“From Modernist Outsiders to the New Canon Writers: Japanese Modernist Writers in Contemporary Japanese Literary Canonization”

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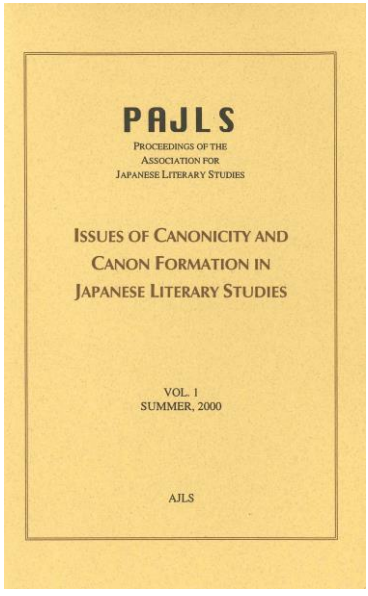
*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies* 1 (2000): 521–532.




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

# FROM MODERNIST OUTSIDERS TO THE NEW CANON WRITERS: JAPANESE MODERNIST WRITERS IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE LITERARY CANONIZATION

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## I. Introduction

The canon formation of literature is a process which involves the literary criticism and art of both the past and the present. Moreover, a canon reflects the significance of the dominant political, social, economic, and education systems of the time. Thus, sometimes a past evaluation of a work can change dramatically depending on the present literary circumstances. Japanese prose modernism reveals this interesting subversion, which involves the critical standards of both the past and the present.

In the history of Japanese literature, many writers of modernist prose fiction in the 1920s and the 1930s remained outside of the canon. Their works were thought so experimental that it was difficult for them to gain wide recognition. In addition, the definition of Japanese prose modernism was not well established when these writers published works. Thus, for many years, the whole movement was not examined for possible inclusion in the literary canon.

However, these modernist works have recently been studied with different approaches. As more scholars have paid attention to narratology, or linguistic experimentations, as attempts to create new literature, Japanese modernism has started to be defined more as an authentic movement in its own right. In addition, some modernist works became well-regarded in popular culture and have profoundly influenced artistic genres ranging from graphic design and comics (*manga*) to experimental film. Although popular culture is not the primary influence in shaping the literary canon in the West, they do lend acceptance to the formation of a new canon in Japan. Explaining the case of Inagaki Taruho (1900-1977), a modernist writer of prose fiction, this paper will discuss Japanese modernism and the nature of canon formation in Japan.

## II. Japanese Prose Modernism—Its Historical Perception

Historically, Japanese prose modernism has not been thought important. One of the chief reasons for this neglect is that Japanese literary modernism tended to be associated with Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism, although these movements are in fact avant-garde rather than modernistic. Generally, modernism (frequently written as Modernism with a capital M) is the movement that pursues artistic elements and attempts to preserve the autonomy of art, whereas the avant-garde is a movement which challenges the autonomy of art. Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism are avant-garde in terms of their criticism toward modernistic concerns. However, Japanese Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists were seeking genuine artistic accomplishment, even while enjoying the chaotic and destructive elements of their experimentations. As a result, although Japanese modernist writers created noteworthy works, their efforts were frequently considered inauthentic and were consequently misunderstood.

Moreover, Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism are generally considered poetry movements and, in Japan, prose fiction was in the shadow of poetry regarding modernism and the avant-garde. There is no question that Japanese Futurist, Dada, and Surrealist groups were active in the field of poetry. By comparison, prose modernism was not able to be readily identified with distinct groups, schools, or influences. Shinkankakuha (Neo-Perceptionist Group) was one of the major exceptions, and it became well known for its aggressive advocacy of modernist literature. Yet, of this readily identifiable school, only Yokomitsu Riichi (1898-1947) and sometimes Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) have been studied, with the other members largely dismissed as followers. Therefore, except for these two writers, Shinkankakuha's other members are almost automatically less well regarded. Furthermore, Yokomitsu was the theoretical leader of the group, and the decline of his writing was extrapolated into the supposed failure of the whole group.

