

John Ruskin in early 20th century Japan: some episodes

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1. Introduction: modern Japan and Ruskin*

Modern Japanese society was at a turning point after the Meiji government had built, though imperfectly, a modern state by promoting ‘fukoku kyōhei’ (rich country, strong army) after its ‘victory’ in the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War. At the time, there was an alternative way of proceeding to create a modern society, however, instead, the government continued to push ahead with the expansion of Japanese militarism, and led Japan’s invasion of countries in Continental Asia such as Korea and China. At the same time, the government strengthened its oppression of any critics of the Meiji imperial bureaucratic system, and formed a sense of solidarity and peer pressure among the people.

As a consequence of Japan’s rapid industrialization, serious social and economic problems such as poverty, war, and environmental pollution had emerged by the start of the 20th century. However, despite the state’s repression, various social movements and activities were undertaken by peasants, workers, women, students, socialists, Christians, citizens, and others, along with the distribution of a wide variety of publications through which the government could be criticized by using limited freedom of speech, even under severe censorship, against the authorities. John Ruskin (1819–1900) was one of Britain’s leading thinkers in the Victorian age, but surprisingly, he also played an important role in early-twentieth century Japan, and especially so for those involved in promoting the ideas and movements sympathetic to anti-industrialization. Since his works were introduced in 1888 in a popular journal *Kokumin no Tomo* (Friends of the Nation) by Tokutomi Sohō (1863–1957), a remarkable journalist, Ruskin came to be recognized in Japan as a well-known Western artist and social thinker in the several decades that followed. Why did Japanese intellectuals follow Ruskin? What was the impact of Ruskin on Japan at the time? These are the questions that I attempt to consider. However, to discuss these questions comprehen-

*In this paper, Japanese names are given in the customary order, i.e. surname first.

sively is beyond the scope of a brief paper, and only a sketch of some selective episodes will be traced in this paper.

2. Criticism of literary art: Natsume Sōseki and Iwamura Tōru

2.1 *An outstanding novelist and critic: Natsume Sōseki*

Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916), a great novelist and scholar of English literature, mentioned Ruskin in *Bungakuron* (Literary Criticism) in 1907, and in *Sanshirō* in 1909.¹ Although there is just one phrase ‘Have you ever read Ruskin?’ in *Sanshirō*, it leaves a deep impression on the reader (Natsume 1907: 610–12, 1909: 42).²

Sōseki was sent to Britain by the government from 1900 to 1902, to study English literature. However, he spent unhappy days in London, as he witnessed serious social problems in the British Empire, and stayed indoors most of the time, devoting himself to books describing various fields of study that were of interest in those days. His landlady and friends feared that he would have a nervous breakdown. Sōseki remembers his days in London with contempt:

The two years I spent in London were the most unpleasant years in my life. Among British gentlemen, just like a pitiable dog among a pack of wolves, I lived in misery (Natsume 1907: 14–15).

Despite his loneliness and lack of living expenses, and because he spent ‘the most unpleasant years’ of his life in London, Sōseki extended and deepened not only his profound knowledge of English literature but also his critical viewpoint of the modern industrial societies that were characteristic of this period. After returning to Japan in 1903, Sōseki was invited to become a lecturer at the Daiichi Kōtō Gakkō (First Higher School) and Tokyo Imperial University. There, he served as the successor to Koizumi Yakumo (another name for Patrick Lafcadio Hearn), who had lectured on the history of English literature.³ However, Sōseki began to feel even more

1 He is known by his common name, Natsume Sōseki, which comes from his haiku pen name given to him by his best friend Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), but his real name is Natsume Kinnosuke. He is customarily called ‘Sōseki’.

2 *Sanshirō* originally appeared serially in the *Asahi Shimbun* from September 1 to December 29 of 1908. At the beginning of the previous year, 1907, Sōseki resigned from all his faculty positions at universities and joined the Asahi Shimbun Company.

