

Commercial Appetite and Human Need: The Accidental and Fated Revival of Kobayashi Takiji's Cannery Ship

Norma Field

Commercial Appetite and Human Need: The Accidental and Fated Revival of Kobayashi Takiji's Cannery Ship

Norma Field

Japan's best-known proletarian novel, *Kani Kosen* (depicting conditions aboard a crab-canning factory ship operating off Soviet waters)[2] [1] by Kobayashi Takiji (1903-1933), enjoyed an utterly unanticipated revival in the course of 2008.



Many attribute the revival of the novel to the deepening impoverishment of the ranks of the irregularly employed, now widely said to account for one-third of the work force. The majority of the latter earn less than two million yen per year. It is their increasingly insistent presence that has given such terms as "income-gap society" (*kakusa shakai*), "working poor"

(*waakingu pua*), and more recently, "lost generation" (*rosu jene*) widespread familiarity.

That said, it remains difficult to formulate a statement along the lines of "Because of a momentous socioeconomic shift, therefore the revival of a novel published in 1929. Why not a contemporary novel for grasping contemporary conditions? How can a novel from eight decades ago even be readable today, especially by those young readers whose circumstances it is said to elucidate? And finally, what meaning should we find in the "boom" beyond amazement that it actually happened?

These questions entail each other. They can only be answered provisionally, not only because the process is ongoing, but also because any meaning we might ascribe to it is itself an expression of our understanding of the present and of our obligations to the future, in other words, of our consciousness.

In order to make even rudimentary sense of the "boom," however, it is first necessary to take account of its implausibility.

Why the "Boom" was Improbable

Let me speak briefly from personal experience. For approximately five years, I have been studying what is called Japanese proletarian literature with a focus on Kobayashi Takiji. I have stayed at length in Otaru, the port city in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, where this writer grew up. Even there, where most people had at least heard his name, if I told people that I was studying Kobayashi Takiji, I was greeted with surprise. The surprise was

often benign, but it could turn skeptical, and especially with intellectuals, aggressively so. *Why are you bothering with someone like him now*, was the accusation I read in people's faces even, or especially when they didn't voice it.

In Japan, it is generally acknowledged that "the season of politics" was over by the early 1970s, after both the popular struggle against the renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty in 1960 had been crushed and the student struggle of 1968-70, which was an explosive protest against the bureaucratized, competitive, consumption-centered society that had followed upon the "income-doubling" plan announced in 1960, ended in a widespread sense of defeat. What did this mean for the legacy of a writer like Kobayashi Takiji? At the time of his death at age 29 by torture at the hands of the Special Higher Police, he was a member of the then illegal Japan Communist Party. Leftist intellectuals from the 60s and 70s movements, who might be thought to feel some affinity for him, were alienated by the fact of his membership in a party that had sought to control them. For others, saturated in postmodernist ideology, a body of works produced in a class-based revolutionary movement was simply laughable. But surely there was more to the hostility of middle-aged leftists than party affiliation or intellectual camp. Takiji's name awakened an all but forgotten reconciliation with a retreat from politics. It registered as a dull, irritating reproach.

For the young, he was simply an unknown entity or at most, a name attached to a title in a list of modern Japanese writers.

The "Boom" was Manufactured and Real

To be sure, during the five years preceding the boom, several developments laid the ground for expanding interest in Takiji beyond the tiny circles of devotees. A Takiji Library (found [here](#), in Japanese) was established through the

remarkable initiative of Sano Chikara, a hugely successful businessman and graduate of Takiji's alma mater, Otaru University of Commerce. The Library became a centralized source of information; it also sponsored the publication of ten books including a *manga* version of *The Cannery Ship* to attract a young readership to, and together with the University, co-sponsored a series of international symposia. A documentary film, "Strike the Hour, Takiji" (found [here](#), in Japanese) was released in 2005; screenings became occasions for new Takiji gatherings. The film's foregrounding of Takiji's opposition to imperialist war served to link it to the national movement to preserve Article 9 (the no-war clause) of the Constitution.



