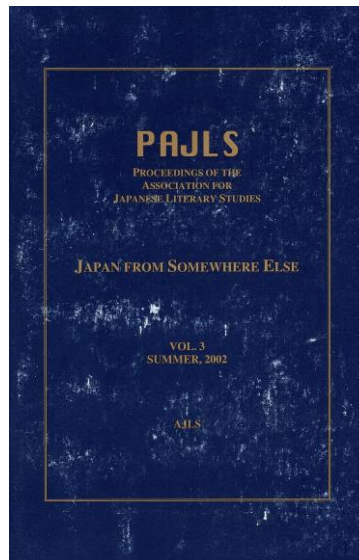


“Merican-Jap and Modernity: Tani Jōji’s Popular Negotiation of the Foreign”

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*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies* 3 (2002): 83–96.



*PAJLS* 3:  
*Japan From Somewhere Else.*  
Eiji Sekine, Editor; Joyce L. Detzner, Production Editor.

**'AMERICAN-JAPAN MODERNITY: TANI JŌJI'S POPULAR  
NEGOTIATION OF THE FOREIGN**

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The post-war discourse on modern Japanese literature has presented the binary opposition between “pure” versus “popular” literature as a historical fact, configuring popular literature merely as the disposable “other” of highbrow, “pure” literature.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Japanese literary studies have paid relatively little attention to such popular forms as mystery fiction, *samurai* “period” fiction, the romance novel, and “*nansensu*” humor. Recently, however, scholars such as Suzuki Sadami and Ikeda Hiroshi have sought to broaden the literary landscape by surveying popular literary production that reached out to and entertained the majority of Japanese readers during the 20th century. In doing so, they re-opened the question of the relative importance of genres that have been lumped together indiscriminately as “popular” forms.

Needless to say, the question of the dichotomy between highbrow versus lowbrow is much more complex than a simple, static binary opposition. In reality, a dynamic conflict between various opposing ideologies created in response to existing literary genres and values has always been at the core of the development of Japanese literature. Indeed, debates about the proper approach to literary expression were essential to the establishment of the very notion of traditional, highbrow *bundan* literature from its beginnings in the Meiji period, although the content of

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<sup>1</sup> This configuration arose most directly out of the *jun bungaku* debates initiated by Hirano Ken in 1961 and continued into 1962 by involving other literary critics such as Itō Sei, Takami Jun and Nakamura Mitsuo. This chain of debates, now generally referred to as “*jun bungaku henshitsu ronso*” (Debates on the Deterioration of Pure Literature), was started by Hirano’s two essays, which appeared in *Asahi shinbun* and *Shukan dokusho-jin* respectively. In these essays, he expressed his concern over the decline of contemporary “pure” literature due to what he perceived as the dominance of “popular” literature. Hirano’s original intention was to re-examine the history of *jun bungaku* to establish an accurate historiography and show that existing definitions of *jun* and *taishu bungaku* were the product of an ongoing critical and historical debate. Ironically enough, as the debates proceeded in 1961-62, with several critics trying to clarify the relation between high- and lowbrow literatures, the sharp opposition between these two realms solidified into the dominant ideology of modern Japanese literary history. See, for example, Hosoya Hiroshi’s “Jun bungaku no henshitsu,” Ogasawara Masaru’s “‘Jun bungaku’ no mondai” and Suzuki Sadami’s *Nihon no “bungaku” o kangaeru*.

“*bundan*” has changed over time. Thus, the distinction between *bundan* and lowbrow is an artifact of both critical and historical debates, and this suggests the need for a closer examination of popular authors. In particular, we need to examine the ways in which they responded via different strategies and goals to the same historical forces of modernity that inspired and shaped their more famous, highbrow contemporaries.