Likewise, the problem of simple categorization can be applied to other groups such as Shinkō geijutsuha (New Artist Group), which was formed in 1930 following the break up of Shinkankakuha. Interestingly, as Hirano Ken mentions, Shinkō geijutsuha was called "Modanizumuha (Modernist Group)" and the term "*modanizumu*" had no relationship with the literary

revolution of the early 20th century.[1] In the case of Japanese culture and custom in the 1920s and 1930s, the word "*modanizumu*" (modernism) had connotations similar to the phrase "*ero, guro, nansensu*" (erotic, grotesque, and nonsensical), which was a popular term used to describe the new and iconoclastic trends in the 1920s and 1930s. Shinkō geijutsuha was recognized largely as the group that, more than any other, pursued the "*ero, guro, nansensu*" topics of literature. Thus, generally speaking, its writers have been dismissed as unimportant. This dismissal is largely justified, although members of the group included the poet/short story writer Yoshiyuki Eisuke (1906-1938), the critic Kobayashi Hideo (1902-1983), and the novelists Ibuse Masuji (1898-1993) and Funabashi Seiichi (1904-1976).

Moreover, their argument in favor of art for art's sake in opposition to the notion of the utilitarian value of art is a phenomenon universal to the modernist period. For instance, there was an intense friction between modernism that pursued purity of art and the avant-garde that challenged the notion of pure art by promoting the utilitarian value of art.[2] Yet, in Japan the stereotypical categorization of Shinkō geijutsuha has prevented their group from being adequately studied.

Finally, with the rise of ultra-nationalism in Japan by the late 1930s, modernism, regardless of its various genres, gradually disappeared from the art and literary worlds. Thus, in the comparison with the history of Western modernism, the flowering of Japanese modernism was brief. The phenomenon of Japanese writers' so-called "return to Japan" has also been the basis for observations that Japanese modernism was merely a transitory infatuation with Western modernism and not a true, indigenous movement in Japan.

## III. Canonization of Modernist Prose Fiction—The Case of Inagaki Taruho

The work of Inagaki Taruho, who was a writer of modernist prose fiction, is a good example of the changing critical view of Japanese prose

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[1] Hirano Ken, *Showa bungakushi* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1963), 60.

[2] An example of this friction is the harsh criticism that the Berlin Dadaists lodged against the Expressionists. Berlin Dadaists such as George Grosz (1893-1958) and Otto Dix (1891-1969) maintained that the Expressionists were only concerned with art as understood by the academy and the museum and that they were indifferent to the world beyond art.

modernism. He was known as a writer who pursued modernist experimentations in literary conventions, Buddhist thought, and homosexuality. However, his modernistic themes and writings were once held in rather low regard. In fact, Taruho was a member of Shinkankakuha, but he was not one of the writers who founded the group. Thus, he has been considered one of the least important among even the minor participants in Shinkankakuha. In addition, Taruho's prose fiction is more experimental than that of Yokomitsu and Kawabata in that it almost totally ignores established norms of semantic and structural logic. He is distinctively different even from the members of this radical literary group.

Taruho was strongly influenced by two avant-garde movements: Futurism and Dada. In particular, he was stimulated by Futurism's adoration of speed and modern machinery and Dada's nonsensical and chaotic art style, and his works reflect this mixture of machine aesthetics and wild experimentation.[3] His first book, *Issen ichibō monogatari* (One Thousand and One-Second Stories), published in 1922, consists of 71 very short stories which Taruho called "objets d'art." In this work, he writes about a fantasy/real experience of the central character who is called "*jibun*" (self). The character "self" is a modern sophisticate who wears a fashionable suit, a hat and bow-tie, attends the opera, and dines in Western restaurants and bars. At the same time, his behavior is like that of a robot, and this dehumanized protagonist has fist fights in the restaurant or on the street against the anthropomorphized moon and comets that come down from the sky in order to have a good time in the city. Moreover, Taruho creates scenes using unconventional phrases in a similar manner to Dadaist poets who create poems by words that are randomly picked from a bag. Similarly, Taruho composes sentences without commas and periods, and the images created by these series of sentences are peculiar and abstract. He also shifts the subject of the sentence without any comment by manipulating the tendency of the Japanese to omit the subject of a sentence. These styles are confusing, but at the same

