

SHINSEINEN IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD (1920-30)¹

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The rise of Japan's popular literature (*taishû bungaku*) in the 1920s can be seen to correspond with the advancement of mass production techniques of the West in the print media. As an example of this explosion, 37,402 periodicals were officially registered in 1929², and each had at least more than 10,000 circulation numbers. Another example is the *enpon* (one-yen paperback) boom which was initiated by Kaizôsha Publishers when it first published *Gendai Nihon bungaku zenshû* (Collected works of modern Japanese literature) in 1926. The emergence of the huge commercial print media also reflects the rise of Japan's middle-class population enjoying so-called 'modern cultural life' (*bunka seikatsu*).

A major outcome of the Great Kanto earthquake in 1923 was that Tokyo was rebuilt as a modern cityscape where consumerism flourished. In the 1920s the Japanese economy changed from one based on agriculture to an industrialised capitalist economy. Newspapers and journals were disseminated throughout the population. The

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² Suzuki Toshio, *Shuppan* (Publications), Tokyo: Shuppan nyûsusha, 1970, p. 178.

expectation of readers was that they would be kept up-to-date, entertained and enlightened. Writing became a commodity. The city became, in Walter Benjamin's term, a 'marketplace'³. Thus, the interwar period from 1920 to 1930 saw great social and cultural changes in Japan, and from a literary perspective that decade represented the height of modernism. One of the popular magazines of this period was called *Shinseinen* (The New Youth) published by Hakubunkan Publishers, Tokyo from 1920 to 1950. In this period of thirty years the journal witnessed three tumultuous events: the growth of the 1920s was replaced by military conquests in China and South-East Asia, which in the end led to Japan's devastation and defeat, and this in turn was followed by the overthrow of imperial rule and the institution of democracy in Japan. *Shinseinen* had the general reputation of being an entertainment journal, chiefly through its popular detective stories; but, having browsed through some 400 copies of this monthly journal, I have noticed that it contains more than simply entertainment, and that in its way, through some of the articles, it has contributed to the development of intellectual literary appreciation in Japan. This paper examines this particular role that *Shinseinen* played in the interwar period.

Before taking up this intellectual aspect, which might be seen as going against the general trend of the journal, I would like to discuss the background of the journal as a whole from a socio-cultural perspective. It is important to recognize and analyse the contributions that *Shinseinen* made:

(1) *Shinseinen* encouraged readers to become contributors to the journal, and once accepted they were paid. This availability of space was of immense value to the young writers and translators. To my knowledge I have never seen such a willingness by contributors to have their works considered for publication. Inui Shin'ichirô⁴ commented that the editorial staff of *Shinseinen* disregarded totally copyright issues⁵,

³ Benjamin, Walter, 'The Flaneur', *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1969), quoted Raman Selden (ed), *A Reader: The Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present*, London and New York, Longman, 1988, p. 447.

⁴ Inui was invited to join *Shinseinen* when his contributed translation work was accepted in 1928. He was then still a student at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo. His long association with *Shinseinen* began in 1930. He became the editor-in-chief of *Shinseinen* between 1937 and 1938, but resigned in 1938 as he could not accept *Shinseinen* becoming a tool propagating Japan's militarism.

⁵ Inui Shin'ichirô, '*Shinseinen*' no koro (On my time with *Shinseinen*), Tokyo: Hayakawa shobô, 1991, p. 64.

which partly earned Japan dishonour as ‘the nation of translation pirates’⁶. The journal contained a multiplicity of genres, e.g. critical essays, overseas news, short stories, poems, film commentaries. Most importantly, detective stories were not mere entertainment but contained scientific analyses and police investigation skills. Translation from foreign languages such as French, English and Russian obviously required the intellectual skills needed for translation and interpretation. It is for this reason that I would like to examine critical articles to show how instructive and intellectual this journal was, while still retaining its popular appeal.

