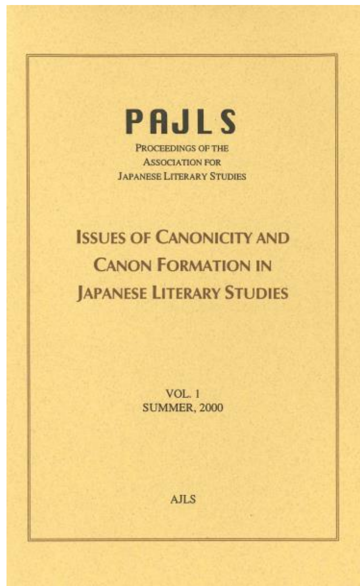
“Proletarian Literature Reconsidered”

Heather Bowen-Struyk

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 1 (2000): 221–231.



PAJLS 1:
Issues of Canonicity and Canon Formation in Japanese Literary Studies.
Ed. Stephen D. Miller.

PROLETARIAN LITERATURE RECONSIDERED

Heather Bowen-Struyk
University of Michigan

Research on Japanese proletarian literature (1921-1934) has been largely the domain of the Japanese Communist Party, and few historians or literary critics have bothered to contest it. Japanese proletarian literature was an important area of research in the postwar/Cold War period when Japan was trying to reinvent itself as a democratic nation and figure out "what went wrong." As a result, the cold war has shaped the writing of proletarian literary history. Moreover, since the economic prosperity that began in 1960, literature has been considered to be increasingly autonomous from Politics, that is, the institutional and party Politics with a capital "P" that occupied a good number of prewar intellectuals intent on effecting change. Now, the exigencies of our post-Cold War moment enable and insist upon a reconsideration of Japanese proletarian literature. After a discussion of the standard proletarian literary history and its limitations, I will gesture toward a practice of reading proletarian literature through the example of Hayama Yoshiki's critical reception and what I am calling the discourse of "real experience," a political discourse that poses as the transcendence of politics. My discussion of "real experience" begins the process of re-reading proletarian literature, both off the map of the standard history and in its literary context.

Proletarian literature has been relegated to the margins of literary history. Its marginality is retrospective, probably because it was squelched by government repression as Japan embarked upon an imperialist war. Kikuchi Kan set up his prizes centralizing and institutionalizing *junbungaku* (pure literature) and *taishū bungei* (popular literature) in 1935, the year after the demise of the proletarian camp. Had he set up his prizes even two years earlier, he would have committed a grievous crime of omission by ignoring proletarian literature as one of the dominant fields of literature.

The small, mostly anarchistic journal *Tanemaku hito* (The Seed-Sowers) is most commonly seen as the origin of the proletarian literature movement.[1] History might have never known this eighteen-page journal launched in 1921 in Akita Prefecture, but the journal moved to Tokyo and continued to grow and many of its contributors were to become significant players in the movement. *Tanemaku hito*'s future was cut short by the Great Kantō Earthquake in September 1923. *Tanemaku hito* ceased publication when the earthquake struck, and it was nine months before its successor, *Bungei sensen* (Literary Front) was issued "to carry the torch of *Tanemaku hito*," as the slogan read. *Bungei sensen*'s beginning was rocky, but it was reissued in June 1925, and it continued through 1932, although in November 1927 it became a social democratic journal.

The orthodox history of proletarian literature posits that *Senki* (Battle Flag) became the rightful heir of *Bungei sensen* and *Tanemaku hito* when it began publication in 1928. *Senki* was the official organ of NAPF, the Communist-led united proletarian front founded in March 1928, and it received the official recognition of the Soviet Union. *Bungei sensen*, the only major left-wing journal to resist NAPF, was effectively refused institutional support.

Two months after the Manchurian Incident (September 1931), NAPF dissolved, and in its place KOPF was founded, redirecting the movement with culture as the key word rather than arts. Meanwhile, those arrested in the mass arrests of March 15, 1928 and April 14, 1929 came up for trial. Two leaders renounced their political convictions from prison and hundreds of others followed. By the time that proletarian leader and writer Kobayashi Takiji was murdered while under interrogation in February 1933, the movement was already in its death throes. The "voluntary" dissolution of the last organized proletarian organization, the Writer's League (NARP), sounded the death toll in April 1934.