In an attempt to map out a fuller picture of Japanese literature in the early twentieth century, this essay discusses a popular writer, Tani Jo#ji 谷譲次 (1900-1935), who earned both fame and a considerable fortune for his light and easy stories about Japanese unskilled laborers struggling to make a living in the United States. According to the 1936 issue of *Asahi nenkan* (Asahi Almanac), his annual income amounted to 78,000 yen, an “unparalleled” amount for a writer.<sup>2</sup>

Tani Jo#ji is germane to our discussion here for three reasons. First, by justifying the writer’s *raison d’être* based on commercial and economic, rather than cultural or even spiritual reasons, he took an iconoclastic stance challenging the categorical superiority of the I-novel *bundan* circle and its mystical and lofty image of the act of writing as art. The literary style of naturalism associated with the idea of *bundan* was already on the wane. Nonetheless it continued to enjoy the status of high art, or in other words, art that lies beyond economic considerations. Second, he satirized the conventionally “heroic” rhetoric of Japanese masculinity. He did so by means of a self-consciously ironic, tongue-in-cheek style that humorously, yet relentlessly, revealed a deep divide between the ideals of that rhetoric and the behavior or actions of the Japanese hobos in America, who were the principal subjects of his ‘Merican-Jap メリケン・ジャップ/めりけん じゃっふ stories. In several stories, for example, Japanese hobos are presented as a *samurai*, although their actions hardly warrant such praise.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For purposes of comparison, note that he was earning approximately 100 times the starting annual salary for bank clerks. See *Nedanshi nenpyo# Meiji, Taisho, Showa and Bukka no seso# 100nen* for comparisons of prices and salaries. Tani’s sister recalls him holding a manuscript paper and declaring that he would surpass what Kikuchi Kan, his archrival, was making – namely, ten yen per page – to earn twelve yen per page. The issue of whether to regard writers as moneymakers began drawing the attention of writers and critics by the 1920s in the general context of a heightened interest in Marxist thought. See Satomi Ton’s “Bungei no shokugyo#-ka ni tsuite” (On the Professionalization of Literary Art; 1924), as well as Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke’s “Geijutsu no shokugyo#-ka ni tsuite” (On the Professionalization of Art; 1924) and “Bungaku no shokugyo#-ka to saitei genko#ryo# mondai” (On the Professionalization of Literature and the Issue of the Minimum Wage for Manuscripts; 1929).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that all ‘Merican-Japs depicted in Tani’s stories are male.

Third, Tani presented a unique vision of Japan and its relation to the foreign through his depictions of Japanese negotiating with and outwitting Americans who treat them as outcasts. We need only recall that as immigrants, Asians, and “excluded” persons, Japanese workers in America were subject to discrimination and negative stereotyping. These three facets of Tani’s career are closely intertwined, and I will discuss them in more detail in a moment. In summary, however, Tani embodies a response to modernity that is fundamentally different from the dominant naturalist *bundan* ideology, as well as from other major anti-*bundan* ideologies such as *modanizumu* avant-garde literature, the *taishu#bungaku* of the masses, proletarian literature and mystery fiction. Moreover, his astonishing commercial success suggests the importance of his perspective on Japanese culture during the inter-war period.

Tani debuted in 1925 with three short-short stories published in the monthly magazine, *Shinseinen* 新青年 (New Youth). These stories were written as journalistic accounts of American society embedded within narratives about Japanese hobos. The subject was taken from Tani’s own experience of living in the United States between 1920 and 1924.<sup>4</sup> The original reason for his trip to America had been to enroll at Oberlin College in Ohio, but in less than three months, he dropped out, leaving no trace of his performance in the five courses for which he registered.<sup>5</sup> Trying his hand at various jobs, he wandered around the Midwest, before finally moving to New York City. Upon returning to Japan and his hometown, Hakodate, in 1924, he contributed several essays to *Hakodate shinbun*, where his father was editor-in-chief and president.<sup>6</sup> He also translated Western mystery fiction and wrote original stories, submitting them to the

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<sup>4</sup> The number of Japanese immigrants to the U.S. mainland in 1920 was as many as twelve thousand (Michael David Albert, “Japanese American Communities in Chicago and the Twin Cities,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1980), and the number of Japanese residents there amounted to 111,010 (*Asian American Geneological Source Book*, 13). Yet, as symbolized by the trial and execution of the Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, for the robbery and murder charges, the anti-communist and anti-immigrant movements were being increasingly heightened.

<sup>5</sup> In a short story entitled “Dasso#” (Running Away), which appears to reflect Tani’s actual experiences at Oberlin College, the ’Merican-Jap protagonist claims that it was the proselytizing attitudes of the local people that were the reason for his departure. By contrast, archival records at Oberlin report only that he left school because of “not enough English.” “Hasegawa, Kaitaro#” 長谷川海太郎 (Tani’s official name) folder (Book 34, p. 109) in the Oberlin College Archives.