(2) *Shinseinen* promoted Japan’s modernist movements by introducing a wide range of genres, e.g. satirical cartoons, short-short stories and overseas social news, all of which were new to writers in 1920 – 30. Studies of *Shinseinen* by Suzuki Sadami and Sekii Mitsuo reveal that Japanese modernism was not simply a copy of Western modernism, rather it was a home grown literary advance with its rapidly changing society as a background. They claim that *shin-kankaku-ha* (New Sensory School)⁷ literature was the best example, showing how mechanization threatened to subordinate ordinary human life. This threat to individuality and desires was easily identified by workers and families in the new capitalist society. In this regard, *Shinseinen*’s detective or mystery stories depicted social injustice and dysfunctional human relationships.

(3) When Japan turned from a traditional agricultural society to an industrialized capitalist society it needed a new identity – that is, of a modernized civil society. One interesting aspect of the advent of modernity here is that the journal’s initial aim was to encourage the youth of Japan to go overseas, e.g. to China, Manchuria, Sakhalin and the South Sea Islands. This campaign mirrored Japan’s expansionist views. Inui Shin’ichirô, who was the editor-in-chief of *Shinseinen* between 1937-38, wrote:

⁶ See Miyata Noboru’s argument why this dishonour came about in his article ‘Dispelling misunderstanding of “a big nation importing translations” and “a big nation of translations without permission”’, *Wochi kochi*, June/July 2008, No. 23, Japan Foundation, p. 33.

⁷ A group of new writers, e.g. Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) and Yokomitsu Riichi (1898-1947) launched a journal called *Bungei Jidai* (Literary Age) in 1924. The critic, Chiba Kameo, named their literary experiments as *shin-kankaku-ha* (New Sensory School).

Originally, *Shinseinen* was a serious journal to encourage the youth to go overseas. We had an epigraph ‘Oh, youth, let us venture out to Brazil to open up a new sphere’.⁸

This intention, however, was soon taken over by the popularity of detective stories.

(4) With its stylish illustrations *Shinseinen* was a phenomenon instituting modernism, and its news items, illustrations and cartoons were at times satirical. Below is an example:

‘These days people marry for money rather than love. You might be able to do that if you have enough money’ ‘Oh, no, it still wouldn’t happen even if I was given money from all over the world.’⁹

Shinseinen represented the liberalism of Taishô democracy through literary entertainment genres, such as science fiction, detective stories, travelogues, news items about fashion and film. This extensive range demonstrates the nature of the journal in that its aim was to be a commercial success and not an elitist journal needing to be subsidised. By focusing on a general readership, it was able to take its place in Japanese society as a whole and have an impact in shaping the minds and attitudes of its readers, particularly young men who were looking to be ‘modern’ or ‘liberal-minded’. The journal initially targeted the young male, but later in the 1930s the women readership was encouraged. In its variety and being up-to date the journal was of great interest to the young in that they were able to find something ‘contemporaneously new’ and quite different from the traditions of the island culture in which they had grown up. They became known as *mobo* (modern boy) and *moga* (modern girl). As mentioned, the journal was published from 1920 to 1950, but after the Second World War a number of contemporary journals began to be published. *Shinseinen* was no longer able to compete and its long life came to an end.

⁸ *‘Shinseinen’ no koro*, p. 104.

⁹ *Shinseinen*, (facsimile edition, 1994), No. 8, July 1928, no page number provided (between pp. 144-45)

Certainly, *Shinseinen* took part in the birth of *taishū bungaku* (popular literature) in the 1920s. It is interesting to know that *Shinseinen* had the aspiration to be a modern journal similar to *The New Yorker*.¹⁰ Items such as stylish stories, cartoons and illustrations showed glimpses of modernism within the limitations of being a general journal. Compared to the wide range of literary genres which were being displayed in *Shinseinen* – such as manga, science fiction and detective stories - criticism on socio-political issues, let alone literary criticism at a higher level, were not many but indicative of a gradual breaking through.