3 Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who is known also by the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo, taught

strongly that something was out of place in modern Japanese society. He expresses his criticism of a general trend to consider Japan one of the world's first-class powers after its 'victory' in the Russo-Japanese War. In a light and humorous phrasing, Sōseki shows his feeling in his books *Wagahai wa Neko de Aru* (I Am a Cat) and *Sanshirō* published just after the war.

'Yamato damashii (Spirit of Japan)' scream the papers, and pickpockets scream it too. [...] Admiral Tōgō has the Spirit of Japan. So has the man in the street, fish dealers, swindlers, and murders. [...] But if you ask what this Spirit is, they give that cough and say 'The Spirit of Japan is the Japanese Spirit', then they walk away (Natsume 1905-07: vol. 2, 50).

'We can beat the Russians, we can become a first-class power, but it doesn't make any difference. We still have pinched faces and feeble bodies. [...] You've never seen Mount Fuji. [...] It's the finest thing Japan has to be proud of, and the only thing we can boast about. It's nothing but a natural object that has been there for all time. We certainly didn't make it'. [...] Sanshirō had never expected to meet anyone like this man after the Russo-Japanese War. The man doesn't look like a Japanese, he thinks. 'But still', Sanshirō countered, 'Japan will develop more and more from now on'. 'Japan is going to perish', the man replied coolly (Natsume 1909: 24-25).⁴

After the Russo-Japanese War, there was a movement toward nationalism and the pursuit of something unique to Japan that was a nation-state of its own, and consequently Japanese 'traditional' culture and thought attracted people's attention once again. Under these circumstances, however, Sōseki continued to take a critical stance against Japan's superficial modernity, yet for him, neither Japanese nationalism nor European modernism was adopted. It is not entirely evident whether Sōseki was under the direct influence of the ideas of Ruskin, but it can be said that they shared a critical viewpoint of the modern industrial societies of the time.

the history of English literature at Tokyo Imperial University from 1896 to 1903, and his lectures remain in his book titled, *A history of English literature: in a series of lectures*. According to the prefatory note, 'these lectures are word for word as they were taken down by his students at the time of their delivery [from September 1900 to March 1903], and appear here without any revision by Hearn himself, who indeed never dreamed of their publication' (Koizumi 1927: vol. 2, 826-41). In this book, he gives an enlightening lecture on Ruskin.

4 These English sentences are based on the translation by Ito and Wilson (2001), and Rubin (1977), but some of them are modified.

2.2 A pioneer art critic: Iwamura Tōru

Iwamura Tōru (1870–1917), a pioneer art critic and of the same generation as Sōseki, was greatly influenced by Ruskin. When he was a student at Tokyo Eiwa Gakkō (later Aoyama Gakuin) from 1885 to 1888, Iwamura read the first few pages of Ruskin's *Lectures on Art* delivered at the University of Oxford in 1870. He was 17 or 18 years old when he found the old book published by Clarendon Press in 1875, at a bookshop in Tokyo. This was his first encounter with Ruskin. He wrote this memorable story in his first biographical article 'John Ruskin' in *Bijutsu Hyōron* (Art Criticism) in 1900 (Iwamura [1900] 1971: 130). Interestingly, he later began translating Ruskin's Oxford lectures, three times in 1902, but never finished them, and also wrote 'Ruskin Sensei to Alps Yama' (Mr Ruskin and the Alps) in 1911, both in *Bijutsu Shinpō* (Art News).⁵