<sup>6</sup> In 1924, he returned to Japan by working illegally as a boiler man on an American freighter.

editor-in-chief of *Shinseinen*. These were published in the January 1925 issue. From then on, his name appeared in every issue of *Shinseinen* for the next three years, under what were later categorized as “Merican-Jap stories” or his translations of mystery fiction. Eventually he achieved tremendous commercial success by writing simultaneously under three different pen names, Tani Jo#ji, Maki Itsuma 牧逸馬, and Hayashi Fubo# 林不忘. In 1928, Tani left *Shinseinen* when he was sent to Europe by Shimanaka Yu#saku, editor-in-chief of *Chu#o#ko#ron*, on a fifteen-month assignment to write travel accounts from Europe.

The ‘Merican-Jap stories run to no more than seven to ten pages,<sup>7</sup> and they are narrated from the perspective of a ‘Merican-Jap, who is, apparently, none other than the writer himself. Tani coined the term, ‘Merican-Jap in order to designate a type of Japanese migrant or sojourner, “the cheerful and brazen yellow men for whom [the term] ‘Jap’ sounds appropriate.”<sup>8</sup> Tani explains that “‘Merican-Jap” possesses a more specific meaning than a “Japanese in America.” The term quite specifically excludes, for example, the small population of elite Japanese expatriates and diplomats, as well as Japanese settlers in California. According to Tani, ‘Merican-Japs are mostly dropouts from American schools, or “the hobos who had dropped out of the highly established and exclusionist Japanese societies [on the West Coast].”<sup>9</sup> He considered these hobos more cosmopolitan than the settlers in California because the former actively attempted to assimilate into American society,<sup>10</sup> while at the same time maintaining a critical perspective on America. The snappy sound of “Jap,” as well as its derogatory socio-political connotation, was directly connected with the lowbrow, “devil-may-care”<sup>11</sup> attitude of the Japanese hobos who survived in America without any establishment backing and who were seen as increasingly unwelcome guests by the 1920s. The term also evokes a Japanese perspective on Americans because it uses a Japanized version of the word, namely, *meriken* rather than

<sup>7</sup> The size of the pages of *Shinseinen* is roughly six by nine inches, and each page contains roughly 1,000-1,200 characters.

<sup>8</sup> “Kutsu” (Shoes), volume 3 of Tani’s complete works entitled *Hitori sannin zenshu#*, 21-27. The piece originally appeared in the March 1925 issue of *Shinseinen*. Among the large number of neologism handbooks published in the publishing boom of the inter-war period, those published after 1925 listed ‘Merican-Jap as a trendy word.

<sup>9</sup> “Kyojetsu-hyo# shu#shu# mania” (The Maniac Who Collects Rejection Slips), vol. 3 of *HSZ*, 159. It first appeared in the August 1927 *Shinseinen*.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see “Kuni no nai hitobito no kuni” (Country of the Countryless People) in the series of ten episodes called “Modan Dekameron (Modern Decameron),” originally published in *Chu#o#ko#ron* in 1927.

<sup>11</sup> “Jii hoizu” (Gee Whiz), vol. 3 of *HSZ*, 184.

“American.” Therefore, his hyphenated slangy neologism signifies a middle ground between native origin and adopted home, from which the ’Merican-Jap remains capable of criticizing both American and Japanese societies by revealing what mainstream cultural systems conceal. In other words, the ’Merican-Jap has a perpetual outsider’s or marginalized person’s perspective at the same time that he remains close enough to both societies to have an insider’s keen insight. In short, through his constant travel between the poles of Japaneseness and Americanness, he has acquired a double consciousness or a double-voicedness. Such multivalent consciousness or identity not only marks Tani’s protagonists as expressly “modern” figures, but it also constitutes one of the strategies by which they negotiate the complex challenges of global modernity as a social, political and economic phenomenon.