---

[1] The following history can be found in the following two works in Japanese or Shea's history in English: Seizaburō Yamada, *Puroretaria bungakushi—wakame no jidai (jōkan)* (The History of Proletarian Literature: The Period of New Buds, vol. 2) (Rironsha, 1954); Seizaburō Yamada, *Puroretaria bungakushi-fūsetsu no jidai (gekan)* (The History of Proletarian Literature: the Stormy Period, vol. 2) (Rironsha, 1954); G.T. Shea, *Leftwing Literature in Japan: A Brief History of the Proletarian Literary Movement* (Tokyo: Hosei University Press, 1964).

After the war, many former proletarian writers tried to pick up where they had left off and some of the most committed and most dogmatic radicals such as Kurahara Korehito, Miyamoto Kenji and Yuriko assumed leadership positions. Despite the re-emergence of many of the proletarian writers in the New Japanese Literary Association (*shin nihon bungakkai*), the term "proletarian" was cast aside in favor of "democratic," transforming proletarian literature and its movement into history. Yamada Seizaburō, Miyamoto Kenji, and Kurahara Korehito have written volumes of proletarian institutional history and criticism from the privileged position of former participants in the movement. The younger generation, those in their thirties who would have encountered the proletarian movement in their student days, resented the hard-line politics. They tried to theorize a position where politics meant something other than simple allegiance to the Party, but it was not the luxury of the day to do so.[2] By the 1960s a new generation was intent on solving social, philosophical, and theoretical problems without recourse to what seemed to be the mistakes of previous generations: in retrospect, the proletarian literature generation seemed to have indulged unknowingly in Stalinist dogma (e.g., Krushchev's 1956 denouncement of Stalin, for example), and the postwar generation failed to liberate themselves sufficiently from Communist Party control.[3]

More recent scholarship has paid less attention to the partisan struggles, and more to individual authors. Author-oriented scholarship makes important interventions into the history of individual authors, but frequently does so at the cost of not challenging the official history.

My summary of proletarian literature is indebted to Yamada Seizaburō's two-volume *Puroretaria bungakushi* (The History of Proletarian Literature, 2 vol., 1954) which has become the standard history of the prewar proletarian literary arts movement. The first of the two volumes, *Wakame no jidai* (The Period of New Buds), covers from Meiji through *Tanemaku hito*, and the second volume, *Fūsetsu no jidai* (The Blizzard Period), picks up from *Bungei sensen* through the dissolution of the Writer's League (NARP) in

---

[2] See Victor J. Koschmann, *Revolution and Subjectivity in Postwar Japan* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), in particular the chapter "Literature and the Bourgeois Subject."

[3] See David Goodman, "Introduction," *Japanese Drama and Culture in the 1960's: The Return of the Gods* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1988), 3-33.

April 1934. He devoted the first of two volumes to the pre-history, what he calls the "buds," of proletarian literature which lead up to *Tanemaku Hito*. His account begins with the development of capitalism in Japan, the Sino-Japan War, the People's Rights Movement, Tsubouchi Shōyō's *Shōsetsu shinzui* (The Essence of the Novel), Political Novels and early Socialism. Continuing through time, Yamada weaves together political organizations, social movements, and statistics about urban workers and farmers, together with literary developments like Romanticism and Naturalism. By grounding the movement in history, politics and literature, Yamada's version implies that Japanese history and literature were flowing toward the telos of proletarian literature embodied by NAPF.

What should not be missed, however, is that for all the historical depth his narrative displays, the second of the two volumes is in fact quite exclusive, and the writings of Hayama Yoshiki, for example, from the time that he left the Comintern-led group in favor a social democratic group are given dismissive treatment, if treated at all. Yamada's treatment of the pre-history is so thorough it gives the impression of being comprehensive, but actually, his history excludes those proletarian writers and theorists who, while continuing to call themselves proletarian writers, forswore the Communist Party and the control that the Soviet Comintern was exercising over them.