Among the few who did deal with literature, the articles written by a journalist Chiba Kameo (1878-1935) demonstrated his insight into literature of the times. Although *Shinseinen* was a popular journal, Chiba intended to stimulate intellectual inquiry, for example, by discussing differences and similarities between detective stories and mystery stories in Japan and the West. Between 1894 and 1935 Chiba's contributions to newspapers and journals amounted to more than 2000. My previous research on Chiba indicated that the number of his contributions to one of the journals, *Josei* (Women, 1922-1926) was 24, as part of his mission was to support Japanese women in achieving emancipation.¹¹

Chiba joined *Nihon shinbun* in 1905 where, together with journalists who would become prominent in the Taishō period—Hasegawa Nyozeikan (1875-1969) and Kuga Katsunan (1857-1907)—he worked on innovative topics, particularly by setting up columns for women readers as well as literary columns. These journalists are important as early protagonists of liberal thought in the media. In addition, Chiba's wide reading made him familiar with the principles and practices of emancipation movements in Europe and America. A study conducted by a research team at Shōwa Joshi Daigaku (Shōwa Women's College) identified Chiba's connection with the American journalist Arthur Brisbane (1814-1935) in this regard. In his newspaper columns Brisbane discussed current topics of daily interest to women, such as family issues and fashion. Influenced by Brisbane, Chiba radically altered the women's column in *Josei* and began engaging in issues concerning the improvement of

¹⁰ *'Shinseinen' no koro*, p. 169.

¹¹ See Yasuko Claremont, 'Chiba Kameo: The Making of Modern Japanese Women', *Intersections*, Issue 11, 1998.

women's status. At the same time, Chiba did not overlook an element of commercialism in Brisbane's innovative journalism, which he saw as a negative aspect of his work. In contrast, his own columns displayed much more depth. Because of his independent feminist approach to literature, journalism and criticism, Chiba is often referred to as one of the first pioneer feminists.

In *Shinseinen* Chiba's literary criticism bears the same approach of intellectual inquiry that was shown in his articles in *Josei*. He questioned what was meant by detective stories. Were they simply entertainment? What did we expect to see in *taishū bungaku* (popular literature)? Essentially he was a literary critic. His sharp eye for social and cultural trends as a journalist and his literary sensitivities are evident in the way that his naming of a new literary movement of the 1920s, *Shinkankakuha* (New Sensationalist School), is now an accepted literary term. Chiba vigorously promoted popular literature in the 1920s by contributing his critical articles to the major journals, such as *Chūō kōron*, expressing his view that the common people's appreciation of literature could no longer be ignored.

As a literary critic in *Shinseinen* Chiba brought a journalistic eye to the topic he was discussing. By a journalistic eye, I mean that he could create a sense of immediacy or a current trend in his writing in addition to the range of his literary analysis. For example, in his article 'Detective Stories and Mysterious Stories' in the February 1926 issue he took up the question as to why Japanese detective novels were plain novels of detection and did not have the variety of other equivalent genres such as mystery novels and ghost novels. He said that detective novels could benefit more if they contained elements of mystery in them because the element of mystery would add to the artistic merit of the plot. He went on to complain:

Current detective novels place great emphasis on human crime, where sins of all kinds become a subject to be gone into thoroughly. Writers' efforts seem to concentrate on the most vivid way that these can be presented in their work.

The more a crime is serious and gruesome, the more time will be spent in its description.¹²