In contrast to other works published in Japan by Japanese about their experiences in the West, Tani’s stories do not depict an elite brooding over its existential dilemma of being transplanted to locations outside of Japan. Instead, the ’Merican-Jap stories represent the viewpoint of drifting, working-class men in spaces where they must act/react on the spot in order to survive in what was seen as the most advanced capitalist society in the world. In other words, the Japanese hobos continuously strive to figure out what is best for them “here” and “now;” and sketchy as their character development and interior descriptions may be, they present themselves with the identity best fitted to each situation within a society multiply layered with various races and economic classes. These stories also differ from the travel accounts seen in *Shinseinen* or other magazines that describe foreign countries from the perspectives of visitors or onlookers.<sup>12</sup> Each narrative tells its story in a speedy and garrulous mix of colloquial Japanese and American street lingo. On occasion Tani addresses his audience directly, and he constantly digresses from the main storyline into descriptions of new political, economic, ethnic or cultural aspects of the American urban space and his critical comments about them. It is worth noting, moreover, that Tani’s writing has been described as a “modernist style that traveled across modern customs and brought great innovation to Showa prose expressions.”<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, linguistic analysis of the transgressive use of

<sup>12</sup> *Shinseinen* was known for introducing Western culture to youngsters through their Western mystery fiction, travel accounts, critical essays, satirical cartoons and Q & A page by Rikko#kai 力行会. In the early twenties, Rikko#kai gave advice to youngsters who had questions about working abroad in pursuit of the dream of *kaigai yu#hi* (“launching out abroad”).

<sup>13</sup> Hamada Yūsuke, “Taishu#bungaku no kindai.” 177. Chiba Kameo (1878-1935), influential critic on literary developments in the Taisho period, asserts that the “free-

language in Tani's stories goes beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, I want to focus on the cultural function served by the descriptions of 'Merican-Japs as possessing or performing a flexible, multivalent identity in the harsh reality of capitalist America.

In the 'Merican-Jap stories, skill at dissembling — or representing oneself as someone else — is used by the central characters as a multivalent strategy for economic gain and survival. Take for example the story of "Sam Kagoshima." The narrator of the story is a Japanese man working as a waiter in an all-night restaurant managed by other Japanese. He is mistaken for Chinese by three Caucasian customers, who make fun of him, asking if he can serve Chinese food, if he has a pigtail, etc. Finally he declares he is Japanese, and calls for help from the cook, Sam Kagoshima, who is waiting in the kitchen. Sam is also a 'Merican-Jap. A former acrobat in the circus, his muscular physique makes him look very imposing. When the narrator announces that Sam will demonstrate "the difference between Chinese and Japanese," the customers fall silent at the prospect of having to defend themselves in a fight. After a moment of reflection, they change their tune. At this point, the narrator steps to their table and asks very courteously, "And what would you, sirs, like to order?"

Although "Sam Kagoshima" is a fairly simple story, the narrator and Sam can be interpreted as the writer's attempt to depict Japanese intellectual and physical strength in two respective individuals. Perhaps even more important, however, Tani creates a scenario in which the *suggestion* of physical strength by the Japanese hobo is as effective as the actual use of force, taking advantage of the simplistic image of Japanese ethnicity held by the Americans. As the three customers sit in cowed silence, the narrator imagines their thoughts:

"Mexicans, American Indians, and Japanese — one never knows what they are going to do."

"Especially this one. He's strange."

"He might jump on our throats."

"No — He's going to snap at [our] noses before that."

"*Jujutsu!*"

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spirited, fresh ... brilliant and sprightly writing style" that Tani employed in the 'Merican-Jap stories "will likely be recorded in the history of modern Japanese literature." "Taishu# sakka to shite no Maki-shi," *Chu#o#ko#ron* August 1935: 328-333.

“That’s right. He will do something strange with his legs first, make us lick the floor, and insert his hand into our ears to injure our pinky toes so that they’ll be useless for the rest of our lives!”

“*Jujutsu!*”

“Although he looks like a stone, he is Japanese. So, he is going to use that sorcery called *jujutsu* . . .”