The formation of NAPF with Communist leadership was decisive to splitting the Soviet-led Communists from others who may have considered themselves communists. Communism has two main meanings in the 1920s and 1930s in Japan. In the first, communism is a political philosophy envisioning a utopian communistic organization of society. In the second related usage, Communism refers to the policies and directives of the Soviet Union's Communist International, or Comintern, and to the policies and directives of the individual national incarnations of the Communist Party. Since Japan had a Communist Party (first in 1922, and then again in 1926), and the Communist Party was supported by the Comintern, it is this second usage which dominates. While the two usages overlap considerably, how they might be different can be gleamed by perusing the debates and platforms of the Communist Party in Japan. In particular, it was a matter of considerable debate whether Japan had completed its bourgeois revolution and was therefore ready to proceed directly to the proletarian revolution. This was crucial to whether one considered oneself a Communist or not, because the 1927 Theses on Japan declared that the vestiges of feudalism apparent in the backwards agrarian system and Emperor system implied an incom-

plete bourgeois revolution. The Comintern-led Japanese Communist Party platform therefore dictated that before the proletarian revolution could be instigated, the Emperor and the Emperor system had to be dismantled. In opposition, the *Rōnō-ha* (Labor-Farmer Group) formed and defended the institution of the Emperor, in no small part because the Emperor was a hugely popular figure and advocating his overthrow would no doubt alienate the masses. Instead, they asserted that Japan had in fact had a proper bourgeois revolution (as evidenced by the Universal Manhood Suffrage passed in 1925) and that capitalism was already in an advanced stage (as evidenced by the capitalism-driven imperialism of the Asian mainland). Therefore, they advocated the utilization of legalistic methods, such as syndicalist and parliamentary means.[4] The *Rōnō-ha*, who published *Bungei sensen* after the Communists and Marxists left it in 1927, was the only major group to oppose the hegemony of the Communists in proletarian literature after the formation of NAPF. The members of the *Rōnō-ha*, including Aono Suekichi and Hayama Yoshiki, considered themselves to be proletarian writers, but not Communists.

Yamada's strict adherence to the Comintern authorized and JCP endorsed version of dialectical materialism produced a literary history that was totalizing in approach, although not in content. Proletarian literature has been dealt with primarily in terms of the way that it relates to official lines like Aono Suekichi's 1926 call for "Purposeful Consciousness," Kurahara Korehito's 1929 injunction on "Proletarian Realism" and the 1932 switch to "Socialist Realism" as the official writing method. And during the Cold War, the complexity of politics (i.e., the sense in which we are all implicated politically insofar as everything we do is already in relation to institutions and discourses that negotiate power), that complexity of politics was foreclosed in the desire to present a unified front. As such, proletarian literature has been subject to comparison to the Communist Party line, a reading approach that fails to satisfy even committed radicals and that leaves Japanese literature poorer. My goal then is to reconsider proletarian literature in historical context and to think about the hitherto invisible complex politics that function in proletarian literature and criticism.

---

[4] Germaine A. Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

It is time to rethink how to read proletarian literature for the following reasons: First of all, for nearly a decade from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s proletarian literature and writers dominated the literary scene in Japan. Nonetheless, mainstream literary histories have difficulty dealing with it other than to relegate it to the territory of interesting historical or intellectual issues. Second of all, the end of the Cold War has enabled a more complicated and nuanced discussion of the interrelated politics and literature of the period of proletarian literature. Thirdly, the history of proletarian literature has been written and validated with Cold War partisan concerns in mind (necessarily), and so the complexity of the situation, not to mention the literariness, has been obscured in the desire to present a united front. Finally, these concerns impact the way we think about literature and its relationship to politics at our historical moment at the beginning of a new millennium. The luxuries and exigencies of our post-Cold War moment enable and insist on a re-examination of works hitherto read as "proletarian." This is not to dismiss "proletarian" as a category, but to hold it up to the scrutiny that it deserves.

Hayama Yoshiki and "Real Experience"

For the rest of this talk, I am going to introduce Hayama Yoshiki (1894-1945), a proletarian writer considered to represent the *Bungei sensen* period (1924-1928). Hayama is best known for his novel-length *Umi ni ikuru hitobito* (Life on the Sea, 1926) based on his experiences as a sailor. We will be looking at one of the common discourses deployed in the commentary on his work, that of "real experience." Our discussion of "real experience" will be a gesture towards a practice of reading proletarian literature that neither suppresses the Politics of organized proletarian literature nor ignores the complexity of discourses that vie for power in the literature and criticism of proletarian literature. It is this latter politics with a small "p" that I am calling the complexity of politics that was suppressed during the Cold War.

