

# Japanese Utopian Literature from the 1870s to the Present and the Influence of Western Utopianism\*

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THIS PAPER OFFERS A SURVEY of modern Japanese utopian/dystopian literature, especially in terms of its relationship with Western models and influences. Japanese literature after the Meiji period—from around 1870 to the present day—cannot be considered in isolation from literatures of the West, and this literary background poses us the question, among others, of how Japan has perceived Western concepts of utopia in creating its own utopian literature. By describing the development of Japanese utopian/dystopian literature from the 1870s chronologically, taking as literary examples some of the better known novelists such as Akutagawa, Mishima, Abe, Ōe and Murakami, this paper aims to offer a new perspective on the distinctiveness of Japanese utopia.<sup>1</sup>

This historically-based examination leads me to suggest that there is an absence of “a constant tug-of-war” (Chang 225) between reality and unreality in Japanese utopian literature. In other words, Japanese utopia lacks what Vita Fortunati, in her essay on George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, defines as the prime characteristic of utopia:

The essence of utopia is to be found precisely in this shifting of position between a projected environment which is not reality and the actual reality to which the projected environment is in opposition. Utopia is thus a game played between the two poles of reality and fiction. Both the strength and the weakness of utopia rest in the basic underlying ambiguity of the genre. (110)

Inadequate tension between “the two poles” in Japanese utopian literature may lead to the conclusion that utopia is, consequently, a distinctively Western form. However, another approach would be to consider, as suggested by Hui-chuan Chang in his essay on Chinese utopias, that the weakness of Japanese utopia is nothing less than a product of that “ambiguity” of the genre. Some of the problems entailed in modern Japanese utopias may suggest not only the fact that Japanese utopian/dystopian literature is still underdeveloped as a literary genre, but may also point to the generic confusion in critical studies of the definition of utopian literature.

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In her *The Emergence of Modern Japan* (1989) Janet E. Hunter observes: “The active involvement between Japan and the Western world which began in the 1850s has been so important for both that a consideration of

Japan's place in the world order is an appropriate starting point for any discussion of her recent history" (15). In 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry, an official commissioner of the US government, arrived in Japan to initiate relations with this isolated country. Perry's arrival with a huge squadron of four ships was effective; the reopening of Japan's contacts with the Western world naturally caused the Japanese to be aware of their vulnerability to threats of western superior forces, which eventually led to an ambition to achieve equal status with the Western countries.

Zest for Western principles and ideas became current in the Meiji period (1868–1912). A few individuals who travelled abroad to see Western culture, technology and society noted that Japan, having spent more than 150 years in isolation, was militarily and economically weak. Naturally, "westernization" or "modernization" became a popular aspiration under the slogan "Western technology, Japanese values" (Hunter 19). Wide-ranging social reforms were accomplished between the Meiji Restoration and the promulgation of the Imperial Constitution, during which a parliament had been created in 1889, and an elected assembly was opened in 1890. As a consequence of these social reforms, the Meiji period is often described as the most "utopian" era in modern Japanese history.

In this most utopian time, foreign and domestic utopian texts were in vogue. Supported by the constructive intention to establish a new society, Japan in this era imported Western novels as a kind of "Western technology". Donald Keene's observation in his *Japanese Literature: An Introduction for Western Readers* (1977) refers to the literary taste of this age: "When we look at lists of European novels translated in the early years of Meiji, we are struck and perhaps amused by the preponderance of political novels, such as those of Disraeli or Bulwer Lytton, and in the works written under European influence this political element is equally conspicuous" (101). In the light of this literary and social background, it seems likely that utopian texts from overseas were also valuable to enlighten the Japanese political consciousness and, it was hoped, to raise Japan's standard of living. Japanese leaders were deliberately trying to grasp utopian concepts and policy from Western history and literature (Kawabata 237). According to Alfred Aldridge, for example, 23 utopian texts of the West were published in translation in the last decade of the 19th century (184). A part of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* was introduced in 1880, and the first translation of Thomas More's *Utopia* was published in 1881. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was interpreted as a future and political fiction at that time. In 1904, translations of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* were released, followed by a translation of Friedrich Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* in the next year.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary interpretations of these Western texts reveal an enthusiastic Japanese attitude towards futurology. This strong interest in depicting a future society and the appreciation of political dogma in texts aroused some Japanese individuals, including Shōyō Tsubouchi (1884), Tetchō Suehiro (1884), Chōmin Nakae (1888) and Kōda Rohan (1900–1),