The narrator depicts the customers beginning to fear Sam as a “jujutsu sorcerer” because they combine their perception of the ethnic signifier, “Japanese,” with his appearance. In actuality, however, Sam has lived in the U.S. since he was nine, and knows absolutely nothing about Japanese martial arts. Moreover, the narrator does not characterize him as a prototypical hero. Sam enters the scene by scurrying out of the kitchen (*chokochoko to dete kita*) – i.e., in a decidedly “unheroic” manner, and when he stands in front of the customers, the narrator describes him as so short that the customers may easily mistake him as sitting down. On one level, then, Tani is clearly making fun of the ignorance of Americans about Japanese. On another level, however, through an ironic tone, he depicts how ‘Merican-Jap’s *self-image* is created through contact with the foreign. The ‘Merican-Jap narrator in “Sam Kagoshima” desires to present the inflated image of Japanese as masculine and heroic when pitted against a majority, when in fact they cannot live up to such an image. The naïve judgment made by the Caucasian customers about Sam being a frightening jujutsu sorcerer is nothing more than an interior dialogue imagined by the ‘Merican-Jap narrator/protagonist. In this way, Tani challenges a traditional notion of authentic Japaneseness through his satirical depiction of the ‘Merican-Japs’ self-imposed ethnic image. Consequently, Tani makes the point that while stereotypical conceptions of ethnic identity stemming from others’ ignorance are sources of pain, at the same time they can also be manipulated, even for financial gain. Once the narrator introduces Sam’s Houdini-like powers and teaches the customers that they should not belittle Japanese, he takes their order – now that he has made them obey and stay to eat.

“Sam Kagoshima” draws a fairly simplistic picture of Japanese pitted against whites. But we also find that Tani’s portrayals of American society become more complex as his characters gain greater awareness of the ethnic diversity and complexity of the United States. Especially because the Japanese hobos interact with the wanderers of various other ethnic backgrounds, their identities as “Japanese male” (*Nippon danji*), or their



notions of pure Japanese-ness, are constantly challenged by the foreignness that they encounter.<sup>14</sup> They learn that the gap is not simply between Japanese and all other peoples, but that American society is composed of a complicated mosaic of various ethnic and economic hierarchies.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Tani also extends his depictions of strategic identity construction to people other than the Japanese hobos. One 'Merican-Jap, who has an almost schizophrenic habit of talking to himself out of deep loneliness, takes advantage of his idiosyncratic habit and becomes a professional ventriloquist. Eventually he becomes rich, as well as happily married to a gypsy woman who also uses multiple identities.<sup>16</sup> Another 'Merican-Jap, Taro, begins corresponding with a woman who is kind enough to fix the holes and missing buttons in his laundry. He believes she is the Caucasian woman whom he sees every morning on the bus. In the letters that he attaches to his laundry, he hides the fact that he is Japanese, fearing that she will stop being nice to him. In the end, he finds out that she is actually a black woman who pretended to be someone else out of fear that Taro would stop the correspondence. She is equally surprised to learn that Taro is Japanese.<sup>17</sup>

One 'Merican-Jap presents himself as an experienced cook – even though this is a lie – to get a job.<sup>18</sup> The jobs that Tani identifies as typical for the 'Merican-Japs all involve menial or physical labor. It is the best they can obtain no matter how hard they work, how well educated they are in their

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<sup>14</sup> According to his family, Tani was once a member of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The majority of the IWW members were hobos and so-called floating workers. Tani seems to have been influenced by Jack London as seen from the fact that in the 'Merican-Jap stories he mentions London and his book on hobos, presumably *The Road*.

<sup>15</sup> The 'Merican-Jap main characters interact with Anglo-Saxons, African Americans, *nisei* Japanese, fellow 'Merican Japs, and what Tani calls the “petit bourgeois second immigrants,” referring to the second wave of immigrants such as Jews and Greeks.

<sup>16</sup> Kuni no nai hitobito no kuni,” vol. 3 of *HSZ*. 360-379.

<sup>17</sup> “Taro# to B.V.D.” (Taro and B.V.D.), vol. 3 of *HSZ*. 256-273.

<sup>18</sup> There is even a series of six stories titled “Meriken-Jappu sho#bai o#rai” めりけんじゃっぶ商売往来. The title is apparently a play on the word, *o#rai*, which means “alright” in English and “textbook” in old Japanese. Various *o#rai* books were used from the Kamakura and Muromachi periods through the early Meiji in elementary education; therefore the title can be translated as “'Merican-Jap's Business Guide” or “'Merican-Jap, Business Is Alright.” The series describes American society through 'Merican-Japs' attempts to get various jobs and can be read as a guidebook to prepare themselves for emigrating to the U.S., although of course especially after the Immigration Act of 1924, emigration to the U.S. was no longer a choice for the general public.

