

Human Rights in Japanese Literature

A Guide to Incorporating Human-Rights Based Literature into Humanities and Social Sciences Curricula

日本文学における人権
人文学と社会学の教育課程へ文学を基にした
人権を組み込むためのガイド

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Abstract: In this essay, I describe the ways in which Japanese human rights literature can be incorporated into diverse courses in the humanities and social sciences. It introduces studies into the concept of human rights and debates about what constitutes them before discussing the role of literature as part of human rights struggles. It also explores the concept of literature as personal and its connections to social and political action, and how lessons centered on literary texts can teach us about human rights and social justice.

要旨

本論では、日本の「人権文学」が、人文学あるいは社会科学等の様々な教科の教材として大きな役割を果たす可能性について述べる。人権文学を紹介することによって、「人権」の概念やその中身についての学び、そして、人としての権利を確立するための戦いに文学が果たした役割を明らかにする方法を論述する。また、文学から見えてくる、個人、時に身の危険を伴うような社会的、政治的行動に参加していく動機や信念、その思いについても触れていきたい。更には、文学を教材とする授業が、人権と社会的公正についてどのような教育的効果をもたらすかという主要課題について検討する。

Introduction

This paper aims to introduce ways units on human rights literature can be incorporated into courses on Japanese literature, history, and culture as well as into more general courses such as human rights or peace studies based courses. It first lays out a general theory of human rights before offering an annotated bibliography of Japanese literature in translation that can be incorporated into lessons on human rights. It also gives general guidelines or suggestions for how the materials might be used and the kind of classroom dialogue that could be fostered.

This paper must also include a caveat. When speaking of rights, we must be sensitive to culture and language. Thus, while being aware of the problematics of what Phillipson (1992) described as linguistic imperialism and the promotion of English at the expense of other national and foreign languages, this paper does look at Japanese literature primarily in English translation as a means to foster broad, comparative dialogue. At the same time, no

translation is perfect. For this reason, comparative reading, or the use of mirror texts, with attention given to both the translation and the original is encouraged whenever possible (Tanaka, 2015).

Human rights are increasingly part of global popular culture consciousness. Since the late 1970s, the United Nations has repeatedly drawn attention to the importance of human rights, through landmarks such as the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Through such actions as the establishment of the Human Rights Council (2006) and its firm commitment to the preservation of human rights as a cornerstone of global peace, the United Nations and its member countries have demonstrated that the implementation of rights is an important part of daily life in the modern world; at the same time this implementation is neither smooth nor uncontested given the varying definitions of human rights.

So what are human rights? Marie-Bénédicte Dembour (2010) points out that of course the idea of human rights is different for everyone, but she outlines four broad, idealized schools of thought on what constitutes human rights. These can be summarized as “the natural school” which defines human rights as “those rights one possess simply by being a human.” (Dembour, 2). This is to say rights are not social but innate.

The second school of thought Dembour outlines is deliberative, wherein human rights are “political values that liberal societies *chose* to adopt” (3). Here, human rights are a social agreement and are limited. In contrast to this, the protest school of thought believes human rights to be “claims and aspirations that allow the status quo to be contested in favor of the oppressed” (ibid). In this third school of thought, human rights are fought for and won.

The final school of thought about what constitutes human rights is the discourse school. Here, human rights exist because they are spoken of, and a discourse that has developed around the idea of them. The idea of human rights exists because “the language surrounding human rights has become a powerful language with which to express political claims” (4). At the same time, however, the limits of language ultimately limits the ways in which human rights can be conceptualized.

This paper believes that human rights are a contested process, rights that should be innate but often are limited or denied by societies. In this sense, we follow the third definition most closely. At the same time, literary scholars must be attuned to the way language frames our ideas and the way discourse shapes society. Language also helps us imagine new possibilities. It is no accident that human rights literature sits uncomfortably on a boundary between literature and testimony, and so often deploys innovative linguistic and narrative techniques. An attention to discourse and the way it shapes society is inescapable in human rights literature. Following this, the third and fourth conceptualizations of human rights have been the guiding framework in this initial paper.

Human Rights in Literature

Just as there is no one way to approach or define human rights, there is no one way to describe what is becoming known as “human rights literature.” As Sophia A. McClennen (2015) argues, the issue of human rights is inescapable in studies in the humanities and social sciences in the culture of fear and militarization that emerged in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001: “Human rights perspectives are now merged with stories

of ethnicity, sexuality, and cross-cultural identity. They infuse stories of war, labor, and personal struggle. They inform stories of language rights, empathy, and trauma. The notion of human rights is at the center of every major cluster of literary writing identifiable today” (3).