to write their own utopian writings, in which we can perceive a certain particularity of the Meiji period (Takayanagi 246). The utopian literature of this period emphasized the importance of political meanings, and the writers' concern rested on the belief that literature had to be "a device for education", whose chief function was, according to Tsubouchi, "frequently proclaimed to be the encouragement or chastisement of morals" (qtd. in Keene 93).<sup>3</sup>

In a way, the introduction of Western utopian literature was a digression in the evolution of Japanese utopian/dystopian literature in two significant ways. One is that Japanese utopian texts in the Meiji era were primarily seen as being for the promulgation of political ideology; they were merely a sort of political guidebook. The intellectuals of this age identified "utopia" with the products of the French, English and American Revolutions (Takayanagi 245); they were indifferent to more precise historical contextualization, such as the fact that, for example, More's *Utopia* was generated by Renaissance Humanism. The other point is that subsequently utopia in Japan has gone on to become associated with futurology, as Seiji Nuita would observe in his "Traditional Utopias in Japan and the West" (1971): "Today in Japan there is great interest in futurology; before long it will be an independent field of study. But at the moment it strikes me as being little more than a theory of economic growth and of prediction by scientific extrapolation" (17).<sup>4</sup> Nuita's comment indicates that Japanese utopia after the Meiji period has, more or less, tended to be deficient in historical and social analysis.

With the transformation that came with Japanese contact with the Western world, Japanese writers' reception of Western literature was also changed. We can see this tendency in a short novel of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke. Akutagawa, the first Japanese author who "appreciated western literature without direct experience of western life" (Kato 240),<sup>5</sup> succeeded in presenting his utopian text, *Kappa* (1927), in a more fictional way. The novel is an allegorical satire which uses the mythic figure of the imaginary amphibian of Japanese folklore called Kappa, and is frequently compared with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, and Anatole France's *Island of Penguins*.

*Kappa* has a double narrative structure in which the person described as "I" happens to hear of a schizophrenic man's experience in the Kappa's world. The lunatic in the mental hospital talks rationally about the irrational, and the incomprehensible Kappa's land is described as a more advanced community than that of humanity. Kappa's remarks on eminent Western people such as Voltaire, Goethe, Strindberg, Nietzsche, Wagner, and Darwin give a sophisticated and cultivated image of their own country, and as one Kappa is positive, everything in the society is well organized and carried out properly. Yet readers readily recognise that various aspects of the society of the Kappa show little difference from those of 1920s Japan—coercion, literary and cultural censorship, birth control, the recruitment of volunteer troops, and ruthless class distinctions. Moreover, it comes to be dubious as to whether the Kappa's society is more righteous; for instance,

the workers who fall victim to the progress of mass production are “eaten up”, as the butchery of the redundant workers is legalized. Finding the man shocked, a Kappa makes out his case with due contemplation, and says that the man’s sympathy is nothing less than “sheer sentimentality” (84).