To Chiba, literature should bring out the mysterious elements that surround the crime, the reasons why it occurred, and what kind of psychological environment or social system was involved. He saw seriousness and mystery in crimes that were committed, including in detective stories. On this point Chiba mentioned Shakespeare as an example, but did not go on to support his argument by mentioning any of the many plays written by Shakespeare where the psychological motivation for murder overrides the crime itself (as in *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*). This would be too much for readers of a popular journal, which has left me puzzling why Chiba should go to the trouble of mentioning Shakespeare at all. In any case, he found in American detective stories the same concentration on plot without further artistic development as was the case with Japanese detective stories. So that while he admired the creative power of American detective stories as being rational, fast moving, modern and scientific, he criticized them for their lack of creative depth. Chiba then went on to mention writers of crime novels that he admired, such as Dostoevsky, Poe, or Robert Louis Stevenson. At the core of their works, he said, was the ‘unexplainable mystery’ that existed in human nature. This element of mystery was of great appeal to readers, whether it was contained in reports of actual crimes in the newspapers or stories in which the French detective Arsene Dupain or the most famous detective of all, Sherlock Holmes, solved the crime. Chiba admitted that crimes in detective stories must always be solved, as this was a central feature of the genre, but in doing so writers should embroider the story as it goes along, allowing readers to exercise and enjoy their own imagination. He also introduced definitions of detective stories by Paul Armstrong who said that the reason why we were interested in detective stories was that human beings recognized sins in themselves, and by Albert Mortel who said that the demand of detective stories in our society revealed that the instinct to murder was latent in our consciousness, whereby human beings enjoyed looking at others’ pain and suffering.¹³ Chiba concluded this particular article with the following words: ‘I believe that bringing together two aspects - resolution of the crime and the motivation

¹² Chiba Kameo, ‘Tantei shōsetsu to shinpi shōsetsu’ (Detective stories and mystery stories), *Shinseinen*, February 1926, p. 189.

¹³ Chiba, ‘Tantei shōsetsu to shinpi shōsetsu’ p. 319.

and mystery that is part of human nature - would raise the level of artistry in detective stories.¹⁴ It is easy to understand why Chiba admired Doestoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as being a great detective story. In his article he mischievously added that some readers might think that his comments would insult the sacredness of *Crime and Punishment*, appearing as they did in a popular journal.¹⁵ On the other hand, we must take into account the background of manga, science fiction, and popular detective stories in which Chiba's article appeared, mentioning some of the great figures in Western literature. The journal was not the place to go into their works in any great depth, but just the mention of them in a comparative way is a small indication of Japan's awareness of Western culture and the social impact it could have.

In another discursive article Chiba examined 'the essence of popular literature'.¹⁶ Here he found three characteristics: 1. Being romantic; 2. Being enlightening; 3. Being entertaining. The first one can be detected in the works of period stories, detective stories and newspaper/entertainment stories, which appealed to feelings of justice in readers or to an ideal world that could never be realized. The second characteristic which Chiba found was that popular literature appeals to human emotions rather than to the intellect. And with the third characteristic he felt that great consideration had to be given in the way that the reader was entertained, avoiding sensationalism or vulgarity. Chiba referred to a critic in England who analyzed the works of a popular woman writer named Marie Corelli. She was successful internationally. The reason for that was that she was able to grasp issues common to everyone, and then restate them. Her strongest points were energy and passion, but her activism did not reach any further depth and was not a substitute for the inclusion of ideas. In saying this Chiba was critical of the mindless trend in popular literature in the 1920s. He agreed that entertainment was a necessary feature of art, but he argued that entertainment should have in it some intellectual elements as well. Chiba's example was Tsukue Ryûnosuke, a samurai hero in *Daibosatsu tôge* (The Daibosatsu Incline) written by Nakazato Kaizan. It was a period novel based in the Edo times, similar to Miyamoto Musashi. Tsukue was featured realistically as an

¹⁴ Chiba, 'Tantei shôsetsu to shinpi shôsetsu', p. 319.

¹⁵ Chiba, 'Tantei shôsetsu to shinpi shôsetsu', p. 185.

¹⁶ Chiba Kameo, 'Taishû bungaku no honshitsu' (The essence of popular literature), *Chûô kôron*, July 1926, in *Chiba Kameo chosakushû* (Selected works of Chiba Kameo), vol. 1, Tokyo: Yumani shobô, 1993, pp. 47-73.

individual with psychological problems. The realism shown in his characterization made a vivid contrast to the background of the period. In the same vein, Chiba said, *Akô rôshi* (The Forty-Seven Ronin) stood at the top of popular literature.