Strike the Hour

These initiatives were significant achievements in themselves and led to a new Internet presence as well. It is striking, however, that the antiwar angle failed to spark a broad interest in Kobayashi Takiji.

What was required for that to happen was not only a widespread acknowledgement of economic crisis, but the much more difficult

recognition—for a society habituated to regarding itself as homogeneously middle-class—that the solutions being adopted were creating dramatic disparities. The bursting of the bubble economy in the early 1990s led to an onslaught of structural readjustment. Suicide rates took a leap beginning in 1998. (The figure of 30,000 per year has not changed in ten years and places Japan second only to Russia in the G8.) Signs of economic "recovery" came around 2003 and were heralded in the media without acknowledgment of the cost, which was growing income disparity. Prime Minister Koizumi himself provided distractions from such recognition by playing up his eccentricity as evidence of independence and by engaging in a hyper display of patriotism in visits to Yasukuni Shrine, obscuring the real damage he was doing to the majority of Japanese citizens. Concurrently, a blame-the-victim approach was prepared through government responses to the three young hostages in Iraq (2004), captured in the expression *jiko sekinin*, "personal responsibility."

Perhaps the first sign of recognition that the economy, if indeed it was recovering, was doing so in a way that benefited the few and injured the many came in the selection of the phrase "income-gap society" as one of the ten keys expressions of the year 2006. The alarming numbers of the irregularly employed and the concentration of unemployment among the young made it apparent that the emphasis on "free" in the expression "freeters" (*furiitaa*) was no longer appropriate. If increasing numbers of the young were to be found in dispatch and other forms of irregular employment, it was no longer because they preferred to be unshackled to a regular job, but because they had no choice. The *precariously* situated young (yielding the term "purekariaato," said to derive from an Italian *graffitto* combining "precario" and "proletariato") found their champion in the erstwhile rightist punk-rock-band-singer-

turned-labor-activist-and-writer Amamiya Karin. Amamiya, a conspicuous media figure in her "gosu rori" (Gothic Lolita) fashion.



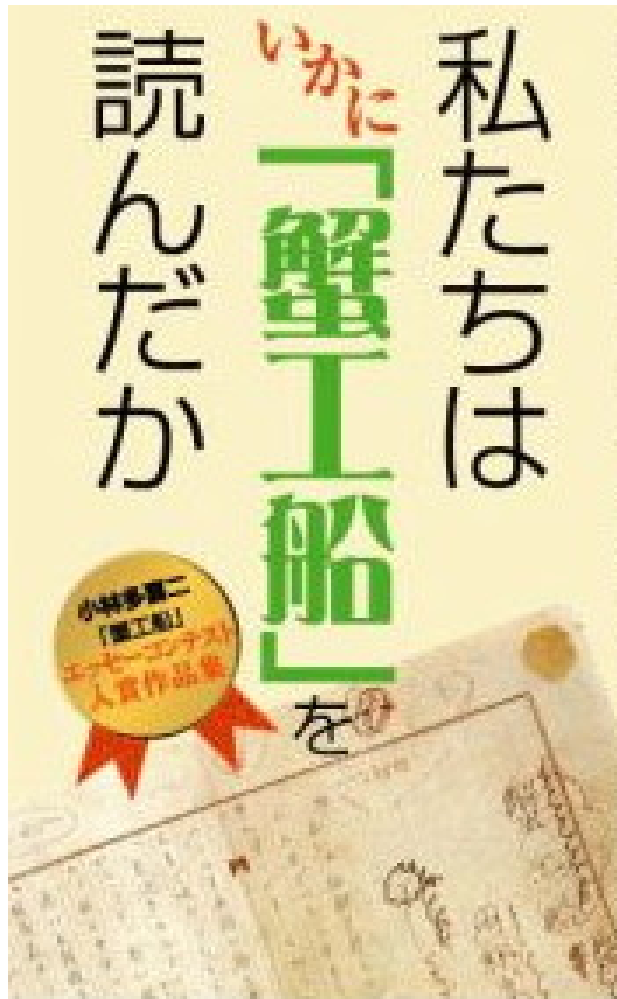
It is one of her book titles that has provided a slogan for the anti-poverty movement: "ikisasero," or "make us live," a neologism insofar as it is a *demand* and not a *plea* to "let us live."