Iwamura lived in America and Europe from 1888 to 1892, in order to study painting and art history. Returning to Japan in 1893, he became an English teacher at his old college Tokyo Eiwa Gakkō, and in 1899, a part-time lecturer of western art history at Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō (Tokyo Fine Arts School). The series of western art history lectures was given by Okakura Tenshin (1863–1913), the first president of Tokyo Fine Arts School, and Mori Ōgai (1862–1922), an army surgeon and notable novelist alongside Natsume Sōseki, for 10 years, until 1899, when Iwamura assumed the post.⁶ He became a lecturer in 1901 and a professor the following year, and was actively involved in art criticism through his contributions to *Bijutsu Hyōron* (Art Criticism), *Bijutsu Shinpō* (Art News), and *Bijutsu Shūhō* (Weekly Art News). In these publications, he often featured hard-hitting articles against the old-fashioned art world and the bureaucratic and authoritarian system in Japan, and also satirized Japanese snobbery in a plain-spoken style. In 1902, Iwamura leaped to fame by writing *Pari no Bijutsu Gakusei* (Art Students in Paris), a best-seller in its time. His pungent criticism of Japanese society was filled with humour and irony. It is clear that Iwamura saw his reflection in Ruskin's critical mind.⁷

In 1909, Iwamura, along with Masaki Naohiko (1862–1940), who was president of Tokyo Fine Arts School at the time, organized an art circle 'Gorakukai', which aimed to foster the beauty of

5 Only a few studies have examined Iwamura's role. However, Tanabe (2008) is an exception. This is the first critical biography of Iwamura.

6 The first professor of art history at Tokyo Fine Arts School was Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) who was also the first professor of economics at Tokyo Imperial University, and is still famous today as an eminent American art historian of Japanese art.

7 According to his son, Iwamura 'was a Christian, without concern for rules or formality, and loved reading the Bible to the end of his life', but further details are unknown (Iwamura 1933: 116).

life created by small-sized works such as art medals. Bernard Leach (1887–1979) and Tomimoto Kenkichi (1886–1963), both original designers and potters, also joined this circle (Tanabe 2008: 134–37). It is not difficult to find a reflection of William Morris's idea of 'lesser art' in this circle's approach to art, but it is also located on the extended line of the idea and practice in Ruskin's intention for social reform through art. Iwamura's 1915 article 'William Morris to Shumiteki Shakaishugi' (William Morris and Aesthetic Socialism) was written especially for his book *Geijutsu to Shakai* (Art and Society), which title clearly conveyed Ruskin's thoughts on art. Iwamura states:

Morris was an admirer of Ruskin. He avidly read Ruskin's *The Stone of Venice* all his life, and was strongly inspired, particularly by the chapter 'The Nature of Gothic', in the latter half of his life. In fact, Morris's idea of social reform is that of Ruskin's ideal: 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever. However, it must be also a joy for all people'. [...] 'The popularization of beauty' and consequently 'the promotion of human happiness' Morris dreamed of and endeavoured to achieve had made good progress in the last twenty years (Iwamura [1915] 1971: 245, 248).⁸

It is not well known that he was a keen reader of the *Heimin Shimbum* (Common people's Newspaper), which was first published in 1903 by Kōtoku Shūsui (1871–1911) and Sakai Toshihiko (1871–1933), just three months before the Russo-Japanese War, to promote and spread socialist thoughts. It was forced to cease the publication in 1905, because it advocated pacifism against the war (Tanabe 2008: 46–49). Kōtoku Shūsui, a famous socialist and anarchist, who had a great influence on the socialism in Japan, was executed along with eleven others in 1911 for his involvement in the 'Taigyaku Jiken' (High Treason Incident) of 1910, however, this was a frame-up by the Meiji state to crack down on anti-government movements. Although the Social Democratic Party — the first socialist party in Japan — was established in 1901, the Heiminsha (Society for Common People) was founded in 1903, and also the Japanese Socialist Party was established in 1906, they were all forced to shut down by the government, and the so-called 'winter time' of socialism deepened especially after 1910 for five years, when most socialist and democratic movements declined.⁹

Iwamura was expected to continue with his work, however, he was forced to resign from the

8 See Ruskin ([1853] 1903–12: vol. 10, 194) and Morris ([1892] 1936: vol. 1, 292).

9 It is, of course, no accident that the High Treason Incident coincided with the unification of Korea with Japan in 1910.