The question of how to limit what is read as human rights literature and the role of that literature is now central to many critical debates. Is it literary? Testimonial? Fiction or non-fiction? McClennen wonders about the social function of such literature: “Does it offer catharsis, healing from trauma, and productive affect? Does it serve as document, evidence, or juridical intervention? How does it balance a need for truth telling with the messiness of aesthetic art? Is there a particular form to human rights storytelling that is more authentic and honest? And where are the lines between sensationalism and meaningful advocacy?” (ibid).

Of course there is no clear answer to any of these questions. Yet McClennen astutely points to the fact that human rights literature is inherently interdisciplinary, blending testimonial accounts of lived experience and literary works that are social, political, and personal. As such, it can and should be taught in a variety of humanities and social science courses.

Narratives and life stories have long been an integral part of the process of social activism to gain rights and recognition. The United Nations Human Rights Council features news and reports together with testimony from people affected by war, rape, violence, and many other unimaginable rights violations. Mary Robinson, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has argued that such testimony is powerful because it has “a crucial role in showing not just the human cost but also incredible resilience” (Robinson, ix). Literature, too, is a powerful personal and political tool for social justice.

Literature and personal testimony humanizes sufferers of human rights violations. In a world where people largely believe in science and empirical facts, the human and social forces are often obscured or overlooked (Lewontin, 1991). Literature recenters the personal in social and political life, drawing attention to the human costs of rights violations. By drawing attention to those who suffer, it creates community and a call for social change or justice. And for many writers, telling their story is on some level therapeutic. It can give voice to both grief and outrage. It tells the story of trauma, but also of hope. For these reasons, the inclusion of human rights literature in any curricula can be a powerful addition to a course and a thought-provoking lesson for students.

At the same time, scholars argue the notion of universal human rights as a postcolonial response to imperialism, and have increasingly called for a scholarship of human rights that decenters western universalism (McClennen, 3). Japanese scholars have been slow to answer this call, and do so at the risk of further essentializing “Asian values” (Bauer & Bell, 1999). This paper therefore seeks to highlight human rights as political, personal, and a source of struggle for social justice within Japanese contexts.

Three Generations of Human Rights

Michael D. A. Freeman (2002) and other introductory texts map three generations of human rights, a common frame followed by the United Nations (cf. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; Leckie & Gallanger, 2006). The first generation is commonly understood to be civic and political rights, such as the right to vote, the

right to free speech, or the right to a fair trial. The second generation includes economic and social rights, such as the right to work for a fair wage and belong to a trade union, and the right to take collective action. Social rights include the protection of the family, mothers and children, as well as the right to health and education (International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1966). The third generation of rights is cultural, and encompasses the right to participate in cultural life, the rights of minorities to practice their ethnic, religious and linguistic cultures, and the right to benefit from science and culture (ibid). Of course there are debates about precisely which rights fall under which categories; in such a nebulous discussion there are no clear boundaries and rights are always contested.

There are numerous ways to center lessons around a work of human rights literature. Close readings and lessons based on contextualizaion are always possible and productive. Brivati, Jensen, Jolly and Moore (2014) propose the use of Raoul Hilberg's triangle of victims, perpetrators and bystanders to conceptualize how the Holocaust took place as a useful framework for discussions of human rights (268). They center their class discussions around an event and seek to expose Primo Levi's morally ambiguous "grey zone" through their exercises (ibid). This article draws on their framework while expanding and adapting it to Japanese contexts. It is also important to note that the topics introduced here are chosen in part for their adaptability to both culturally specific discussions as well as broad, globally comparative frameworks. There are countless other avenues to explore human rights in Japanese literature, such as literature about aging and elderly rights; literature about rights for non-humans such as animals and literature about Parkinson's disease, Hansen's disease, HIV/AIDS, and other illnesses. While I have included feminist writing, I have not touched on the possibilities of LGBTQ+ literature; and while Okinawan literature is address, the literature of Ainu people is not included here. A necessary category of human rights literature in Japan is the writing and testimony of people who survived the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and work by people whose lives have been destroyed by environmental pollution. It also does not take up writings by people who served time in the Japanese prison system. This list might also include writing by Koreans, Chinese, Taiwanese, and other East and Southeast Asians living under the umbrella of Japanese imperialism, or Japanese burakumin. The possibilities are numerous; this article, therefore, aims to give very general introductions to only three basic categories while suggesting the above groupings as further avenues for the exploration of Japanese human rights literature.