home country, or how clever they are at using their wits. Such jobs include being a house servant, bus boy, hotel bellboy, attendant at a game called “Japanese Rolling Ball” at state fairs, and exotic *amma* masseur. There are also jobs that the ’Merican-Japs obtain via false identity, bogus qualifications, or pseudo-career that is invented through their superb skill at the art of narration (i.e., what Tani calls “good storytelling”). In other words, Tani gives the use of language a central position as a strategy for survival in the switching of identities and the deception of others. The most straightforward example of such pragmatic success is Tani’s “confidence men.” By assuming different identities, these sharks trick people to make money. Tani wrote several stories about such smart confidence men in which he applauds them for using their wits as the sole means to survive in a highly competitive modern world. He even argues that a writer himself is a type of a confidence man. He describes his art as a form of “bluffing,” thereby linking the strategies of a jobless Japanese hobo with the work of the popular author who lives by his pen.<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted that Tani’s hobo heroes (e.g., the ’Merican-Japs and the wandering samurai Tange Sazen 丹下左膳 that he created under the pen name, Hayashi Fubo#) became popular during the decade-long recession from around 1920 into the early 1930s. By 1930, only 42.3% of the university graduates could find jobs.<sup>20</sup> Those urban youngsters were popularly referred to as “intellectual hobos” (*interi runpen*, originally from the German word, *lumpen*).<sup>21</sup> Significantly, Tani debuted in *Shinseinen* magazine, a publication whose target readership was the newly emergent middle-class, or petit bourgeoisie. It was an educated class, but one that suffered from a poor job market due to the serious economic depression following WWI, as well as the centralization of the workforce to large cities because of advancements in systems of production in urban spaces.

To borrow Terry Eagleton’s words on the process of literature, “literature may be an artefact, a product of social consciousness, a world vision; but it is also an *industry* . . . Writers are not just transposers of trans-

<sup>19</sup> “Maruu shippu” (Maru# Ship), vol. 3 of *HSZ*. 72. Originally appeared in the April 1926 issue of *Shinseinen*.

<sup>20</sup> “Sho#wa no yokogao,” a booklet published by Yasuda Bank. Quoted in *Shuppan: ko#fukyo#ka ko#bo#no isseiki*. 216.

<sup>21</sup> In the film industry, Ozu Yasujiro#’s *Daigaku wa deta keredo* (I Graduated from the University, But...) in 1929 was one of the several hit movies that were categorized as *sho#shimin eiga* (petit bourgeois movies). They depicted the struggles and pathos experienced by university graduates and white-collar workers in those days.

individual mental structures, they are also workers hired by publishing houses to produce commodities which will sell.”<sup>22</sup> Tani declares a similar belief in asking his readers to see him as a fellow worker. For him, readers are his equals. The masses, or the *taishu*#, are not a faceless crowd to be enlightened; they are individuals who have their own will and beliefs. He speaks of his literary labor in terms of being a *bunko*#文工, “a worker in the factory of literature”<sup>23</sup>—a neologism he created to convey his recognition that writers comprise merely part of a larger production line which produces literary works. In doing so, he put himself on par with other workers such as type pickers and setters. He emphasizes that he does not want to be called a *bunshi* (lit., a literary gentleman) because it sounds “too pompous.” The term also reminds him of a “pale, skinny writer.” He does not pretend that writing is an ascetic practice in which all aspects of the self are revealed and one becomes enlightened. Writing is a profession, or a means to make a living. He writes in “Kyojetsu-hyo# shu#shu#byo# kanja” (The Maniac Who Collects Rejection Slips) that every ordinary individual is trying to be a writer because of the “success fever” in the United States. He hears about a housewife in Arizona winning \$3,000 in a book deal or about a train conductor selling his fabulous idea for comedy for \$2,500. Inspired by such ordinary people’s commercial success, the ’Merican-Jap narrator writes scenarios and sends them to several movie studios, although they are all returned with rejection slips. “Please try other markets,” they all say. By going commercial, Tani dissociates himself from *bundan*,<sup>24</sup> and attempts to reveal how deeply the system of literary production remains tied to capitalism.

More than simply exposing the processes of modern capitalist society, however, Tani went one step further to actively promote his own commodification through the use of three pen names for different genres, namely his ’Merican-Jap stories, his mystery fiction, and his *samurai* “period” fiction. He thereby simultaneously created multiple images out of a single person. Indeed, one might go so far as to see his interest in the flexibility or multivalence of identity as part of a modernist attack on the I-

<sup>22</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. 59-60.