Tokyo Fine Arts School in 1916, and died one year later after his diabetes worsened.

3. Criticism of economics and social reform: Kawakami Hajime and Mikimoto Ryūzō

3.1 ‘Japanese Ruskin’: Kawakami Hajime¹⁰

Kawakami Hajime (1879–1946) was one of the most influential economists in early twentieth-century Japan. He began to introduce Ruskin’s economic and social ideas in 1917.¹¹ These ideas were popularized in the country through his articles and books. One of his students, Mikimoto Ryūzō (1894–1971), says about Kawakami:

The first man that introduced Ruskin as economist to Japan may be said, if I am not wrong, to have been professor Hajime Kawakami; It may be an unexpected fact that the greatest Marxian teacher in Japan has once been so Ruskinian that he was called the Japanese Ruskin by his colleagues (Mikimoto 1931: 40 [Mikimoto’s English]).

Kawakami, who was a professor of political economy at Kyoto Imperial University, first became well known through the publication of *Binbō Monogatari* (Tale of Poverty), which became popular in 1917, in which he refers to Ruskin in the preface.¹²

Ruskin famously says, ‘There is no wealth, but life’. Wealth is the purpose of life — that is, the only purpose of life is to quest the way, wealth is significant simply as a means of achieving this purpose. Therefore I hope to eradicate poverty from human society because poverty obstructs the way of life human beings pursue (Kawakami [1917] 1982: 4).¹³

Kawakami expressed his deep sympathy with Ruskin’s concept of wealth and his criticism of

10 This section is based on part of my previous paper (Izumo and Sato 2014).

11 It is the same year Iwamura died and one year after Sōseki passed away. In the next year, 1918, the Rice Riots broke out at the instigation of housewives in the small fishing village of Toyama and subsequently spread across Japan, just a year after the start of the Russian Revolution.

12 This story originally appeared serially in the *Osaka Asahi Shimbun* from September 11 to December 26 of 1916. The preface to *Binbō Monogatari* was added when it was published as a book in 1917.

13 These English sentences are based on the translation by Watanabe and Kikuchi (1997: 305), but some of them are modified.

‘individualist economics’ in his 1918 article, ‘Ruskin no *Kono Saigo no Mono nimo*’ (Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*) (Kawakami [1918a] 1982: 159). Moreover, in his preface to Ishida Kenji’s 1918 translation of *Unto This Last*, Kawakami, probably for the first time, classified economics into three streams: ‘individualist economics’, which is characterized by selfishness and the pursuit of profits; ‘socialist economics’, which seeks to reform the economic system; and ‘humanitarian economics’, which demands the reformation of the human mind. Kawakami typecasts Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, Thomas Robert Malthus, and David Ricardo as leading economists of ‘individualist economics’, Karl Marx as a leader of ‘socialist economics’, and ‘our John Ruskin’ as a great figure of ‘humanitarian economics’ (Kawakami [1918b] 1982: 509–10). He then repeats the same argument in 1919, and again refers to Ruskin as a humanitarian economist in his book *Shihonshugi Keizaigaku no Shiteki Hatten* (Historical Development of the Capitalist Economics) in 1923. In this book, Kawakami re-described the ‘historical development’ of the mainstream justification of ‘self-interest’ and criticism of it from Mandeville and Smith via Malthus, Ricardo, Bentham, and J. Mill to Ruskin through J. S. Mill and Carlyle in the history of economic thought. The reason Marx is seldom mentioned is thought to be that Kawakami planned to publish another book, *Shakaishugi Keizaigaku no Shiteki Hatten* (Historical Development of the Socialist Economics), however, this plan was never realized (Kawakami [1923] 1982: ch. 5).¹⁴

Ironically, Kawakami ultimately became a Marxist after his view of economics based on ‘humanitarianism’ was strongly challenged in 1924 by Kushida Tamizō (1885–1934), a noted Marxian economist and pupil of Kawakami. However, many translations of Ruskin’s works and books about him were published in Japan from the 1920s to the 1930s.