Three Generations of Human Rights in Japan: An introduction to texts and ideas for classroom use

Civil and Political

Women

Meiji to Early Showa Feminism

Although Article 14 of the Japanese Constitution guarantees equality of men and women, in reality the 2016 Global Gender Gap Index ranks Japan 111 out of 144 countries, drawing attention to the stunning lack of progress Japan has made towards gender equality (Global Gender Gap Report, 2016).

Women's literature in Japan, like many literatures of human rights, has often been treated as a minor literature, as a literary subgenre somehow distinct from main literary trends. In the Meiji period (1868-1912), women writers were often upper-class, educated women described with the term *keishū sakka*, or lady writers (Copeland 2003, 70). Later referred to as *joryū sakka*, or women writers, at the turn of the twentieth century, female authors took up issues of women's right to political participation, in addition to the role of women in the home and family. Writers such as Higuchi Ichiyō (1872-1896) took up issues of women's place in society, by depicting women trapped in unhappy marriages or women who work as geisha in the pleasure district (translated in Danly, 1981).

Rebecca Copeland introduces some examples of women activists with translated excerpts of their work in the volume *Lost Leaves: Women Writers of Meiji Japan* (2000). Another volume edited by Copeland, *Woman Critiqued: Translated Essays on Japanese Women's Writing* (2006), provides translations of essays about women writers from the Meiji period into contemporary Japan by a wide variety of literary and social critics. Finally, her 2006 edited volume *The Modern Murasaki: Writing by Women of Meiji Japan*, contains a wide selection of women's writings, from diaries to speeches to dramas, poetry, and fiction. It is an invaluable volume for a discussion of women's social and literary activism in Meiji and Taisho Japan.

Jan Bardsley collected and translated a selection of writings from the early feminist journal *Seitō*, or *Bluestocking* in her 2007 text, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seitō, 1911-16*. Bardsley has chosen 12 writers who were active in the Seitō circle, and translated a variety of works, from controversial essays that earned censorship bans of the magazine to fictional pieces. While drawing attention to early feminist struggles in Japan, this volume is particularly interesting as it speaks to issues that continue to be debated today, such as sexuality and motherhood, gender equality, and abortion.

The poetry of Yosano Akiko is also often included in trailblazing Japanese feminist writing due to her frank and scandalous acknowledgements of female sexual desire and taboo subjects such as the pain of childbirth. Janine Beichmann (2002) provides a critical biography and translations that can be incorporated into discussions of early Japanese feminism.

While the above focuses on first wave feminism in Japan, it is important to note that second and third wave feminism has left a rich history of activism and social critique, some of which, such as the work of prominent

feminist scholar Ueno Chizuko, has been translated into English. Banana Yoshimoto, Ogawa Yoko, Natsuo Kirino, Kamikawa Mieko, Kanehara Mieko, Kono Taeko, Takahashi Takako, Kurahashi Yumiko, Murata Sayaka, and many other contemporary Japanese female writers are widely available in translation. All of these writers present different visions of femininity and what it means to be a woman in contemporary Japanese society.

With texts from the turn of the twentieth century, students can be asked several questions. One of the most obvious is, of course, how such texts speak to the current situation of women in Japan today. Who would the readers have been, and how would people have reacted to the texts when they were initially published? Has the readership or the reception changed over time, and if so, why? What did these texts hope to accomplish, if anything? Were they written for the purpose of inciting social change? If not, how should we understand the purpose of the writing and how it changes over time?

Economic and Social

Proletariat

Early Showa

The Red Decade (1925-1935) of proletarian literature began in Japan after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 with the establishment of the Japan Proletarian Literary Front in 1925. During this decade writers faced varying degrees of oppression for the publication of their leftist beliefs, culminating in the 1933 murder of author Kobayashi Takiji (1903-1933) at the hands of the police. So successful was the Japanese policy of torture and suppression that for many years proletarian writing and authors who called for just and fair working conditions were treated as a footnote in Japanese literature history.

Proletarian literature has in the past been dismissed by scholars as ideology-driven productions that offer little to interest either in aesthetics or content. At the same time, as Japan faced a post-bubble economy and the emergence of a new class of economically and socially insecure precariat in part drove a rediscovery and renewed commitment to proletarian literature (Field, 2009; Bowen-Struk, 2009 & 2015). Željko Cipriš has been a prolific and sensitive translator of proletarian literary works into English, issuing collections of the antimilitarist and proletarian leader Kuroshima Denji (2005) and Kobayashi Takiji (2013). Michael Bourdaghs (2014) has also translated Kuroshima's work, making a wealth of commentary on economic inequality and the proletarian movement available to English readers.