Amamiya was to play a key role in the *Cannery Ship* revival.

Here, a brief chronology of the boom might be useful. Two newspaper articles served as major catalysts. First, a conversation between Amamiya and established novelist Takahashi Genichiro in the nationally circulated daily *Mainichi* (January 9, 2008) in which Amamiya observed that reading *Cannery Ship*, she was struck by how the conditions depicted mirrored the current desperate situation of young workers. (Why was Amamiya reading this work? She was preparing for a discussion on literature and labor to be published on the pages of *Minshu Bungaku* (Democratic Literature), a formally independent journal with close ties to the Japan Communist Party. Amamiya, in her early 30s, seems to effortlessly cross the boundaries between old and new left and new new left, liberal, socialist, and

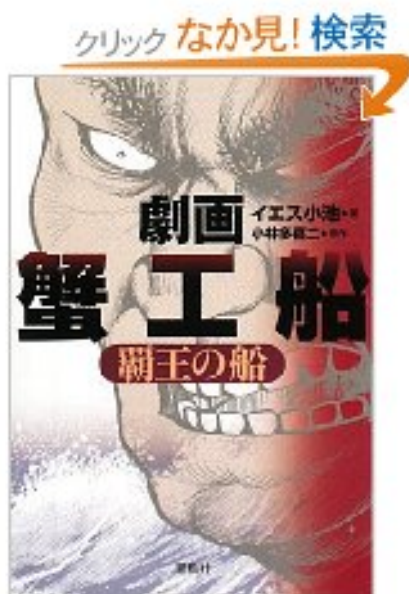
communist publications. (For her presence in the Save Article 9 movement and other activities, see [this website](#).) Amamiya's comment was quoted widely and found its way into the second influential article, in the major liberal daily *Asahi* on February 16. In the course of the article, senior editorial writer Yuri Sachiko referred to an essay contest on *Cannery Ship* in which she had been a judge. Cosponsored by the Takiji Library and Otaru University for Commerce, the contest targeted (a) young readers (age limit of twenty-five) but also (b) made room for older and unconventional readers (such as homeless readers, through internet café submission) and offered substantial prize money for responses to *Cannery Ship*, or more precisely, the *manga* version published in 2006 by the Library. (In fact, the winning entrants went on to read the novella, as evident from the collection of submissions, which in turn sold well: *Watashitachi wa ikani kani kosen o yonda ka*, or *How We Read the Cannery Ship*).



The *Asahi* article prompted a bookstore worker in charge of stocking paperbacks to read the novel. Stunned by how it spoke to her own experience of three years as a "freeter," she ordered 150 copies from Shinchosha, the publishers of a paperback edition, who were frankly bewildered to receive such an order for a long-forgotten title. Once received, the copies were stacked with a handwritten pop-up sign suggesting that the conditions of the "working poor" might constitute a veritable "cannery ship." "Working poor" was already familiar as a phrase, and here it was effectively paired with the unfamiliar, but concretely suggestive "cannery ship." Middle-aged male readers, the first to notice, began to yield to young people in their twenties. Then, on May 2, during the slow-news period of "Golden Week,"

the top circulation conservative daily *Yomiuri* made the boom—which *did not yet exist*—its topic article of the evening edition. Soon, television stations began vying with one another to take up the improbable hot topic of the day, their cameras going to bookstores, and filming essay contest winners. By the end of May, Shinchosha had reprinted 200,000 copies. By December 2008, it is estimated that 600,000 copies of this edition alone had made their way to bookstores. Other publishers followed suit; one (Shukan Kin'yōbi) produced a new hard-cover edition with an introduction by Amamiya in which she meticulously analyzed the parallels between labor conditions as depicted in the novel and those of the present-day. There are now four *manga* versions on the market.