[3] Taruho, who had once hoped to be a painter, was also influenced by Cubism. In "Hoshi o uru mise" (A Shop That Sells Stars), a short story published in 1923, the scenery of the story resembles Cubist paintings in which nature is depicted in an extremely abstract manner. For example, he uses words like "a triangle" and "a rectangle" to describe buildings instead of their actual descriptions.

time, Taruho's literary experimentations present intriguing new aspects of literature.[4]

Taruho's modernist adventure to pursue a new style of literature was not fully understood in his contemporary literary world. Hirano Ken reports that Taruho's prose fiction "Hoshi o uru mise" (A Shop That Sells Stars) received harsh criticism from established writers such as Tokuda Shusei (1871-1943), Kikuchi Kan (1888-1948), and Kume Masao (1891-1952) when it was published in 1923.[5] These writers commented that "A Shop That Sells Stars" was a failure because there was no comprehensible theme or plot.[6]

From the 1930s to the end of World War II, his works were almost completely ignored in the reactionary atmosphere of militarism and imperialism. For instance, in 1940, Taruho wrote a novel *Miroku* (Maitreya Bodhisattva), one of his representative works. *Maitreya Bodhisattva* is the novel in which Taruho's machine aesthetics, adoration of the modern city, and Buddhist imagery merge to create a complex aesthetic world. However, this work did not receive any recognition during the war.

But during the postwar period his literature began to be praised by writers such as Takeda Taijun (1911- 1976), Itō Sei (1905-1969), and Mi-

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[4] This element is one of the reasons why Taruho's works can be considered modernistic rather than avant-garde. His intention was to create a new literature by using Dada and Futurism. Thus, Taruho challenged the literary conventions of his predecessors, but he did not seem to question the autonomy of literature. Also, Taruho's works do not probe the utilitarian value of art in the way that many Berlin and Russian Dadaists did. The Berlin Dadaists created works in order to criticize the rise of Fascism, and Russian Dadaists expressed their support of the Russian Revolution by creating uniforms, flags, various monuments, and even children's books. By contrast, Taruho was indifferent to the utilitarian value of art; therefore, it is difficult to consider him as a writer of the avant-garde.

[5] Hirano Ken, *Shōwa bungaku shiron* (Tokyo: Mainichi shinbunsha, 1977), 44-45. Taruho also writes about the same episode in the 1948 essay "Zuihitsu–vita makinikarisu" (Essay –Vita Machinicus), where he maintains that only Akutagawa Ryūnosuke defended Taruho's work but that the rest of the writers did not understand "A Shop That Sells Stars." ("Zuihitsu–vita makinikarisu," *Inagaki Taruho Taizen*. vol.4 [Tokyo: Gendai shichōsha, 1969], 529).

[6] Hirano, 529.

shima Yukio (1929-1970). Takeda described Taruho's experimental works with phrases like "futuristic dazzling" and admired the lyricism created by his use of scientific terminology.[7] Nonetheless, the other two novelists praised Taruho in regard to different literary aspects. Mishima admired Taruho greatly and made reference to him in interviews and essays. For instance, by way of an oblique reference to his future attempted coup d'etat and subsequent ritual suicide, Mishima mentions, "I am very certain that Mr. Inagaki will understand me. It may be just my imagination, but I think Mr. Inagaki is the only writer who knows the secret that a man keeps."[8] Nonetheless, Mishima's adoration of Taruho mainly concerned his works regarding homosexuality and boy love.[9] Itō also praised Taruho and recommended, along with Takeda and Mishima, that Taruho be the first recipient of the Nihon bungaku taishō (Japanese Literature Grand Prize) for the essay "Shōnen ai no bigaku" (The Aesthetics of Boy Love) in 1969. Although he admired Taruho's uncompromising stance during Japan's wartime militarist government, Itō did not discuss the quality of Taruho's writing. Taruho's modernist writings were still not fully appreciated even in the late 1960s. This ambiguous assessment was similar to that experienced by other modernist writers. For instance, Yumeno Kyūsaku (1889-1936), who explored narrative elaborations and the ambiguity of the self in the form of mystery and detective fiction, became popular in the subculture during the 1970s; nevertheless, his themes and styles were not studied as examples of modernism.