When compared with the utopian writings of the Meiji period, Akutagawa’s allegorical short fiction can be seen to have developed “the two poles of reality and fiction”, through which he criticises Japanese society of the 1920s. Japan by this time had become captive to a desire to progress on a world stage, as seen in the colonization of Korea, and the wars with China (1894–1895) and Russia (1904–1905). Not only these military successes in the two-overseas wars, but also the success in domestic industrialization consolidated the authority of the Meiji imperial-bureaucratic state. Under the rigid authoritarian regime, the claims of the individual were largely denied. However, in the Taisho period (1912–1926), often referred to as Taisho Democracy, individualism was highlighted with the new spirit of liberalism. Taisho liberalism exercised a moral effect on Akutagawa’s mind for one, and may be seen in his attempt to approach the problem of reciprocity between individual and society in *Kappa*. Yet the Depression after the First World War, following damage in the earthquake of 1923 and the establishment of Imperial Fascism, caused him a certain “vague unease” about the future. Akutagawa’s uneasiness is represented by the words of a young Kappa who suddenly crosses to the middle of the street and peeps through his legs at cars and people passing by: “No. I’m not playing any prank. No. Everything seemed so terribly gloomy that I thought I’d have a go looking at the world the other way up. But it turns out to be just the same, after all” (100). Akutagawa’s “vague unease”, which in several letters he gave as a reason for killing himself in 1927, was not vigorous enough to evoke for his readers a sense of social crisis.

Japan after the Second World War again explored ways to establish a new society as it had done in the Meiji period. In the years after the end of the war, Japan’s former enemy turned itself into an ally, and great changes took place in its political and social system under the surveillance of American General Headquarters (G.H.Q.). Where Japan under the strong militaristic regime of the pre-war and war years had severely cut off the import of both Western materials and thought, after the war Japan was again receptive to Western products and influences. Authors after the war felt they were required to search for new identities as writers. Trying to overcome this dilemma, they explored new styles and themes. One of the significant changes in the Japanese political and social system of this time was the introduction of “democratization”, from which writers gained freedom of speech and started to establish their literary world.

Although, as Janet Hunter again points out that “a re-emergence of the ‘Western technology, Japanese values’ syndrome seems on the cards” (35) at this time, in contrast to the Meiji or Taisho periods, this did not lead to the writing of utopian texts. On the contrary, Japan, having lost the Pacific War, was not in a proper condition to create utopia, as Keene writes: “[Since]

Japan was fated to lose the war, they must exhaust the possibility of happiness which each moment gave them. When the war does end and they are repatriated, everything in Japan seems mean and ugly" (106). Now utopian texts which had appealed to the Japanese in the Meiji period were replaced by science fiction from the West and particularly America. It can be understood how Japan's aspiration toward economic prosperity and unfolding technology was better matched by science fiction whose context was limited to a future with advanced technology.

So for example, in 1962, Yukio Mishima, after reading more than 100 texts of Western science fiction, wrote his own science novel under the title of *Utsukushii Hoshi* [*The Beautiful Star*]. His work is distinctive in that the protagonists are aliens who believe they have been sent to the beautiful star, the earth, to save humanity. A sense of revolt against the advancement of science and technology is described from the viewpoint of the Osugi, the main characters of this novel, together with a long dialogue on whether or not mankind of worthy of preservation. The development of the hydrogen bomb in 1962 inspired Mishima to write about the possibility of global annihilation in this text. Despite the author's view that *Utsukushii Hoshi* was the culmination and most successful work of his career, it did not attract a wide range of readers. The novel sold fewer copies than any book Mishima had ever written—around twenty thousand. This failure may be attributed to the convention in Japanese literature that novels of realism had been orthodox, and that styles such as techno-military science fiction had been categorized as popular culture. Thus critics and readers did not know how to interpret Mishima's attempt to mingle a serious realistic novel and science fiction.

Kenzaburo Ōe attempted a rather similar mix of genres in his science fiction texts. *Chiryōto* (1991) describes a society after "the Deluge", when humankind has already explored the universe and built the "New Earth." "Chiryōto" is a tower for medical treatment on "New Earth" which cures any diseases and gives selected people a perfect body. Numerous social problems of this century are touched on, including religion, HIV, and mass production. In his Nobel Prize Speech at Stockholm, 1994, Ōe asserted the importance of keeping "decency", one of George Orwell's preferred aspects of human nature. His belief that "decency" can prevent the emergence of a ruthless society such as is described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and his social commitment as a writer are reflected in Ōe's science fiction. However, as with Mishima's case, *Chiryōto* has not proved very popular with readers.