A documentary on Takiji's life by Hokkaido Broadcasting Corporation won the Agency for Cultural Affairs Grand Prize, edging out major productions by NHK, the National Broadcasting Corporation (*Inochi no kioku: Kobayashi Takiji Nijukunen no jinsei*; found [here](#), in Japanese). Not only are more titles forthcoming in 2009, but a stage production and a feature film scheduled as well. All of this would surely have been welcome to Takiji, an eager filmgoer, ardent yet critical fan of Charlie Chaplin, interested in all genres that would bring the movement to more people.

What can we make of this concatenation of events? It seems to be a miraculous meeting of pure contingency and absolute necessity, of commercial appetite and human need. Without the long investment in Takiji and his works (collecting, editing, reprinting, issuing newsletters, observing his death anniversary) on the part of a few groups, many associated with the Japan Communist Party, the resources would not have been available for this historic moment. Takiji could have lived on like this for another decade, until the aging keepers of the flame died out. To be sure, there were individuals newly interested in him thanks to the activities of the Takiji Library, but they did

not constitute a group; if they knew each other, it was through the Internet. For Takiji to survive beyond dusty library shelves, something utterly different needed to happen. That is, somehow, there had to be a meeting between his 1929 fiction and the political-social order of the present, a meeting that could only take place in the hearts and minds of those compelled to live under the strictures of the latter.

Two liberal newspaper articles, an initial book order of 150 copies, then a conservative newspaper article turned the trickle of interest into a flood. Finding a story that sells is of course a central preoccupation of the media, with the hoped-for outcome being a cascade of sales. The aura of newsworthiness prompted publishers to reprint more copies, bookstores to provide more space, provoking further media attention, then more copies reprinted.

And in this largely commercial process, something began to happen. Kitamura Takashi, in a report at the 2008 Kobayashi Takiji Memorial Symposium at Oxford in October (see [2], below) observes a shift in the nature of the reporting, which began with the familiar observation of similarities but then evolved to registering and reproducing the novella's claim that banding together in resistance can lead to social transformation. In other words, journalists following the story began to recognize themselves in it and to express their own desires in print and on the airwaves.

Not *That* We Are Exploited, but *Why* and *How*, and What We Must Do

The phrase "kani kosen" ended up among the top ten key expressions of 2008. The phrase, in other words, had become a metaphor that enabled many people to grasp their condition. It drew together terms such as "working poor," "lost generation," and "income-gap society" into a coherent whole in its image of inescapable exploitation: a factory ship, subject neither to international maritime law nor factory

regulation because of its hybrid nature, operating in frigid waters near the Soviet Union, with workers of diverse origin who were driven to compete for marginal advantages in literally deadly conditions of labor. In fact, it was this condition—that workers were confined on board ship and faced with a visible enemy in the form of slave overseer-like bosses—that led some to question the applicability of the novella to present-day conditions, wherein temporary workers are scattered and the exploitation often abstract and impersonal. Takiji makes clear in the work, however, (1) that it is a slow, difficult process for the hierarchically separated, motley group of workers to reach the understanding that only through solidarity do they have any chance of survival and (2) that their real enemy is not the brutal overseer before them, but the structure comprised of bankers in Tokyo, the imperial military, and global capital. (In fact, the workers' first uprising fails because they expect the imperial navy to defend them, loyal imperial subjects, against their unjust bosses. Having learned their lesson, they must rise up "again...and again.") About his next major work *Fuzai jinushi* (The Absentee Landlord, 1929), Takiji wrote his editor that his purpose was not to show tenant farmers that they were wretched, which they knew all too well, but why and how they were maintained in that condition, and that the way forward was struggle through solidarity not only among themselves but with urban workers as well.