By "real experience," I mean the insistence that commentary and creative works make that the text is "based on real experience." Or perhaps even more specifically, I mean the insistence that the "real experience" of the author is present in the text, and that a skillful critic should be able to read it. I have also considered "lived experience" or something else less complicated, but I like the tension in the term "real experience"; "real" is problematic and defining it in a way that is satisfying is difficult because when we

talk about real experience, whether our experience at this conference or our childhood, it is already a narrative and no longer self-identical with the experience we are talking about. So I like the way "real experience" works as a critical tool, even as it retains that (sometimes transparent) relationship to lived reality.

Much has been made in recent Japanese literary studies over the hyper-personal I-novel that is said to have dominated the first half of the twentieth century.[5] In fact, proletarian literature shared a similar esthetic of the "real life experience" of the author as a criterion by which to evaluate literature, although it is never acknowledged as such, and the proletarian camp would have denied having anything in common with the bourgeois literary mainstream. Broadly, the emphasis in literary criticism on a flesh and blood author's real life experience seen in I-novel fiction and criticism as well as in proletarian criticism suggests a literary reaction to the alienation of the professional writer in the age of mass communication. That is, in contrast to an increasingly mass-commodified print culture, these writers valued the intimacy afforded by imagining the flesh and blood author to be just beyond the text at hand.

Hayama Yoshiki's participation in the discourses of "real experience," such as when he writes autobiographical or semi-autobiographical fiction, should not be read as natural or innocent despite the seeming innocuousness of "real experience" as a category. Just as Fowler and Suzuki have shown in their studies of the rise of the I-novel at this time, assumptions about truth and representation could be and were manipulated by self-conscious writers. And even something as apparently transparent as "real experience" assumed the heady, ideological weight of dogma dressed in sheep's clothing.

"Real experience" seems to transcend systems and institutions and answer directly to something primary, something real—which is precisely what makes it so compelling. In August 1928, Kuroshima Denji writes a review of Hayama Yoshiki, praising his writings as those of a real proletarian writer by virtue of the image of the real proletarian author in the back-

---

[5] Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishōetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988);Tomi Suzuki, *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

ground.[6] This example will illustrate nicely the mechanism of "real experience" and give us an opportunity to think about the politics of the deploygment of "real experience."

Kuroshima emphasizes that while Hayama's literary style may be reproducible, what is not reproducible is the aura of the proletarian life of the author:

> No matter how one tries to write a proletarian story (*puroretaria-teki na shōsetsu*), if one has not lived a proletarian life for ten or even twenty years, then the plan will backfire. Proletarian consciousness is not so simple that one could merely struggle for a year or two and attain it. "The Prostitute," "Letter in a Cement Barrel," *Life on the Sea*, and "Half a Day in Prison" could not have been written if one had not shed the blood of a proletarian life for ten or twenty years. When one speaks, life is hidden in the background (83-84).

Kuroshima's argument is persuasive: surely the class consciousness of the writer is reflected in the work and surely proletarian class consciousness is relevant when judging proletarian literature. In effect to pre-empt his would-be adversaries, Kuroshima writes, "Even if one says that there is such a thing as proletarian literature (*puroretaria bungaku*) without the author's proletarian life in the background of the work, it will never be great proletarian literature (*sugureta puroretaria bungaku*)" (84). The difference between something that could pass for "proletarian literature" and "great proletarian literature" is the "author's proletarian life in the background of the work." To put it even more simply, what makes a work "great" is the "life in the background."

When he dismisses those who grapple with proletarian consciousness for a year or two, he dismisses the students who energetically flocked to *Senki*, the journal of the Communist-led proletarian organization NAPF. Kuroshima's position as a social democratic *Bungei sensen* writer is defined by his opposition to NAPF. Earlier we mentioned that *Bungei sensen* supported the Emperor and Emperor System and advocated legal means of revolution

---

[6] Denji Kuroshima, "Hayama Yoshiki no geijutsu" (Hayama Yoshiki's Art), *Bungei sensen* (1928, August).

such as taking advantage of the newly passed Universal Manhood Suffrage Law (from 1925). In contrast, the writers of *Senki* advocated a more radical, anti-legalistic, revolutionary position. Kuroshima does not criticize the *Senki* writers for their political platforms, ideological stances or creative works. Instead, he issues a rave review of Hayama's already two-year-old works in order to foreclose any discussion of politics: duly noting *Senki*'s debt to the *Bungei sensen* writer Hayama, Kuroshima argues that the young *Senki* writers will simply never be able to produce great proletarian literature like Hayama's great works because they lack the *a priori* proletarian life experience which is the foundation of great proletarian literature. Kuroshima's deployment of "real experience" is geared towards denouncing the possibility of the *Senki* intellectuals writing at all. Kuroshima's position as a *Bungei sensen* writer is off the map of the official proletarian literary history.