Whereas the texts of Mishima and Ōe indicate difficulty in expressing their serious social concerns through science fiction, Kōbō Abe has been more successful in presenting his views on science and utopia in *Dai-yon Kampyōki* [*Inter Ice Age 4*] (1959), a dystopian novel mixed with detective fiction. One of the main topics of this novel is whether the future can be foreseen by computers. Consequently, a sort of future society of aquans, humans with gills who are capable of living under water, is portrayed, and a young aquan, although "discovery meant punishment" (219), is driven search for ancient human society, on land. Like Kuno in E.M. Forster's

“The Machine Stops” (1909), this character enjoys the touch of air and wind, being amazed at the existence of gravity.

Abe is often described as “the first Japanese writer whose works, having no distinctly Japanese qualities, are of interest to the Western audience because of their universal relevance” (Yamanouchi 174). *Dai-yon Kampyōki* poses a “universally relevant” issue in the history of utopian literature. Booker regards this novel as a challenge to “the Western Enlightenment notion of the universe as a huge mechanism the workings of which are determined by well-defined natural laws whose results, given sufficient data, can be predicted by science” (71). Abe also mentions his challenge to his predecessors in utopian literature who have depicted future worlds in exclusively affirmative and negative ways. The open, rather chaotic and equivocal ending of *Dai-yon Kampyōki* is indicative of the author’s question as to how his reader draws a conclusion from the novel. “Yet I shall have fulfilled one of the purposes of this novel,” Abe writes in the Postscript, “if I have been able to make the reader confront the cruelty of the future, produce within him anguish and strain, and bring about a dialogue with himself” (227–8).

Whereas Abe conceives, then, of the coexistence of the origins of utopia and dystopia in the human spirit, Haruki Murakami in *Sekai no Owari to Hādoboirudo Wandārando* [*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*] (1985) poses us a “strong suspicion not only of the possibility of utopia, but of its *desirability*” (Booker 196). This fiction is made up of two interleaved texts, as the title suggests. Here I will deal with “*Sekai no Owari*” [“The End of the World”]—the world of fantasy, the magical place of dream and unicorns, in which all the inhabitants lose their shadows and emotions in exchange for achieving immortality. The protagonist is an outsider who engages in reading old dreams in the library. This Dreamreader is asked to throw his shadow away at the gate of the Town; if his shadow dies he loses all feelings and old memories like the inhabitants of the Town. In order to be complete again, the shadow persuades the man to make a map of the Town, which will enable their escape. The Dreamreader, however, hesitates to agree with the shadow because of the perfection of the Town. The shadow then explains what this utopian situation reveals:

You tell me there is no fighting or hatred or desire in the Town. That is a beautiful dream, and I do want your happiness. But the absence of fighting or hatred or desire also means the opposites do not exist either. No joy, no communication, no love. Only where there is disillusionment and depression and sorrow does happiness arise; without the despair of loss, there is no hope. (334)

It turns out that the Town is the mental creation of the protagonist himself. The shadow explains: “You yourself created this Town. You made everything here. The Wall, the River, the Woods, the Library, the Gate, everything . . .” (399). Despite the shadow’s belief that the protagonist’s rightful world is outside the Wall, the hero eventually decides to stay and to help the shadow to go outside: “But I must see out the consequences of my

own doings. This is my world, the Wall is here to hold *me* in, the River flows through *me*, the smoke is *me* burning. I must know why" (399). The split of the subject into the shadow and "I" indicates that the desirability of creating a utopia no longer exists in the mind of contemporary individuals.

