Broadly defined, proletarian literature is any creative writing in which the author identifies with the working class and champions its cause. In this comprehensive sense proletarian literature may embrace a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley or William Blake as well as a memoir by Domitila Barrios de Chungara or Rigoberta Menchú Tum. A more specific usage of the term denotes the great worldwide upsurge in the production of left-wing literature that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917 and includes such writers as Jaroslav Hašek in Czechoslovakia, Bertolt Brecht in Germany, Maxim Gorky in Russia, Lu Xun in China, Yi Ki-yŏng in Korea, Kobayashi Takiji in Japan, Pablo Neruda in Chile, Josephine Herbst and Meridel Le Sueur in the United States, and hundreds more.

Reaching its productive zenith during the 1920s and 1930s, proletarian literature formed a prominent part of contemporary proletarian art, a diffuse and largely spontaneous international movement represented by a variety of artists like the German graphic satirist George Grosz, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, the Italian photographer Tina Modotti, and numerous others. Some of the cultural workers of the period accepted the tenets of “socialist realism”—a Soviet artistic
doctrine officially promulgated in 1934 and prescribing a formula of anti-
modernist realism, sunny optimism, and idealized depictions of the working
class. A great many, however, did not. Brecht, for one, explicitly rejected it
as an obstacle to imaginative experimentation; most other artists who were
free to ignore it tended to do so.

Although proletarian literature is characterized by a diversity of genres
and styles, its political stance has been consistently anticapitalist. Insofar as
they were acquainted with Marx’s critique of capitalism, most proletarian
writers active since the second half of the nineteenth century have considered
it valid. Be they communists, anarchists, or rebels of a less identifiable sort,
proletarian artists generally regard the capitalist socioeconomic system as
incorrigibly alienating, oppressive, and exploitative. Skeptical or contemptu-
ous of the dominant representations of capitalism as natural, eternal, and in
the best interests of all, they view it instead as a heartless and hypocritical
regime that ostensibly promotes freedom and prosperity while in fact depriv-
ing the majority of humankind of both.

According to Marx’s analysis, capitalism splits humanity into two
major classes: the relatively few who own and control the society’s produc-
tive resources and the dispossessed many who are compelled to sell them-
skins on a daily basis in order to survive. Although capitalism is more
dynamic and infinitely more productive than the feudalism out of which it
evolved, its endless quest to accumulate wealth and maximize profits renders
it more destructive of the natural environment, highly aggressive economi-
cally and militarily, and intrinsically detrimental to human equality, liberty,
and happiness. Its supremacy, however, is not unassailable. There does exist
a life-affirming alternative: once the disinherited majority fully awakens to
the true nature of the capitalist system and effectively organizes to reclaim
the earth from its usurpers, it may at last be able to create a humane world
—a cooperative commonwealth “in which the free development of each is
the condition for the free development of all.”

Proletarian literature, along with other forms of politically radical art,
has played a vital role in the ongoing struggle to construct a more rational
and compassionate way to live. It has done so by taking a penetrating look
at our current mode of life—with its myriad unnecessary tragedies, tireless
efforts at resistance, and intimations of a better future—and by striving
through powerful portrayals of the reality it sees to galvanize its audience
into thought and action. Variable in aesthetic quality, at times more noted
for passion and political commitment than for artistic virtuosity and refine-
ment, proletarian literature has persevered in its task without worrying
much about critical approbation, especially that of mainstream critics. As The Anvil, a North American proletarian literary magazine edited in the 1930s by Jack Conroy, proclaimed through its motto: “We prefer crude vigor to polished banality.”

The wave of proletarian literature marking the 1920s and 1930s subsided amid repression and the chaos of a world war but resurfaced in a more scattered form shortly after. Continuing to draw strength from, as well as to inspire, radical mass movements, left-wing writing has since then fluctuated in scope and influence while continuing to constitute a significant current in world literature. In the early twenty-first century, the work of such literary artists as Eduardo Galeano of Uruguay, José Saramago of Portugal, Ngugi wa Thiong’o of Kenya, Arundhati Roy of India, and Ahuti of Nepal suggests that rebellious independent-minded writers will keep on endeavoring to interpret the world and—together with a burgeoning movement for global justice—to change it for the better.