3.2 A disciple of Ruskin: Mikimoto Ryūzō

During the 1910s and 1920s, in parallel with the rise of Christian socialism and the labour movements, the Christian socialist Mikimoto Ryūzō, along with Kagawa Toyohiko (1888–1960), be-

14 In that same period, Ōkuma Nobuyuki (1893–1977), under the direction of Fukuda Tokuzō (1874–1930), who was a prominent economist and professor of the Tokyo Higher Commercial School (later Hitotsubashi University), wrote three articles on Ruskin and Morris. He published *Shakai Shisōka toshiteno Ruskin to Morris* (Ruskin and Morris as social thinkers) including these articles with others in 1927 (Ōkuma 1920, 1921). As already indicated in my previous paper, the contrast studies of Ricardo between Fukuda and Kawakami, both from the Marshallian and from the Marxian points of view, were introduced into Japan in the 1910s, and then passed on to later generations of scholars (Izumo and Sato 2014). In another paper, I would like to go on to consider the contrast between Kawakami (or Mikimoto) and Ōkuma in their Ruskin studies.

came leading Ruskinians, and published numerous translations, articles, and books on Ruskin in the 1920s and the 1930s.¹⁵

Although Mikimoto Ryūzō was the only son of Mikimoto Kōkichi (1858–1954), who established the Mikimoto Pearl Company, Ryūzō criticized his father's business for being run by 'a small capitalist' and did not succeed to the pearl company. Mikimoto was interested in Ruskin when he was a student of First Higher School, probably in 1913, as a result of reading Ada Earland's *Ruskin and His Circle*, published in 1911. He was deeply influenced by Kawakami Hajime at Kyoto Imperial University, and decided to devote his life to Ruskin studies following Kawakami's advice. In 1920, leaving the university before graduation, Mikimoto went to Britain and gathered Ruskin's books, letters, original manuscripts, drawings, and paintings. Hence, he became the foremost Ruskinian and Ruskin scholar in Japan as a successor to Kawakami (Honma 1985: 2, Watanabe and Kikuchi 1997: 91, Washi 2000: 120).¹⁶

Mikimoto often published his works by Shimeisha (the Mission Publisher), which was based on Christian socialism originally established in 1915 by Yusa Toshihiko (1888–1973), who was a reliable co-operator of Kagawa Toyohiko and later became head of the central office for employment placement. Shimeisha suspended its business in 1917, however, under Mikimoto, along with Yusa and others, it resumed operations to help unemployed Mikimoto workers after the Mikimoto factories closed down due to the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923.¹⁷ Saitō Shinkichi, Ryūzō's uncle and later head of the Mikimoto precious metal factory, also had a close connection with the Christian socialist movement. He visited America in 1905 and Europe in 1909, in order to attend exhibitions and open the overseas branches of Mikimoto Pearl Company in New York and London. During these trips, Saitō was deeply impressed with the education and enlightenment evident in managers' support for their workers' moral culture and welfare, particularly in Britain. He established a Workers' Church inside the factory, and tried to foster a spirit of mutual support

15 Mikimoto translated twelve works by Ruskin from 1930 to 1936 and wrote over twenty essays on Ruskin during the 1920s and 1930s (Watanabe and Kikuchi 1997: 93).

16 Honma Sachiko was a daughter of Mikimoto Ryūzō. Mikimoto visited Britain six times, in 1920, 1925, 1927, 1928, 1929, and 1930, and collected a lot of material regarding Ruskin (Washi 2000: 120).