By the 1980s and 1990s, however, views on prose modernism began to change rapidly. Scholars began analyzing prose modernism based on Japan's social and cultural milieu, and they began looking at individual writers' works more closely as opposed to simply accepting historical critiques and evaluations. For instance, Suzuki Sadami examines the controversial issue of modernist writers' "return to Japan" and states that it arises not

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[7] Takeda Taijun, "Uchūteki-naru mono," *Shin bungei dokuhon: Inagaki Taruho* (Tokyo: Kawadeshobō shinsha, 1993) 81-82.

[8] Mishima Yukio and Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, "Taruho no sekai," *Shin bungei dokuhon: Inagaki Taruho*, 99-100.

[9] Although Mishima recognizes Taruho's works as essentially modernistic and significant, he also states that he wants to explore "more serious and profound works" which can be interpreted to mean works expressing homosexuality (Mishima Yukio and Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, "Taruho no sekai," 98).

out of nostalgia for things Japanese or xenophobic reaction to things Western. Rather, he considers the "return to Japan" as a movement that pursued the *gesaku* (playful writings) of the Edo period with its emphasis on "monogatari," a trait which modern literature since the time of Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935) and his call for realism attempted to suppress. Modernist writers in particular paid attention to the tradition of *gesaku* and *monogatari* as examples of fiction where narrative is valorized and prioritized.[10]

Satō Kōichi, a scholar of Japanese literature, points out the accomplishments of Japanese modernism through his analysis of Shinkankakuha.[11] According to Satō, Shinkankakuha's greatest contribution to modern Japanese literature is the awareness of the act of writing. The act of writing is different from the act of depicting, and the act of depicting has been promoted as realism and thus as the presupposition of great modern Japanese literature. However, the act of depiction can be shared with other art genres like painting and film, and Shinkankakuha writers insisted that the act of writing was a distinctive mode of expression accomplished only through literature. This conscious intent to explore the distinguishing and salient element of each art genre is one of the crucial themes of modernism in Europe and the United States, where modernists presented characteristics of each art genre that could not be shared with any other genre. For example, the French writer André Gide (1869-1951) wrote the 1926 novel *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (The Counterfeiters), in which he neglected to describe the characters' facial and physical features. Gide considered literature an art form which allowed the reader to imagine characters, and he employed this interpretation of what constitutes a distinguishing element of literature in his work. In Shinkankakuha, writers like Yokomitsu wrote novels with visual and phonetic experimentations with Chinese characters, and the attempts of the writers in this group are based on this genuine modernist concern.[12]

As new critical views began to reveal the quintessential nature of Japanese prose modernism, modernist works began to be included in *bungaku zenshū*, the anthology of the canon of Japanese writers. For instance, Chikuma shobō published the 60-volume *Nihon bungaku zenshū* in 1991, and it includes prose modernist writers such as Taruho, Ozaki Midori (1896-

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[10] Suzuki Sadami, *Showa bungaku no tame ni* (Tokyo: Shinchō-sha, 1989), 176-79.

[11] Satō Kōichi, "Shinkankakuha to modanizumu," *Jidai-betsu Nihon bungakushi jiten: gendai-hen* (Tokyo: Tokyodō shuppan, 1997), 27.

[12] Satō, 28.

1971), and Yumeno Kyūsaku (1889-1936) and, to some extent, Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965), who is a well-known writer of detective fiction and mysteries, along with well-known canonical writers such as Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), and Shiga Naoya (1883-1971). The selection of these modernists as writers of the literary canon reflects recent literary studies on prose modernism, and it presents the relationship between canon formation and contemporary criticism.

## IV. Canon Formation by Both High Culture and Popular Culture

As seen in the new evaluation of Inagaki Taruho and Japanese prose modernism, canon formation is not as rigid as is widely considered. Rather, while keeping its high status as a symbol of high culture, the canon reflects continuing or discontinuing ideas of literature and constantly evolves. As a result, the contemporary criticism is particularly crucial in determining the literary canon. Richard Ohmann analyzes the system of canonization and points out that the canon is created by a small group of people who are involved in literature.[13] Ohmann calls these groups of key people who formulate the canon the "Professional-Managerial class," who do not fit in the traditional categorization of the Ruling class and the Working class.[14] The Professional-Managerial class includes readers of hard-cover books, editors, publishers, critics, and professors who determine the canon through book reviews in respected newspapers and magazines or through the selection of textbooks at educational institutions.