**Kuroshima Denji**

One of the best—though least known—practitioners of proletarian literature in Japan was Kuroshima Denji. Born on Shōdo Island in the Inland Sea on December 12, 1898, he was the eldest son of a poor rural family who had been farmers for many generations. Denji completed elementary and vocational schools and then worked as a sardine fisherman and as a laborer in the local soy factory. In the autumn of 1917 he went to Tokyo where he found employment with a construction company, leaving it shortly to become an editor of a poultry journal. A chance meeting with his childhood friend Tsuboi Shigeji, then studying literature at Waseda University, contributed to Denji’s decision to become a student himself. His academic background was quite inadequate, however, so he resorted to having his entrance examination taken by a substitute. The trick worked: in the spring of 1919 he began his studies at Waseda University. Among his interests at the time were literature and French—he had been trying to learn the language since coming to Tokyo—and he might have entered the university intending to make them his field of study. Kuroshima enjoyed reading Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and other Russian writers, reserving his greatest admiration for Anton Chekhov and his own compatriot Shiga Naoya. But whatever academic plans he may have had were cut short by a conscription notice received late the same year. As a vocational school graduate, Denji was ineligible for deferment and in December 1919 he was inducted as a medical corpsman.
into the Himeji Tenth Infantry Regiment. A most unenthusiastic conscript
from the outset, he prefaced his army diary with a dedication: “To the day
of discharge from military service.” He spent the next sixteen months sta-
tioned in Japan, but then in April 1921, with his discharge date drawing
near, his unit was sent to Siberia to take part in the Japanese armed inter-
vention there.

The term Siberian Intervention (Shiberia shuppei) refers to the role
played by the Japanese military in an international effort to reverse by force
the recent political victory of the Soviet revolution. In the autumn of 1918,
Japan sent some seventy-four thousand soldiers to cooperate with French,
British, US, Canadian, and Czech troops fighting against the newly formed
Red Army and communist guerrillas. By June 1920 all other foreign troops
had withdrawn in the face of the Soviet advance, but the Japanese troops
fought on for more than two additional years before finally pulling out of
Siberia in the autumn of 1922. It was only in 1925 that a humbled Japa-
nese military evacuated entirely from Soviet territory.

Kuroshima spent a full year in Siberia. While still in Japan he had
begun to show symptoms of tuberculosis, and the harsh Siberian climate
made the illness worse. He was hospitalized in March 1922 and repatriated
in May. After separation from the military he returned to his island village
and, while recuperating, began to write stories of rural and army life. In the
early summer of 1925 he went to Tokyo for the second time, taking along
the stories he had written. Tsuboi Shigeji and some friends were then put-
ting out a small magazine called Chöryü (Current), and it was with Tsuboi’s
help that Kuroshima published in its pages his story “Denpō” (The tele-
gram), translated in the present volume. For the rest of the decade, Kuro-
shima’s work continued to appear in various literary outlets, including the
Marxist journal Bungei sensen (Literary front), which was the prime pro-
moter of proletarian literature, and the highly influential liberal magazine
Chūō kōron (Central review).

The political and cultural atmosphere of 1920s Japan was relatively
liberal, especially if compared with what was to follow. The prestige of the
military was so low that army officers were said to have trouble finding
women willing to marry them and wore their uniforms in public as seldom
as possible. Young and vigorous social movements proliferated—among
them a labor movement, women’s movement, student movement, farmers’
movement, and a movement for the emancipation of social outcasts (Bura-
kumin kaihō undö). Enthusiastic dissident artists and authors produced a
wealth of posters, paintings, poetry, plays, and prose with antimilitarist,
anti-imperialist, antiracist, antisexist, and anticapitalist themes. Dozens of proletarian writers were active, including Maedakō Hiroichirō, Nakano Shigeharu, Kobayashi Takiji, Miyamoto Yuriko, Sata Ineko, Hirabayashi Taiko, Tsuboi Shigeji, and Oguma Hideo. The authorities watched the surge of socialist and feminist activism with a wary eye but resorted only sporadically to repressive action. Censorship existed; anticapitalist agitation was made illegal in 1925; but the harshest laws were not yet being heavily enforced.

Japan of the 1920s was a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament. Wealth and power were concentrated in a relatively few hands. Large family-owned financial/industrial/commercial combines dominated the nation’s economy and largely controlled its politics by supporting the major political parties. Big landowners dominated the economy’s agricultural sector. The country exercised colonial rule over Taiwan and Korea and maintained cooperative relations with Western powers. Alongside the United States, Britain, and several lesser European hegemons, Japan assiduously exploited the natural and human resources of a politically fragmented China and backed whichever of the Chinese warlords it deemed the most compliant. It was in China that Japan’s foreign policy began to swerve out of control—with tragic consequences for the people of China and Japan alike.