<sup>23</sup> “Nento# kan nashi” (No Special Thoughts on the New Year), *Tani Jo#ji: meriken jappu ichidai-ki* (Tani Jo#ji: Life of a ’Merican-Jap). 152. The essay first appeared in the January 1932 issue of *Bungaku jidai*.

<sup>24</sup> Tani criticizes *bundan* as follows: “[In Japan,] there is a group of so-called literary young men. They turn the merely private associates of writers into what is called *bundan* [circle], and [by that] each writer strengthens his/her fortresses for self-defense.” “Sojō Amerika mandan” (A Rambling Critique on America), vol. 3 of *HSZ*. 86-87.

Novel approach to realism, which advanced a single, unmediated view of reality and identity.

In depicting identity as merely a series of ephemeral masks to wear in accordance with various situations, he differs from other Japanese writers of the early twentieth century. He depicts Japan not as a nostalgic, idealized space of stable identity, but as being fundamentally constituted by an engagement with the foreign. As a comparison, we do not see such modernist interaction in Nagai Kafu# 永井荷風's short stories in *Amerika monogatari* (American Stories), for example. Thus, in "Akatsuki" (Daybreak; 1907), the narrator is a helper at a summer resort. He and another young Japanese worker start talking after work is over. The narrator learns that the young man comes from a prestigious family and that he came to the United States to attend school. Consequently, he has never needed to work because of the financial support he receives from his father. However, after studying hard for two years, he quit school. To free himself from the pressure of having to become as successful and noble as his father, he decides never to open another book. Instead, he plans to hang around places like Coney Island for the rest of his life. The narrator, who listens to this story, is also a student who has been studying in the U.S. for two years. His father too has been financially supporting his son's education, but the young narrator is working and saving money out of a personal desire to go to Europe.

In terms of the thematic structure of the story, we see that Kafu# starts out to explain aspects of the manners and customs of American society, but his interest soon shifts to the traditional father-and-son relationship of the Japanese young man. The narrator is empathetic because he is in similar circumstances. In other words, the main concern of the story does not center on the life of Japanese and their relation and interaction with American society, or about the way Japanese survive by adjusting to the new culture. Instead, it focuses on the traditional family system from which the Japanese sons never seem to be able to liberate themselves. Hence, the Americans at the fair serve as merely a backdrop for those Japanese who have come so far from home, yet cannot be free of it. Foreignness and Japaneseness exist in a simple dichotomy within this story.

"Santo# senkyaku" 三等船客 (The Third-Class Passengers; 1922) published in *Tane maku hito* (The Sower), by the early proletarian writer, Maedako# Hiroichiro# 前田河広一郎, is also relevant to our discussion here. The story depicts the languid atmosphere among the third-class passengers who once emigrated from Japan to the United States but are now returning home on a ship sailing from San Francisco to Yokohama via Honolulu. For these immigrant returnees, "Japan has become something much more than

what it means to the people who spend their entire lives in Japan.”<sup>25</sup> Like so many Japanese immigrants in the early twentieth century, they left their homeland seeking the opportunities of “launching themselves abroad” (*kaigai yu#hi*), yet their final destination was not life in a foreign country, but Japan, to which they would ultimately return and live comfortably with the money they made. Japan was “the final place for repose after a lonely life and physical labor,” or the utopianized place that “they longed for with their eyes filled with tears of homesickness” while residing in a “foreign country where they had nothing to rely on.” Maedako# writes that “all because they wanted to go home richer, more powerful and famous,” the immigrants “took on all sorts of challenges, endured harsh labor, and bore every indignity,” and “their love for the abstracted symbol called Japan was stronger than anything else.” Japan was the utopian place where all their wishes would be fulfilled. For example, in the scene where a *naniwa-bushi* ballad performer recites a traditional *samurai* tale of revenge filled with traditional Japanese sentiments, the passengers become spellbound by their own imaginings of the perfect homeland. In the very last scene where the passengers finally see Japan in the distance from the ship’s deck, the tone of the story, which has been subdued until now, lightens dramatically and becomes filled with hope. This short story is one of the earliest proletarian literary works to have been produced in Japan.<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, Tani’s ’Merican-Jap stories never end with his hobos going back to Japan. Occasionally they do express frustration with life in America and voice a diasporic longing for homeland. However, the works maintain a perpetually ironic tone throughout. ’Merican-Japs are described as patriotic and brave *samurai*, for example only when faced with or compared to non-Japanese. So, in “Kutsu” (Shoes; 1926), Tani describes a fellow ’Merican-Jap named Henry Kawada who came to North America twenty years earlier and had the experience of serving as a soldier in the Canadian army during WWI. He is so poor that he comes to the narrator to borrow a pair of shoes to participate in a parade held on the anniversary of the end of the war. In the parade, Henry rides on a white horse, dressed in a Western uniform, and he looks heroic. Impressed, the narrator says: “Ah, a Japanese. Henry is Japanese, and so am I. He has been away from homeland for twenty years and living the life of a drifter, but he and I are both Japanese.” For him,