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A brief history of the development of Japanese utopian/dystopian literature from the 1870s reveals how Japanese authors have molded their utopian writings under the influence of Western utopian literature. Japan's first introduction of Western concepts of utopia in the Meiji Restoration was only for the purpose of political ideology, and utopia as a literary genre could not be consolidated at this time. In Akutagawa's short fiction *Kappa* the author faces the problem of the interaction between the individual and the society, yet Akutagawa's satire did not have a great impact, nor did it suggest an enlightened direction to readers. Immediately after the Second World War, it was impossible to envisage a utopian society. Rather, science fiction dominated after the war with the development of industry and science and Japan's concern for the future. Yet science fiction tended to be a little lightweight; the arduous texts of Mishima and Ōe with serious social conscience and morality, however, did not acquire a wide range of readers. The two Japanese texts which Keith Booker lists as dystopian fictions, those of Abe and Murakami, show their authors' concern with our daily consciousness. Abe clearly expresses that his purpose in presenting a dystopian fiction is to make his readers realise that "there is real evil in the very commonplace order of things we call everyday living" (227). Murakami's text is more a sort of fantasy, and the utopia is now in the mind of the main character. Ōe points out a difference between post-war-writers and contemporary writers, including Haruki Murakami, arguing that the new generation represents "the experience of a youth politically uninvolved or disaffected, content to exist within a late adolescent or post-adolescent subculture" (50). The sense of warning shown in the works of Ōe, Mishima, and Abe is less conspicuous in Murakami's novel. However, Murakami's new narrative approach or concept of utopia displays a question of how utopian/dystopian literature should be in the future. The making of Japanese utopian literature may be conceived as being underdeveloped as a literary genre from the view of Western form, yet this "weakness" of Japanese utopian texts sheds light on a certain peculiar ambiguity of utopian as well as dystopian literature, requiring us to re-examine its definition and function.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

\*A preliminary version of this paper was presented for the Conference "A Millennium of Utopias: The Theory, History, and Future of Utopianism" held by the University of East Anglia, U.K., in June 1999.

1. Briefly this paper defines dystopia as anti-utopia, "not a world we should like to live in, but one we must be sure to avoid" (qtd. in *Listener* 5 January, 1967). Dystopian literature is

thus that literature which aims to “warn against the potential negative consequence” of utopianism (Booker 3). Moreover, this paper especially considers dystopian fiction as the product of the twentieth century, and as a part of utopian fiction.

2. The translator of these three texts, Toshihiko Sakai, claimed the compatibility of the poetic and anarchistic Morris’s and the economic, organic and socialistic context of Bellamy’s work to describe an ideal life in the future.

3. Tsubouchi Shōyo presented *Niti Zakkyo Mirai no Yume* (1884), and Suehiro Tetchō published *Nijuusannenn Miraiki* (1884), both of which described a future society of Japan. Having been influenced by French philosophers such as Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau, Chōmin Nakae depicted his own utopian fiction *Sansuijin Keiron Monto* in 1888. The presentation of Nakae’s utopianism was also stimulated by Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Kōda Rohan’s *Ikkoku no Shuto* was written as a plan to rebuild Tokyo, based on Thomas More’s *Utopia*. I am grateful to the *Utopian Studies* referees for information on Rohan’s work.

4. Immediately after World War II, for example, translations of overseas books were made in line with the recommendations of the occupying forces. In 1947, G.H.Q. de-proscribed foreign books, and the first book among them was George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. A translation of *Animal Farm* was first published in 1949, followed by a translation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1950. The impact of the Cold War on international affairs naturally affected the politics of the American occupation of Japan, and these two novels were dogmatically labeled as anti-Communist novels. Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, however, could not live up to the expectations of the G.H.Q. members. It did not have a great impact on Japanese readers; rather, it would cause a great sensation in the early 1980s as an interesting example of futurology.

5. For example, whereas two representative authors of the Meiji period, Soseki Natsume and Ōgai Mori, had actually been in Britain and Germany respectively, Akutagawa had never been abroad.

6. This article is exploratory, as there still remains further questions such as those related to Japan’s politics, economy and social environments. Further study of Japanese literature is necessary, and I sincerely appreciate the valuable advice and questions of the referees.

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