As Chinese resistance to foreign economic aggression intensified, Japan’s governing elite responded to the threat to its freedom of action with increasing reliance on military force. One of the early “incidents” (jihen or jiken) that would eventually lead to a full-scale war between Japan and China occurred in the spring of 1928 in Tsinan, the capital of Shantung province, during a northward advance by Chinese nationalist troops attempting to reunify the country. Possessing considerable commercial and industrial investments in Tsinan, and faced with a collapse of its favored warlord in the area, Japan rushed in its own troops, ostensibly to safeguard the Japanese residents of the city. After a tense standoff the Japanese units clashed with their Chinese counterparts. The Japanese army, needing reinforcements, claimed that more than three hundred Japanese residents had been massacred by the Chinese troops. Although the Japanese who were killed were in fact some thirteen suspected opium smugglers, Japanese newspapers reacted to their deaths with inflammatory outrage and called for armed intervention. Japan’s prime minister dispatched an additional division to the region, and the Japanese troops launched an attack against Tsinan, killing and wounding thousands of Chinese civilians.

Japan’s military response in such cases, though supported by the major-
the region of Japanese intervention.

ity of the Japanese public, deepened the Chinese hatred of Japan’s imperialism and strengthened the popular resistance to it. In Japan itself, not everyone subscribed to the official story: a small but energetic anti-interventionist movement called for an end to Japanese militarism and for solidarity between the people of China and Japan. Kuroshima Denji, who knew war at first hand, traveled to China to see for himself what some of the realities of the new war looked like up close. His research resulted in a novel called Busō seru shigai (Militarized streets), published in November 1930. Kuroshima’s novel was instantly banned, censored again fifteen years later by the US occupation authorities, and not reprinted in full until 1970, four decades after its initial publication. The poet and essayist Tsuboi Shigeji, Kuroshima’s lifelong friend who was instrumental in publishing the work, has commended its uncompromising anti-imperialism. The novel remains little known in Japan even now, although according to a leading literary historian “it may well be the most absorbing work to have been fostered by the proletarian literature movement.” The present volume contains a complete translation of Militarized Streets.

By the beginning of the 1930s Kuroshima Denji had written and published several dozen narratives depicting the stunted lives of impoverished
peasants and workers and detailing the misery of soldiers (most of them conscripted from that same wretched population) who are shipped overseas to kill and die for the master class. As may be expected in a writer influenced by Chekhov and Shiga Naoya, the narratives are unadorned in style and simple in storytelling technique. Their content conveys a sense of authenticity, grief over the unnecessary suffering, and above all the urgent need for change. Despite occasional flashes of humor and lyricism, the tone is seldom cheerful and happy endings are rare: Kuroshima refrains from accomplishing in fiction what is much harder to attain in actuality. Devoid of easy optimism, his stories are open-ended chronicles of abuse and resistance. If his protagonists fail to survive and prosper despite strenuous effort, his readers are all the more impelled to seek a way out of the brutal labyrinth. How can the human race emerge once and for all from poverty, oppression, racism, sexism, nationalism, and war? Kuroshima’s work may implicitly point to an answer. A clear-sighted, courageous, and profoundly compassionate writer, Kuroshima recognizes that, however long it may take to materialize, only a vast international movement based on grassroots solidarity stands a chance of replacing the present hell on earth with a sane, livable world of justice and generosity.

Kuroshima’s literary activity diminished rather abruptly after 1932. A story he had published in February of that year was sharply criticized on doctrinal grounds by a young but influential Communist Party leader and self-appointed literary critic. That the attack should come from within the proletarian movement, rather than from the authorities, was symptomatic of the internal dissensions afflicting the leftist circles—dissensions which would make it that much easier for the government shortly to crush them. Kuroshima was undoubtedly stung by the force of the criticism, but he might not have withdrawn from the literary world had his health not taken a sudden turn for the worse. Early in 1933 he began to cough up blood, and that summer he returned to Shōdo Island. Apparently intending to stay on the island only long enough to recover, he left his furniture and other possessions in the care of his younger brother in Tokyo.

