

# Trajectory of Modern Japanese Science Fiction

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As a popular slogan during the Meiji period, *wakon yōsai* (Japanese spirit and Western technology) implies, it was a daunting task for Meiji intellectuals to maintain Japanese traditions while importing Western thought and technologies; their challenge was to reconcile Japaneseness and modernity (Westernization) in order to keep at least part of their traditional identity. Just as *junbungaku* novels were strongly influenced by the theme of modernization and the new Japanese subjectivity, science fiction in the Meiji period also came to encompass a wide variety of themes influenced by the influx of foreign, particularly Western, culture. New findings in astronomy, geology, and physics, as well as Christian, particularly Protestant, became sources of the new imagination for science fiction in the Meiji and Taishō periods (1868–1926). This paper will explore the way in which Japanese science fiction developed since early modern period, by looking at its original evolution. Then it will discuss the way in which the genre of science fiction has spread throughout the wider and higher cultural area since the end of World War II.

The first Japanese science fiction is usually considered to have been written by a Confucian scholar Iwagaki Gesshū (1808–1873) in the late Edo period, in 1857, four years after the Perry expedition that brought the end of Japan's premodern age. The story is about a holy war between a fictional country in the Far East (modeled on Japan) and the United Kingdom, which is colonizing Asia. In the 1860s, many works of science fiction dealt with themes of the foreign Other, expansion of space and time, modernization, and progress. Jules Verne's classic 1873 adventure *Around the World in Eighty Days* was translated into Japanese in 1878 and became very popular. This was followed rapidly by various other SF works by Verne such as *From the Earth to the Moon* (Nagayama 2009).

In the 1880s, political fiction dealing with civil rights and parliament politics came into vogue as Japan tried to adopt a modern political and legal system. Such fiction often used elements of science fiction such as utopias, parallel universes, and futuristic worlds in outer space. For example, in Nukina Shun'ichi (year of birth and death unknown)'s *Hoshi sekai ryokō* (Travel in Outer Space), published in 1881, the main character visits planets outside of the solar system and studies their science, socio-political systems, ethics, and so on. One planet is described as a cooperative totally lacking government, where everything is equal. On this planet people do not work since they have biologically artificial human beings for labor (Nagayama 2009).

As Japan became an imperial nation state, political novels began to deal with the power of the state aiming at the expansion of the empire. Science fiction at this time period came to feature adventure and simulation in futuristic settings. Sugiyama Tōjirō (year of birth and death unknown)'s 1887 *Toyotomi saikōki* (The Restoration of the Toyotomi Clan) is a simulation story in which Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who unified Japan in 1590, unifies the entire world, subjugating Korea, China, Siam, India, Turkey, Arabia, and Siberia. When Hideyoshi is conquering Europe he becomes sick and dies. However, he meets the Monkey King in the other realm, who asks *Enma Daiō* (Great King Yama in the afterlife) to revive him. Hideyoshi becomes immortal and returns to unify the entire world (Nagayama 2009).

It is at the end of the nineteenth century that apocalyptic science fiction flourished in Japan in earnest. Influenced by the fin de siècle in Europe, a number of translations of apocalyptic science fiction were brought to Japan as well as new astronomical findings based on the latest science fiction writers' apocalyptic science fiction imaginations. Since the late Edo period astronomical phenomena such as comets and newly discovered planets had been often considered potential causes of world-wide destruction, for it was understood that there was some chance that such celestial bodies could bring ecological changes on Earth. Comets had long been regarded as omens, but the idea that they could bring global apocalyptic catastrophe developed

in the late nineteenth century along with the importation and growth in popularity of science fiction.