Heather Bowen-Struyk and Norma Field (2016) have also published a rich anthology of proletarian literature in translation that foregrounds the social and activist role of literature in Japan. The volume raises questions about motherhood, prostitution, war, militarism, and of course the economic injustices of an industrial Japan that sacrificed its workers to economic profit and imperialistic expansion.

These new translations prove that at its very heart proletarian literature was concerned with justice and social change, driven by the strong belief that human relationships and human rights should be prioritized over economic

profit or military expansion. The stories that have been translated reveal the human cost of the pursuit of wealth before human well-being, and are therefore at their core a literature of human rights. The fact that Kobayashi Takiji ranked #13 on the 2008 Japanese list of best-selling books (Bowen-Stryuk, 2009) demonstrates how salient these issues remain for our time. Indeed, we often see human rights literature gain renewed popularity in the face of threats to these very rights. The 2008 literary spike of Kobayashi in the face of the economic downturn is echoed in the fact that George Orwell's 1984 rocketed to the top of the best-selling lists in America in the wake of the election of Donald Trump and the totalitarian turn in US politics (de Freytas-Tamura, 2017).

With proletarian literature, students can be asked about the nature of the text. Was it written as an act of witness against an inhumane economic system? Was it meant to be a historic or aesthetic representation? Did it aim to create sympathy in its readers for the plight of those who suffered? Or was it primarily intended to raise class consciousness and act as a call to revolution? What are the benefits and demerits of reading it in each of these ways? That is to say, how does the text change when we read it for empathy and when we read it for its class consciousness?

Cultural

Okinawa

Japanese literature is treated as a monolith when in fact there are rich regional variations and minority literary cultures. Prominent among these are the literature of the Ainu and the Uchinanchu, or the native Okinawans. Both Okinawa and Hokkaido were independent kingdoms annexed by Japan during the Meiji period. Writing from these areas, and from Japan's other imperial colonies, thus frequently take up issues of cultural identity, exploring the effects of Japan's assimilation policies and their own ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage. They further often foreground the human cost of colonial and military violence and how cultural memory can be silenced.

There is a variety of works by Uchinanchu authors available in English translation. Prominent among these are Steve Rabson's (1989) translations of novellas by Oshiro Tatsuhiro (1925-) and Higashi Mineo (1938-). Both of these authors were awarded the Akutagawa Prize for their works. Oshiro's work deals with the rape of a young girl by an American soldier, and Higashi's piece describes the experiences of a boy whose parents run a bar and brothel near the American military base. Both novels, then, focus on the continued American occupation of Japan and its human cost to the Okinawan people.

Rabson has several other edited collections. With Michael Molasky (2000) he edited *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, and with Davinder L. Bhowmik, Rabson has edited *Islands of Protest: Japanese Literature from Okinawa* (2016), both collections of short stories, poetry and drama from Okinawa. Furthermore, Frank Stewart and Katsunori Yamazato (2011) published a special issue of *Manoa* entitled *Living Spirit: Literature and Resurgence in Okinawa*. Add to these translations of pieces by Medoruma Shun (1960-) and Eiki Matayoshi (1947-) that are available online, and the body of Okinawan literature available in English is rich indeed.

These texts raise important questions about what it means to be Japanese and Japan's legacy of colonialism and violence. It further asks us to rethink American imperialism and the human costs of American military bases for the host countries. What does it mean to be colonial? What does it mean to be occupied? Does occupation ever end? How do writers preserve their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural heritages while still participating in a "national" literature? Is the writing activist, and if so, in what way? How do the writers express trauma? Is the work meant to protest, to heal, or to do something else?

Conclusion

Collectively, when discussing human rights in literature, we can ask what kind of history they provide and how that adds to Levy's "grey area." How does literature change or enrich our understanding of history? What does it add? What does it leave out? How does memory or trauma work in the text? Are there silences? What do these silences mean, and how should we understand them? While certainly foregrounding aesthetics and the nature of literature, because they bear witness, human rights literatures are a rich addition to any curriculum, easily incorporated to add shades of grey and complicate received historical narratives.

There are numerous avenues for exploration and expansion in a consideration of human rights in Japanese literature. Testimony and narrative can be productively added to a spectrum of courses in the humanities and social sciences. In a world where history so often repeats, restoring the human voices to the historical record is a powerful tool that encourages critical thinking and reflection in students. It also makes students question their own positionality. In Hilberg's triangle, where do they stand, and what are the consequences for the position they take? This act of critical thinking and reflection on the part of students is crucial as they become active and contributing members of society, and there is no better way to promote it than with the use of literature and testimony.

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