After decades of depoliticized emphasis on consumer pleasures, accompanied by atomization masquerading as individualism and fostered by educational and workplace competition—decades in which the word "labor" was all but forgotten despite the rising phenomenon of death-from-overwork (*karoshi*)—it should, in fact, not surprise us that there was no contemporary literary work that could provide such an intuitively compelling image of both exploitation and resistance. Indeed, now that we have been thrust in a

worldwide depression, the image of the "cannery ship" is more comprehensive than ever, coinciding with that image of "spaceship earth" from a time when astronauts still provided us heady excitement and hope.

The aspect of the "cannery ship" image that continues to be under-recognized is that of the military. Acutely attuned to the imbrications of the class system, colonialism and imperialism, Takiji argued for the need to join the class struggle with anti-imperialist struggle. In his penultimate work of fiction, *Toseikatsusha* (The Life of a Party Member), published after his murder in 1933, the protagonist, together with comrades, is organizing in a factory that has suddenly been ordered to produce gas masks for use on the continent. The goal is to persuade regular and temporary workers to stand together for their rights *and* to oppose the use of their labor for an imperialist war. Since permanent workers were inclined to safeguard their privileges from encroachment by cheaper temp labor, and temp workers were grateful for a war that was providing at least short-term wage labor, we can imagine how daunting this organizing task was.

Daunting, but correct in terms of principle and analysis. If Japanese activists today, often securely middle-class, well educated, and middle-aged and older, who are dedicated to problems of historical consciousness, the former military comfort women or Article 9, have not seemed engaged by the antipoverty movement of the young, then the latter have not taken up the antiwar cause. Given the limitations of time and resources, this is altogether understandable. But in order to catch up with the consciousness of Takiji and his comrades of the late 1920s and early 30s, in order, therefore, to be adequate to the demands of the present, it is necessary to join the antipoverty and antiwar struggles. That entails overcoming the sectarian residues from the 1960s and 70s as well as generational divides.

Two new journals give a hint of the discussions and actions that are underway: *POSSE*, run by an NPO membership in their early twenties and dedicated to labor issues, and *Losgene*, which bills itself as a "Pan-left Journal."

The New Bearers of Solidarity and Struggle

The *Cannery Ship* boom issued from and feeds a hunger for collectivity and activism amid the loneliness and cynicism produced by neo-liberal callousness. Communist Party membership has been increasing at the rate of 1000 per month over the past year and has attracted mainstream media attention. New kinds of unions are springing up around the country, welcoming single members, providing legal advice and support, demonstrating that collective bargaining is possible even for dispatch workers. From December 31st to January 5th, twenty some organizations, including these unions as well as mainstream labor confederations, came together as part of the Anti-poverty Campaign (found [here](#), in Japanese) to establish a "New Year's Village for Temp Workers" ("Toshi-koshi haken mura" in Japanese) for those who had been summarily terminated and rendered homeless just as administrative offices closed for the new year holidays. Tents went up in the heart of Tokyo in Hibiya Park, under the nose of the Labor Ministry; food and legal advice were provided, and most importantly, the New Year was greeted in the company of others and before the eyes of the nation.



No doubt Takiji would have rejoiced in these developments, too. Committed as he was to the cause of poor women—often depicting their skills as organizers in his fiction—he might have been especially intrigued by the case of Iwagami Ai, who was unlawfully fired by a shop specializing in the BABY line of Lolita fashions (her website can be found [here](#), in Japanese).



Photo Credit: Akahata

Clad in her long black Gothic Lolita dress, surrounded by customers in pink and white ruffled dresses, Iwagami speaks at May Day rallies and labor-rights' study groups. She has won broad support from the new unions and is taking her case to court: "Workers have the right to stand in unity, to engage in collective bargaining, and to take collective action."



Why Literature?

In *Cannery Ship* as well as in other works, Takiji makes frequent reference to the colonies and to the "semi-colonial" brutality of the police. He understood the periphery to represent both backwardness and possibility. Looking to the Scandinavian writers who raised key issues in modern literature, he

acknowledged a similar aspiration for himself, an "absentee writer," absent, that is, from the center in Tokyo, situated as he was in the semi-colonial periphery of Hokkaido. But he expected truly great "absentee writers" to emerge from the colonies, from Korea and Taiwan.