Translations of science fiction works were already common in this early modern period; a novel titled *The End of the World*, written in 1903 by the influential American-Canadian astronomer Simon Newcomb, was translated into Japanese and published as *Ankokusei* (The Dark Planet) in 1905. The novel was inspired by the latest astronomical science, and had a considerable impact on Japanese intellectuals. The story takes place ten thousand years in the future, when the cultures of humankind are flourishing with advanced science and technologies. One day, a scientist discovers a mysterious dark planet approaching our solar system at incredible speed. He calculates that this dark planet will crash into our Sun and that the crash will cause the Sun to expand one thousand times, heating up the Earth and causing the extinction of all living things. The scientist, aiming to be a sort of second Noah, builds an underground shelter stocked with food and seeds. Following the crash and the subsequent destruction, the few people who had taken refuge in the shelter return to the surface to build a new society. However, they discover that the dark planet has turned the Sun into a nebula (Nagayama 1999: 168–179).

Many science fiction stories on astronomical themes were published in Japanese popular magazines during the prewar period. Prewar high-culture literary circles, made up solely of male authors, dealt mainly with *shishōsetsu*, autobiographical narratives describing realistic details of the author's personal life and thoughts, targeting intellectual male readers. On the other hand, science fiction in popular literature was full of chimerical imaginations, targeting a wider adult and older teenage male readership. Although popular science fiction was concerned only with imaginative themes and was thought to lack serious reflection on the rapidly modernizing society, the themes in SF narratives of the period keenly reflect the social and cultural changes that Japan faced at the time. Literary critic Nagayama Yasuo argues that Japanese science fiction in the prewar period was different from Europe and the United States, and has identified a common pattern in science fiction novels in this time period: the peculiar avoidance of the absolute end.

In his study of science fiction from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Nagayama concludes that most avoid a final termination, for example, by the device of making apocalyptic events take place in a main character's dream. This applies not only to works originally written in Japanese; in translated works, even when the original ends with world annihilation, the translated version safely relegates the destruction to a dream (Nagayama 1999: 168–179). It can be argued that early modern science fiction heightens the description of complete destruction and annihilation, since observing the conventional order being destroyed and being involved in unexpected changes overlaps with what people actually experience in a rapidly modernizing society. However, it is clear that science fiction could not fully accept modernization and Westernization; it avoided the description of realistic destruction, instead returning to conventional reality. This shows that it was difficult, in the major upheaval of the transition to a modern nation-state, to have a stable vision for the future and to establish a new identity in modern society (Nagayama 2009).

The era of modern Japanese science fiction revived with the influence of paperbacks that the US occupation army brought to Japan after World War II. The first science fiction magazine in Japan, *Seiun* (Nebula), was created in 1954 but was discontinued after only one issue. Avant-garde author Abe Kōbō (1924–1993) wrote works that are within science fiction genre, and he later had close relationship with SF authors. His *Inter Ice Age 4* (1959) is considered as the first full length Japanese modern SF work. In 1959, *S-F Magazine* was published monthly by Hayakawa shobō, and Hayakawa SF Contest in this magazine put Komatsu Sakyō (1931–2011), Tsutsui Yasutaka (b. 1934), Hirai Kazumasa (1938–2015) and others out to the world.

Public interest in science fiction had risen notably in Japan by Expo '70 and science fiction novels successfully gained wider readership during this period. Komatsu's *Japan Sinks* published in 1973 has sold over three million copies. A number of new SF magazines such as *Kisōtengai* (Fantastic Idea), *SF Adventure*, *SF hōseki* (SF Jewel), *SF no hon* (SF Book) were published, and through these new magazines Ōhara Mariko (b. 1959), Yumemakura Baku (b. 1951), Arai Motoko (b. 1960), and Kanbayashi Chōhei (b. 1953) debut as professional SF writers.

In early 1990s, SF boom started to decline, due to the rise of fantasy and horror genre. All SF magazines except *S-F Magazine* discontinued publication. Instead, new SF writers were found in other fields such as light novels, Kadokawa horror series, Japan Fantasy Novel Award, and Japan Horror Novel Award. Sena Hideaki (b. 1961) who is famous for horror fiction has

written many works of science fiction and obtained the 19<sup>th</sup> Japan SF Award for his 1997 work *BRAIN VALLY*, and another famous author Miyabe Miyuki (b. 1960), known for her bestseller mystery stories, writes science fiction and fantasy.