17 Ōsugi Sakae (1885–1923), a great anarchist, was murdered, along with his partner Itō Noe (1895–1923) and his nephew Tachibana Sōichi (1917–23), by the military amidst the chaos after the Great Kantō Earthquake. Ōsugi began the publication of the monthly Journal *Kindai Shisō* (Modern Thoughts) in 1912, and translated both Romain Rolland's *People's Theatre* and Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* in 1917. The publications *Heimin Shimbun* and *Kindai Shisō* played an important role in introducing and popularizing the ideas of 'humanitarianism' during this period.

and Christian love for humanity among his workers. As might have been supposed, it is highly probable that Mikimoto was strongly influenced by the ideas and practices of his uncle Saitō (Miyoshi 1962: 4–9, Watanabe and Kikuchi 1997: 91, Kusamitsu 2001: 118–20).

Mikimoto established the Tokyo Ruskin Kyōkai (Tokyo Ruskin Society) in 1931 and published the journal *Tokyo Ruskin Kyōkai Zasshi* (Tokyo Ruskin Society Journal). In 1934, he also built the Ruskin Bunko (Ruskin Library), which was a Ruskin cultural centre with a library and a tea room.¹⁸ Moreover, Mikimoto opened ‘the Ruskin Hall’ and ‘the Ruskin Cottage’ which is a kind of handicrafts guild, and tried to establish cultural places where ordinary people could learn about the beauty of life in Ginza — the centre of Tokyo — during this period. In 1937, regrettably, he went bankrupt prior to achieving these goals (Watanabe and Kikuchi 1997: 91–92, Kusamitsu 2001: 122–124). However, his attempts and projects should be greatly appreciated, despite their failures, not only because of his ideas for social reform, but also because he put Ruskin’s ideas into practice in Japan.¹⁹

4. Concluding remarks

The early twentieth century was a transitional time in Japan’s history. The social and economic system that had existed was beginning to break down, with the infiltration of rapid industrialization, and environmental devastation proceeding in both the material and spiritual sense. Under these circumstances, a strong interest in the thoughts and practices of John Ruskin arose among Japanese intellectuals. Yet, it was not until the 1920s that Marxism came to be widely known in Japan, and the notion of anti-capitalism and anti-industrialization, such as that advocated by Ruskin, along with William Morris, became the handiest intellectual tool for criticizing the system that predominated at that time. Various social movements also emerged, such as Christian socialist movements, before Marxism assumed leadership over these movements, which were influenced by the ‘Taishō Democracy’ — and also the period of humanitarianism — during the 1910s

18 Both the Tokyo Ruskin Society and the Ruskin Library were re-established in 1984, and they continue to support Ruskin studies.

19 From 1938 to 1947, there was only one book that Mikimoto published. Kimura points out ‘during the militarist period 1937–1945 there was a curiously deviant phase of Ruskin analysis. A few sincere students of Ruskin continued their work along the religious-humanitarian line [...] and Ruskin was now generally deliberately hailed as a totalitarian social reformer, and some of his doctrines and assertions were picked up and specifically made use of to support the imperialist war by the right-wing nationalists’ (Kimura 1982: 236–37).

and the 1920s, and encouraged by the Russian Revolution.²⁰

It was not surprising that many of those who were involved in the movements were Christians. Through Christianity, the Japanese could acquire fundamental knowledge of various fields, and this system of thought was also particularly significant in helping intellectuals assess the existing systems in Japan in comparison with those used in the West.²¹ Moreover, it should be emphasized that some intellectuals attempted to practice Ruskin's ideas in their own ways in Japan. Their attempts and projects should be greatly appreciated, despite their failures. Earlier human beings and societies have always reconsidered how they should exist, as a point of reference. It would be important to go back to the starting point, in order to understand their failures and defeats.

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20 Marx's *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* was translated by Kōtoku Shūsui and Sakai Toshihiko in 1904, and *Das Kapital* was completely translated for the first time by Takabatake Motoyuki (1886–1928) in 1924.

21 In the late 18th to mid-19th centuries, before Christianity had a great impact on Japanese society, Dutch Learning, as a systematized field of enquiry dedicated to the Western sciences, had huge draw for Japanese intellectuals.

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