No doubt, again, that he would have been gratified to see a new Korean translation of *Cannery Ship* appear in 2008. But he would also have been thrilled with the rediscovery of an earlier translation and the journey of the translator Yi Kwi-wŏn and publisher Yi Sang-kyŏng to speak at his birthplace in Akita Prefecture in February of 2008.



Photo Credit: Kitamura Takashi, Akahata

Yi KwÄ«-wŏn recounted how, as he translated the works of Marx or Lenin from Japanese translations in the course of underground activities in Pusan, he began to yearn for works of literature. Encountering Takiji's works for the first time, and feeling a strong affinity for the portrayal of state violence (in "March 15, 1928") and underground struggle ("The Life of a Party Member") as well as the narrative of the *Cannery Ship*, he translated the three, and his friend published them under the title of *The Cannery Ship* as soon as the Chun Doo-hwan regime came to an end.

Why did Yi Kwi-wŏn feel the need for works of literature? Why, for that matter, did Takiji and

his comrades feel the need to produce literature during their busy, danger-ridden pursuit of social transformation? And how important is the fact of its being a work of literature to the revival of the *Cannery Ship*? We know that the title has provided an invaluable metaphor enabling people to grasp their current condition, but what about the work as a whole?

It remains to be seen if, and how, in these strange and familiar times, the experience of novelistic ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking will serve people seeking to redefine their world: from a collection of atomized consumers to a collectivity of citizens who, by forging solidarity around the necessity of work, have once gain begun to dream of a society dedicated to the flourishing of all.

Notes

[1] Anonymously translated as "The Cannery Ship" in the 1933 collection, *The Cannery Ship And Other Japanese Stories* from International Publishers and as "The Factory Ship" in Frank Motofuji's 1973 "*The Factory Ship*" and "*The Absentee Landlord*" from the University of Washington Press.

[2] The 2009 books, in order of publication, to date:

Norma Field, *Kobayashi Takiji: 21seiki ni do yomu ka* [Reading Kobayashi Takiji for the 21st Century] Iwanami Shinsho.

Ogino Fujio, *Takiji no jidai kara miete kuru mono: Chian taisei ni koshite* [What the age of Takiji reveals: In protest of the public peace and security regime] Shinnihon Shuppan.

2008 *Okkusufodo Kobayashi Takiji kinen shupojiumu ronbunshu: Takiji no shiten kara mitashintai chiiki kyoiku* [Report of the 2008 Kobayashi Takiji memorial symposium at Oxford: Body, region, and education] Otaru University of Commerce and Kinokuniya.

Hamabayashi Masao, "*Kani kosen*" no *shakaishi: Kobayashi Takiji to sono jidai* [A social history of *Cannery Ship*: Kobayashi Takiji and his age] Gakuyu no To mosha.

A trailer of the feature film with Matsuda Ryuhei, to be released this summer, may be seen [here](#).

The Haiyuza Theater, marking its 65th year, will stage a [new production](#) of *Kani kosen* in May.

Norma Field teaches in the Department of East Asian Languages & Civilizations at the University of Chicago and is a Japan Focus associate. She is the author of [In the Realm of a Dying Emperor: Japan at Century's End](#).

*Her most recent book is *Kobayashi Takiji: 21seiki ni do yomu ka* (Iwanami Shinsho 2009).*



This article was written for Quarterly Changbi (Spring 2009) and is reprinted in slightly revised form with the addition of notes and photographs, and with grateful acknowledgement to its editors and publishers.

Posted at The Asia-Pacific Journal on February 22, 2009.

Recommended citation: Norma Field, "Commercial Appetite and Human Need: The Accidental and Fated Revival of Kobayashi Takiji's Cannery Ship" The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol. 8-8-09, February 22, 2009