Chiba saw detective stories as inevitable products of society, and their birthplace was a crime wave that swept America at that time, where crimes were committed daily. If detective stories were to last and be read by later generations, Chiba argued, they would need to have neo-romanticism as an element in them – that is, apart from the fact of how the crime was committed or who committed it, they should explore why the crime was committed through psychology and the social environment in which it took place. Then, detective stories could occupy a worthy place in *taishû bungaku* (popular literature). Chiba knew that popular literature could reach out to a wider readership than pure artistic literature. Pure literature was centripetal whereas popular literature was centrifugal. The main characteristic of popular literature should be to succeed in inspiring the spiritual needs of the readership.

In 1928 Chiba published a composite article of thirteen sections in which he discussed what he saw as constituting modern literature.¹⁷ Chiba's analyses were based on Marxism. His references here are almost all to Western literature. Chiba had experienced social divisions existing between rich and poor existing in Japan, and yet at the same time he still held to the tradition of art-for-art romanticism. He also believed that science played a strong role in literature, particularly in psycho-analysis:

Sexuality is not Satan wanting to destroy spirituality in all but one sense, as Christian fundamentalists would try to do. Sexuality, in particular, has a scientific basis... Consider Freud who in his discoveries placed so much emphasis on hormones and the physiology of reproduction... Owing to science we have come to understand the strong power of sexuality. Literature reveals it.¹⁸

Chiba was critical of the bourgeois age and the *petite bourgeoisie*, who sought to restrict human values within a single framework of morality that they had adopted.

¹⁷ Chiba Kameo, 'Bungaku' (On Literature), *Shinseinen*, No. 7 June 1928, pp. 160-69.

¹⁸ Chiba, 'Bungaku', 1928, p. 168.

Their views on sexuality were restricted by this moral framework. Women, too, had rigid specific views on chastity and sexuality.

Chiba concluded that the new literary movements such as futurism, the expressionist movement and structuralism were all examples of modernism escaping from the old feudalistic control. Chiba also pointed out the hidden agenda of those in authority. Through their use of ideology and religion they sanitized the reactions of people, making them compliant. According to Chiba, Turgenev's weakness was that he did not possess the spirit of resistance necessary to champion individual rights in a society based on humanist principles. Chiba took as second example Chekhov, who from the beginning saw life as a place of despair. In opposition to these attitudes, he said, there were many humanist writers who were able to rejoice in the vitality of life, despite the violence, coercion and brutality that remained such a persistent feature of it.

Later in his life Chiba became a professor at Rikkyō University, Tokyo, a position which he occupied until his death in 1935. In memory of Chiba Kameo's contribution to the promotion of *taishū bungaku*, the newspaper, *Sandē mainichi* twice awarded the Chiba Kameo Prize for popular literature in 1936 and 1939. The first recipient of the prize was Inoue Yasushi with his short story 'Ryōjū' (Hunting Gun).

Compared to Chiba's articles, Kozakai Fuboku's critical discourse on 'a study of criminological literature' has a more specific focus in its argument.¹⁹ He was a trained doctor, but due to having contracted tuberculosis he gave up medicine. In this particular piece of writing he discusses aspects of human nature – fear and curiosity – and differences between criminological literature and ghost stories. As one example, he cites the case of babies who are fond of being scared by adults who joyfully scare them in play. Instinctively we all have such a nature, he argues. In bringing out the difference between subjective and objective perceptions Kozakai discusses another case, such as a ghost (e.g. Hamlet's father) who is only visible to a certain person.

Contributions to *Shinseinen* by such writers as Chiba and Kozakai gave the journal an intellectual focus which it would not otherwise have had.

¹⁹ Kozakai Fuboku, 'Hanzai bungaku kenkyū 7', *Shinseinen*, December 1925, pp. 36-48.