Kuroshima names works by Hayama which he calls inimitable; interestingly these are the first four creative works (three of which were composed in prison) that Hayama published. By the time *Umi ni ikuru hitobito* was published (the last of the four), Hayama was able to make his living as a professional writer and is generally considered to have lost touch with his own working class experience. Kuroshima is "forgetting" the two years of prolific publishing that have intervened since Hayama's early works (nearly a story every month) in order to uphold the image of an authoritative proletarian life experience legible in the background.

By now you might be wondering how it is possible to read the "life in the background." Kuroshima explains: "In *shōsetsu*, the author cannot falsify himself. The thoughts in his head will, unexpectedly and without anything to clothe them, end up bared. That is what is interesting about *shōsetsu*. It is charming and touching that someone appears just as he is, but to that same extent the author's impure elements end up exposed without a veil to hide them" (83). What began as an apparently simple assertion of the author's class background and its relation to his writing reveals itself to be implicated in what I am calling the striptease of "real experience," because the more Kuroshima explains how it is that he can read the "life in the background," the more his own language accuses him of being seduced by his practice of reading. *Shōsetsu*, for Kuroshima, is a text(ile) that always promises or perhaps threatens to unveil the author's "impure elements." Kuroshima seems satisfied with the image of the Author he sees through the veils of writing: "Hayama's writing is charming and touching because he is a bona fide proletarian, a high-spirited worker, and that image dances vividly in the back-

ground of his works. One of the reasons that those who follow his model do not reach his greatness is because those who model him have no [real, proletarian] life" (84). Kuroshima was titillated and may have succumbed to the ease of the strip since the Author that he glimpses is a product of his knowledge of the author's life history, correlating textual evidence and a willingness to conflate the two.

Kuroshima insists that the "real experience" of the author is present in the text for anyone to read. This example is useful because of the allegory of the striptease of "real experience" suggested by Kuroshima's language; that is, Kuroshima's longing to see the image of the Author in the work is revealed by the sexually charged language. It is also useful because we can see that Hayama's "real experience" was canonized as part of his opus from the beginning and that the historical and social context in which Hayama wrote valued "real experience" in particular historical ways.

Lastly, this example is useful because we can see the implicit politics of "real experience" Kuroshima summons Hayama's "real experience" as evidence that his work is authentic, irreproducible, and primary. Such an invocation apparently preempts discussions of politics since the life that the author lived authorizes and validates the fiction (although in practice it is the "life" in the fiction that testifies to the life that the author lived). Kuroshima appeals to the "life in the background" of Hayama's work in order to assert its superiority on the basis of its class consciousness. As we have already noted, his appeal is conditioned by the specific political stance of *Bungei sensen* in defiance of the largest left-wing, Communist-led literary arts organization and its mass of university-educated members. We can see that his strategy is to suggest that *Senki*'s writings are merely reproductions of Hayama's hallowed "proletarian" writing: the *Senki* writers—"those who follow his model"—may emulate Hayama's style and approach, but they cannot reproduce the image of the real worker that "dances vividly" in the background of the work. Kuroshima deploys Hayama's "real experience" as a political strategy although it poses as an extra-political strategy.

By calling attention to "real experience" as a discourse, or by arguing that the deployment of "real experience" is political, I do not mean to suggest that the author's background should not be considered as a part of a reading. I wish to highlight that in many cases such as Hayama's, the background of the author has been frequently invoked as a part of the reading, and that critics of different political, some avowedly apolitical, stances agree that he is particularly satisfying to read in this manner. What we are investi-

gating are the implicit politics of "real experience," a reading method that compels by virtue of its apparent transcendence of politics. Kuroshima's language has revealed to us the longing a reader may feel to see the bona-fide proletarian Author dancing vividly in the background of a text.

In our post-Cold War moment, I am attempting to read proletarian literature in the terms of the implicit politics, such as the discourse of "real experience." Proletarian literature's history was told under specific politically rigid Cold War parameters when such questions could not be asked. We now have the luxury of re-investigating the creative and theoretical production without compromising an ideological war.