The notion of a specific class for canon formation can be applied to the circumstances of Japanese literature. At the same time, we have to ask the next question, whether canon formation is the work of criticism alone and whether any elements outside of it are irrelevant to the "canonization" process. For example, Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* has long been included in the literary canon, and one of the reasons for the wide recognition of this work in the canon is that *Kokoro* has long been a part of the Japanese high-school curriculum. A work like *Kokoro* is chosen by critics and professors of

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[13] Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975," *Critical Inquiry* 10.1 (September 1983): 201-02.

[14] This class is originally mentioned by Barbara and John Ehrenreich in "Professional-Managerial Class" (Pat Walker, ed. *Between Labor and Capital* [Boston: South End Press, 1979], 5-45) .

literature. In fact, *Kokoro* appeared in the thirteen *kokugo* (national language = Japanese) textbooks for high-school students published by large textbook publishing houses such as Chikuma shobō, Jikkyō shuppan, and Meiji shoin.[15] The so-called Professional-Managerial class can indeed put a work on the path toward inclusion in the literary canon. At the same time, more than 90% of Japanese attend high-school and read works such as *Kokoro* from the canon, and this fact suggests a complicated issue in which the canon that has been appreciated by the vast majority of people cannot be merely the property of high culture guarded by the Professional-Managerial class. High culture is commonly established by excluding popular culture, but in Japan, the two cultures are often surprisingly close. Under an essentially uniform and national education system closely monitored by the Ministry of Education, nearly all Japanese, regardless of social and economic class, are exposed to the same canon and study it as a part of their national culture, not as the culture of a small elite.

As a result of this uniformity, Japanese popular culture sometimes participates in canon formation, and Taruho's novels mirror these canonization circumstances. For instance, Tamura Shigeru (1949- ) and Kamozawa Yūji (1952- ), illustrators/comic writers/graphic designers who both were inspired by Taruho's modernist works such as *One Thousand and One-Second Stories* or "A Shop That Sells Stars," have published their works in various media. Kamozawa, in particular, acknowledges Taruho's influence on his comics: "I like Inagaki Taruho. I thought that I would express his world in the form of comics and that is why I wanted to draw comics."[16] Also, Kamozawa has produced TV commercials in which he develops the image of a city which resembles Kobe of the 1910s and 1920s as described by Taruho. In this Taruho-inspired modern city, a toy robot and rubber duck walk on the street or get on a street car, and the two heroes, one a boy and the other a

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[15] Fujii Hidetada, "Yomigaeru *Kokoro*–Showa sanjuu hachi-nen no dokuhsa to shakai," *Nihon bungakushi o yomu*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1992), 213-19. Fujii also mentions that *Kokoro* has consistently been one of the twenty most popular novels among high school students from the time this novel began to be included in textbooks by various publishing houses ("Yomigaeru *Kokoro*," 229-30).

[16] Kamozawa Yūji, *Kushi-kun no yoru no sanpo* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 1985), 112.

rabbit, both wearing bow-ties, stroll through this illusionary modern city.[17] Tamura is also a well-known illustrator, and his illustrations are used in major advertising campaigns. Like Kamozawa, Tamura uses images from Taruho's *One Thousand and One-Second Stories*. Also, he publishes a series of illustrations with one or two sentences which seem like Taruho's short stories.[18]

Taruho's high regard in popular culture led to the wider recognition and acceptance of the significance of Taruho's work and, in this sense, popular culture has influenced high culture as well as canon formation. In Japanese culture, the ambiguous consciousness regarding high culture/popular culture distinctions seems to allow these rather contradictory cultures to overlap, and Taruho, a newly recognized writer of the canon, is an example of this Japanese cultural phenomenon.