Around the same time that Kuroshima’s health deteriorated, Kobayashi Takiji, a prominent young proletarian writer, was arrested and beaten to death by the police. The event signaled a marked change in the nation’s political climate. In the 1930s, as Japan moved ever closer to an all-out war with China, the intensifying aggression overseas was matched by increasing domestic repression. Arrests grew more numerous and sweeping, sentences
harsher, censorship more heavy-handed. Dissidents were accused of being un-Japanese or anti-Japanese (hikokumin). Through a combined reliance on force and persuasion, the government succeeded in neutralizing the social movements and even converted some of their former members into ultranationalists. With the population largely under control and the production of heavy armaments strong and growing, the governing elite felt free to extend its economic and military hegemony over the continent. Sporadic armed clashes continued until, in the summer of 1937, the conflict exploded into a major war engulfing a large portion of China. Many of Japan’s journalists, academics, and other manufacturers of public opinion supported the war and echoed the government’s consistent claim that the aim of the conflict was not conquest but liberation. By the time it ended some eight years later, the alleged war of liberation had killed more than half a million Japanese and perhaps as many as thirty million Chinese.

“In war, truly good literature can probably do nothing but disappear,” wrote Kuroshima Denji to a friend in the late summer of 1937, shortly after the outbreak of full-fledged warfare. The only literary outcome Kuroshima expected for the duration of the conflict was a profusion of shallow war literature. About a year after Kuroshima made his gloomy prognosis, the Japanese government invited a number of prominent Japanese authors to travel to the front as members of its newly organized Pen Corps (Pen butai) and write about the fighting. The response was so enthusiastic that not all the writers who wished to join could be accommodated. In September 1938 a contingent of twenty men and two women was flown overseas and nine additional members followed two months later. Not surprisingly, the work they produced was supportive of the war and, as Kuroshima had anticipated, very superficial indeed.

Kuroshima spent the final decade of his life living quietly with his wife and children on the island of his birth. He read widely and wrote letters and articles but no works of fiction. The house had very few visitors and Kuroshima rarely left his room except to work in the garden or stroll among the nearby hills or by the sea. Though he grew weak and had to walk with a cane, he remained intent on recuperation. At the slightest sign of a cold he would take to bed and stay there until the symptoms disappeared. The children—two girls and a boy—regularly walked several miles to the nearest hospital to get the medicine that he conscientiously drank. Despite his best efforts, his condition began to worsen in the spring of 1943, and he succumbed on October 17 of the same year, eight weeks short of his forty-fifth birthday. His wife Yuki, who survived him by ten years to die at the same
age as her husband, managed to keep the impoverished household together and raise the three children to adulthood. Encouraging them to persist in their studies and to help her and each other, she often spoke of their father’s stubborn optimism, recalling his unwavering conviction he would get well and his joyful anticipation of the day he could once again go to Tokyo.19

It may be surprising that a man whose works are seldom cheerful should be described as such an optimist, yet he undeniably was one. His strong will to live recalls the characters in his narratives who struggle to survive against all odds. Kuroshima believed, both as a human being and as a committed proletarian writer, that things were bound to get better in the long run and devoted his life to the creation of an egalitarian and peaceful world. The best contribution he could make was by writing, he felt, and he intended to continue. In a letter dated March 19, 1940, he writes: “I have been feeling much better this year. I am sitting at the desk for the first time in a long while and although I have not been writing for five or six years, let me only regain health. For I find myself able to write better than before, more subtly and deeply—and I am happy.”20

Assessing the Narratives

As Kuroshima would have been quick to recognize, conditions in Japan and indeed in the world have changed greatly since the time he lived and wrote. Rural poverty within Japan has been largely eliminated, Japanese militarism appears to be extinct, and China is no longer a victim of imperialist depredation. Given all this—as well as the fact that Kuroshima himself had no illusions about being a “great writer”—do his writings possess any value today beyond the historical?

Indeed they do—because the ongoing changes, dramatic and important as they are, have been taking place within the context of that same global socioeconomic system whose multiple facets Kuroshima explored in his writings. True, the level of misery in the Japanese countryside has been sharply reduced thanks in large part to a program of land reform. Yet conditions as painful as those he described, or even worse, still plague hundreds of millions of people in dozens of countries throughout the world.21 True again, tens of thousands of Japanese youths are not currently being shipped overseas to kill and die for the ostensible sake of the nation. Yet similar operations by other world powers continue unabated, and their full-scale resumption by Japan itself may only be a matter of time and popular acquiescence. Targets of imperialist plunder have definitely shifted. Yet imperial-
Al-Ghazali's thought remains as alive today as in Kuroshima’s lifetime and even more attractively advertised.

