? If anything, Taiko, several months pregnant, had more reason than Yamamoto to abandon her beliefs for her own comfort. Why did she react differently?

You could put it down to her greater strength of personality or deeper humanity, but I wonder if the root of the matter doesn't lie in Taiko's gender. The other system of dominance existing in Manchuria, directly parallel to colonialism, was the relation between men and

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[8] Taiko: "Throw it away!," 1925.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Yamamoto.

women, straight out of the home country. Of Taiko's Manchuria stories, "In the Charity Ward" shows that the most clearly. In the charity ward of the hospital where the protagonist Mitsuyo gives birth, the male hospital director exercises dictatorial power over his wife, the junior nurses, and the female patients. A class system based on gender is in existence. Similar situations exist in the house of Mitsuyo's brother-in-law in "Throw it away!" or that of Kobiraki, the railway employee who gives temporary houseroom to Taiko and her husband in *Flower in the Desert*.

Taiko (Mitsuyo)'s gender places her on the dominated side of the system, makes her metaphorically the colonized—Manchurian—element in contrast to the male/Japanese side. She acts out within her own body the colonial equation of Japan and Manchuria. Taiko becomes the capital city of Tokyo, creating future life in her body while in a prison; then, dismissed from Tokyo and carrying that future to Manchuria, she becomes the land of China, its future distorted by Japanese colonial authority. And, as Manchuria was chronically infected by the physical and symbolic representation of that authority in the form of the South Manchurian Railway, Taiko's body (breathing in the "colonial air full of the dust of the red earth") gives in to beriberi.[11] She gives birth to a daughter named Akebono ("daybreak") but, with nothing to nourish her but beriberi-infected breast milk, cannot keep her alive. There will be no new day breaking any time soon for women or for colonized Manchuria, Taiko's experience says.

These are the stories that we can discover from "Throw it away!" and "In the Charity Ward" and *Flower in the Desert*. This metaphorical meaning is a significant part of the appeal of the first two short stories in particular. But it's not an imaginary tale: the details may be different, but the stories are ultimately a record of Taiko's life as she lived it, hanging on by her fingernails to her own life. This gives them a power above and beyond the interest of pure fiction or theoretical analysis. Horii Ken'ichi, in a brief discussion of "In the Charity Ward," offers "The originality of the heroine lies in the way Hirabayashi's novels are I-novels and yet are not I-novels... ."[12] Undeniably based on, and faithful in detail to, her personal experiences, Taiko's stories go beyond autobiographical fiction in their significance.

The body of an individual holds a metaphorical, symbolic meaning. Taiko gave a new meaning to "the personal is political," drawing the problems of gender and colonialism of the time with her own body as the

[11] Taiko: "In the Charity Ward," 1927.
[12] Horii.

brush. The pattern on the map of the times was drawn again in her literary works, and given more and fuller meaning there. Taiko, who had the guts to go through the experience in the first place and the gifts to turn it into literature later, deserves more recognition than she has gotten as a significant figure in the problems of the time.

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