<sup>25</sup> Maedako# Hiroichiro#, “Santo# senkyaku,” *Nihon gendai bungaku zenshu#*, vol. 69 of *Puroretaria bungaku-shu#*. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Maedako# became a pupil of Tokutomi Roka’s in 1905, and Roka financially supported Maedako# to go to the United States to obtain first-hand experience of American society. The story is based on the writer’s own experiences in the United States from 1907 to 1920, where he first worked as a day laborer in extreme poverty.

Henry is a *samurai*. However, the irony is that Henry rides in the parade as a veteran for the Canadian army in which he happened to participate because Canada did not have enough soldiers during WWI and started recruiting anyone in the country. When the protagonist utters the word, *samurai*, it is written in *katakana* as though it is an exotic term to describe a non-Japanese. Tani's characters often declare themselves as true Japanese men, but in saying so, their language is a pidgin of broken Japanese and broken English.

The contrast between the works of Maedako# and Kafu# and those of Tani serves to illustrate the extent to which Tani offers a fundamentally different vision of Japan as a historical or geopolitical entity, and how it is endlessly re-assessed in relation to the foreign or international. In addition to describing American modern commodity society from the viewpoint of the marginalized 'Merican-Japs, Tani also turns his eye to contemporary Japan. He criticizes people in Japan for having a stereotypical image of Americans. For example, he writes that Japanese possess two simple images of Americans. They consider them either as charitable, like the missionaries residing in Japan, or as hedonistic, as they are presented in Hollywood movies. His stories attempt to provide a fuller, alternative view. They depict America as a place in which people of various backgrounds continuously re-assess their positions in relation to others. At the same time, he criticizes the *moga* and *mobo* phenomenon<sup>27</sup> in Japan as a superficial copy of the "undesirable pieces" of American culture. He sees the capitalist aspects of American culture becoming especially prevalent in urban Japan, and cursory as his pronouncements may be, he tries to make a point that cultural phenomena are not mere fashion. Rather, they are the result of the frictions and fusions of various cultures from different parts of the world. In other words, he ventures predictions about Japan embedded within the context of international/transnational history.

Tani continued to be in high demand until his untimely death in 1935, having entered into contracts with many newspapers, magazines and movie studios. Though it may sound ironic, he was marginalized within the critical discourse of the highbrow literary world for the very reason that he occupied a central place in the commercial publishing world and enjoyed such a large readership. In response to such bashings, he chose the *strategic rhetoric* of marginality on two levels. One, he wrote more than fifty 'Merican-Jap stories that depicted a marginal man's critical views about a lazy majority resting on its laurels. Two, by associating factory workers in

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<sup>27</sup> "Futatsu no ju#jika: A Story of The American Slang" (Double Crosses: A Story of The American Slang), vol. 3 of *HSZ*. 124-125.

an assembly line with the writer as a laborer in commodity society, he emphasized that writers played a role as a cog in the machinery of modernity – just like the socially marginalized working class. In other words, he did more than simply describe marginality as a condition imposed upon the oppressed by the powerful. Instead, he presented marginality as a space pregnant with diversities and freedom of choice, where one could choose to resist existing authorities/power and open up new possibilities for other ideologies. In short, he exploited his marginality to increase his commercial success; and through that success, he illustrates how the cultural dynamics of marginality are central in the development of inter-war Japanese literary expression.

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