## V. Canon Formation as a Marketing Concept

In addition to the nature of high culture and pop culture, we should also note the linkage of canon formation and high and pop cultures in the marketing activities of contemporary society. Ohmann analyzes the relationship between the bestseller and canon formation in American literature and makes an interesting observation. In the United States, a well-received or bestselling hardcover is an important precondition to becoming part of the canon. Bestselling paperbacks, on the other hand, usually do not survive long enough to be included in the canon. The reason for this is that, although paperback bestsellers can gain immediate success and popularity, they are not reviewed, or are reviewed only briefly, in the literary sections of the journals and newspapers read by the Professional-Managerial class.[19] Thus, they are unlikely to receive attention as candidates for canonization. In Japan, on the contrary, the canon aggressively seeks to validate its cultural status by appealing to a wider audience through mass marketing. For example, Taruho's works were published in 1977 as *Taruho Taizen*, a 6-volume hardcover edition. This set was published for readers who were fans of

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[17] This is a commercial film for *jintan*, silver ball-shaped breath mint made by the Morishita Company. This film is called "Kushi-kun no fushigina hakken" (The Xie Boy's Strange Discovery) (Kamozawa Yūji, *Kushi-kun no yoru no sanpo*, 111-15).

[18] Cf. Tamura Shigeru, *Suishō gari* (Tokyo: Kawadeshobō shinsha, 1985).

[19] Ohmann, 206-07.

Taruho by a relatively small but respected publishing company. As his works became more highly regarded, they were eventually published in a *bunko* series—the Japanese equivalent of a major publishing-house mass-market paperback. The works of Ozaki Midori have followed a similar path in which a hardcover book for a small number of dedicated readers becomes a mass-market paperback after receiving new accolades from both high culture and pop culture.

This phenomenon became more apparent in the 1980s and 1990s, and even *bungaku zenshū* (Complete Works of Literature), the complete works of the Japanese canon, are now published in paperback editions. Historically, *bungaku zenshū* has been published in 50 or 60 volumes of hardcover books put in the hard cases at high prices. But some canon anthologies in the 1990s are no longer published in this traditional style. For example, as discussed in Taruho and canon formation, in 1991, Chikuma published a paperback edition of *Nihon bungaku zenshū*, the canon anthology which responds to more recent literary studies by including works of Taruho and other modernist writers. This marketing reflects a concern that it is more difficult to attract a mass audience through deluxe hardcover editions. In preserving their status of cultural significance as anthologies of the canon, *bungaku zenshū* seek to expand their popularity in paperback editions in Japan.

## VI. Conclusion

Canon formation is a mixture of perspectives on both the past and the present. In particular, the present value on literature is the crucial key to determining canon formation. Japanese modernist prose fiction is a recent example of the dynamics of canon formation. When Japanese prose modernism was active in the 1920s and the 1930s, the movement was considered to be just a frivolous imitation of Western modernism and avant-garde. Moreover, in Japan, modernism was generally thought of as a poetry movement. As a consequence, Japanese modernist prose fiction was not closely analyzed and was relegated to the category of failed or minor works in modern Japanese literature.

Inagaki Taruho, a writer of modernist prose fiction, is representative of these modernist writers whose works were once dismissed as flawed and insignificant. Influenced by various modernist and avant-garde movements from Europe, Taruho created his fiction through the experimental use of words and narrative. But his modernist fiction was not understood at the time. Even when his works began to be appreciated by readers, writers, and

critics in the postwar period, no serious study of his modernist fiction was undertaken until the early 1980s. However, the circumstances of modernist study changed in the 1980s and 1990s. As a new approach to prose modernism evolves, modernism, including Taruho's works, becomes recognized as a salient accomplishment in the history of Japanese literature.

At the same time, scholarly critical discourse established by the Professional-Managerial class is not the only key to determining the canon in Japan. A case like the canonization of Taruho's works reveals that the canon, which is a part of high culture, is also influenced by pop culture. Taruho is admired by creators of popular culture such as illustrators and comic-book writers, and this admiration propels his works to be recognized as significant. Moreover, major publishing houses, in their marketing efforts, promote the literary canon in seeking a mass audience through inexpensive paperback editions. Despite the general notion that the canon is established in high culture, the canon is actually in constant metamorphosis, reflecting the changes of criticism, high and popular cultures, and literary and economic circumstances.