Convinced that poverty, exploitation, and war cannot possibly be eradicated within the framework of a system based on organized greed, Kuroshima nonetheless recognizes that many people do not share his conviction, do not consider the system surmountable, or simply do not give the subject much thought. His writing addresses a broad spectrum of readers, making its appeal both to their emotions and to their intellect. In detailing the anguish and indignities that are systematically and relentlessly inflicted on human beings whose only offense is a lack of wealth and power, Kuroshima evokes a potent sense of sympathy and anger at the sheer injustice of it. At the same time, he attentively examines such diverse topics as the mechanics of oppression and obfuscation, tactics of resistance and rebellion, impediments and catalysts of international unity and revolution.

Kuroshima’s narratives explore a number of significant questions:

- Why is education potentially subversive? (“The Telegram,” “Their Lives”)
- How can a worker be induced to turn against a fellow worker? (“The Sugar Thief,” Militarized Streets)
- Can a rebellion succeed if some decline to join? (“A Herd of Pigs”)
- Does a highly motivated and diligent individual working alone stand any chance of effecting meaningful change? (“Their Lives,” “Land Rising and Falling”)
- Is submissiveness a satisfactory strategy for survival? (“Siberia in the Snow,” “A Flock of Swirling Crows”)
- Is spontaneous rebellion effective? (“Siberia in the Snow,” “The Sleigh”)
- How does ethnocentrism support an oppressive status quo? (“The Hole”)
- Does militant unionism give rise to sufficient change? (“The Cape”)
- How do exploiters justify their conduct? (Militarized Streets)
- Whom does a war allegedly benefit, and whom does it actually benefit? (Militarized Streets)
- How do the mass media generate support for war? (Militarized Streets)
- How does the military maintain control over a powerful body of armed men? (Militarized Streets)
The presence of such questions, and others, does not by any means suggest that Kuroshima’s narratives offer nothing more than a sort of revolutionary catechism disguised as fiction. But since their author is after all wholeheartedly committed to fundamental social change it is hardly surprising that such issues should arise as integral components of the work. Although a reactionary reader would be unlikely to enjoy the pages that follow, one certainly does not need to be a Marxist to discover considerable interest in them.

The artistically accomplished oeuvre of Kuroshima’s nonproletarian literary contemporaries—Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, Kawabata Yasunari, Nagai Kafū, Yokomitsu Riichi, and others—continues to merit and enjoy a wide readership in Japan and abroad. One hopes that increasing notice will soon be taken not only of writers such as these, who poignantly celebrate the beauty and sadness of human existence, but likewise of those who strive to promote the kinds of transformation that diminish the province of sadness and expand the realm of beauty. At any rate, faced with the daily tragedies of an irrationally structured world, radical artists everywhere are bound to persevere in their oppositional work. As Kuroshima Denji writes in a 1929 essay: “So long as the capitalist system exists, proletarian antiwar literature must also exist, and fight against it.”

Notes


7. For a sampling of radical posters from the period see the website of Ohara Institute for Social Research, Hosei University, at www.oisr.org.


13. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, 610. The critic was Miyamoto Kenji, who would become the durable head of the Japan Communist Party. Years later he expressed regret for the sharpness of his criticism.


16. Japan’s war against China is thought to have killed between fifteen million and thirty million Chinese, the vast majority of them civilians. For one estimate see James C. Hsiung and Steven I. Levine, eds., *China’s Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937–1945* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), 295–296. According to Hsiung and Levine, about four million Chinese soldiers and eighteen million civilians were killed in the war.


19. Kuroshima Kazuo, “Chichi,” Monthly Bulletin 1, April 1970, in *Kuroshima Denji zenshū*, 1:7–8. This is a terse, affecting account by Kuroshima’s only son of his father’s final years and the decade following his death.


21. The land reform in Japan was implemented during the US occupation. The United States did not see fit to carry out a similar land reform program in the course of its decades-long colonial occupation of the Philippines, where desperate rural poverty still prevails.

22. *Hansen bungaku-ron* (On antiwar literature) may be read in Japanese online at www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000037/files/1424.html. Aozora Bunko has also published over a dozen other works by Kuroshima, including six of those translated in this volume, and more are being added. A complete English translation of Kuroshima’s essay on antiwar literature will be found in a forthcoming anthology of Japanese proletarian fiction and criticism edited by Norma Field and Heather Bowen-Struyk.