At the same time, boundary between science fiction novels and light novels was blurred in the 1990s. Although Morioka Hiroyuki (b. 1962)'s *Seikai no monshō* (Crest of the Stars) series is considered to be in the vein of the light novel, the series was published by Hayakawa shobō as part of the mainstream science fiction world. On the other hand, light novel writers like Sasamoto Yuichi (b. 1963) and Nojiri Hōsuke (b. 1961) have also published hard SF novels.

Science fiction is continuing to be wide spread in the realm of mainstream literature. Ōe Kenzaburō (b. 1935), who later received Nobel Prize in Literature, wrote two science fiction novels *Chiryōtō* (Treatment Tower) and *Chiryōtō wakusei* (The Planet of Treatment Tower) in 1989–1991. Murakami Haruki (b. 1949) received World Fantasy Award for *Umibe no Kafuka* (Kafka on the Shore) in 2006, and his 2009 novel *IQ84* that employed the setting of parallel world was a bestseller. Among his works, 1985 bestseller *Sekai no owari to hādoirudo wandārando* (Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World) is considered as excellent combination of science fiction and fantasy.

The novel consists of parallel narratives: the odd-numbered chapters are set in a place called Hard-Boiled Wonderland, in near-future Tokyo, while the even-numbered chapters are set in the End of the World, an isolated town surrounded by a forest and a wall. The narrator of the odd-numbered chapters is a Calcutec, a human data processor who has been trained to do shuffling, data conversion that uses his subconscious as an encryption key. The Calcutecs work for a quasi-governmental institution called the System, while the criminal Semiotecs, generally fallen Calcutecs, work for the Factory. These organizations compete for information; the Calcutecs protect data while the Semiotecs steal it.

The odd-numbered chapters begin with their narrator's visit to a mysterious scientist who is exploring "sound reduction" in a laboratory hidden within an anachronistic version of Tokyo's sewer system. The scientist asks the protagonist to calculate some data with a shuffling system that the Calcutecs have for some time been forbidden to use, but the scientist has official permission from the top of the System. The protagonist has no reason to refuse this special request, but this precipitates an attack on the scientist's office by the Semiotics after the calculation is done, and both the data and the scientist disappear.

Meanwhile, the narrator of the even-numbered chapters is in the process of being accepted into the fairy-tale-like town called the End of the World. Because residents of the town are not allowed to have a shadow, the narrator's shadow has been "cut off." The gatekeeper of the Town tells the narrator that his shadow must remain in the shadow grounds, where it is not expected to survive the winter. Shadows represent mind or memory in this town, and the residents do not have minds. The narrator is assigned quarters and a job as dream reader, whose task is to remove all traces of mind from the town. He goes to the library every evening where, assisted by the Librarian, he learns to read dreams from the skulls of unicorns. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the two different worlds are interrelated (Murakami 1985). This work is the one of the finest example of modern Japanese science fiction with a number of fantasy elements written in *junbungaku* field.

As discussed above, Japanese science fiction was born in mass culture. It gained wider popularity yet it still remained as relatively minor genre with narrower target. Especially its original "it was all a dream" ending reflected the difficulty of rapid modernization that people in Meiji period faced. After the war, however, it has gradually spread for established authors started to write science fiction. Also, writers of horror and fantasy adopt the themes in science fiction. As technology advances, science fiction in Japan becomes one of the main genres in visual media culture such as film, manga, and animation. Generally, science fiction is understood as fiction based on an imagined future, present, or past, featuring futuristic but often plausible scientific developments and including such tropes as advanced technological achievements, paranormal abilities, and alternate or parallel universes. In fact, since 1990s, it has been often difficult to make a clear distinction between science fiction on the one hand and fantasy based on parallel or alternative time periods featuring magic and other supernatural phenomena as a primary plot element, theme, or setting on the other. The existence of genres like speculative fiction, science fantasy, and fabulation demonstrates how much cross-breeding occurs, and how various literary genres with contrary-to-real-life settings often pursue the common thematic goal of conjecturing about and exploring alternative pasts, presents, and futures.

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