Chapter 14

Proletarian Writers and the Great Tokyo Earthquake of 1923

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Prologue

On 9 April 2000 the writer turned hawkish politician and mayor of Tokyo Ishihara Shintarō was invited to address the Self-Defence Forces at a commemorative ceremony held at their Nerima base in Tokyo. In his speech he referred to the duties of the forces in terms that aroused fierce opposition from various directions:

When we look at Tokyo today, we see that illegally entered third country nationals, foreigners, are repeatedly committing extremely heinous crimes. Crime in Tokyo has already changed shape compared to the past. Considering this situation, in the event of a natural disaster incidents of great, great civil disorder are even to be expected. In order to deal with something like that there are limits to the power of the police. In that case, we expect you to report to duty, and not only to provide disaster first aid, but we also expect you to accomplish the important aim of maintaining public order.

These comments were made in connection with a large-scale military manoeuvre, which was planned for the following September, to practise natural disaster prevention and to deliver first aid. The main reason that Ishihara’s speech created such controversy was a word he used. The word *sangokujin*, or third country nationals, carries two meanings, one of which is taboo in today’s language usage. Before and during the Second World War it was a derogatory term used to denote nationals from countries under Japan’s colonial rule living in Japan. Responding to the critique, Ishihara however claimed that he had used the word in its other sense of ‘nationals other than from the country concerned’, which carries more neutral connotations.

What added explosive force to the utterance, though, was the mental leap he made from natural disaster to rioting foreigners, to many an eerie reminder
of the massacre of thousands of innocent Koreans, in the immediate aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake that struck Tokyo on 1 September 1923. Groundless rumours, to the effect that Koreans and also socialists were rioting and poisoning wells and deliberately starting fires, had spread like an epidemic and initiated an unprecedented persecution. Even though Ishihara tried to exculpate himself by claiming that he had intended no scapegoating of Koreans – he had only meant to say that there is no telling what illegally entered criminal foreigners may do in the event of disaster – the damage had already been done. (Sankei shinbun 13 April 2000, Osaka morning edition: 29) Although media seemed to focus on semantics, this incident is indicative of how Japan's problematic colonial past and treatment of colonial subjects remain a sensitive and contested issue even today.

**Introduction**

The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 has been identified as a defining cultural moment and turning point in Japan's social as well as literary history. Writing at the time, the well-known writer Kikuchi Kan's (1888–1948) defeatist declaration of the powerlessness of literature became a famous, if contested, reference point of post-disaster sentiment among intellectuals. Kikuchi did think the earthquake would have a single beneficial effect: by setting in motion a social revolution, it would level the playing field and bring the principle of 'precedence of merit' (jitsuryoku hon'ī) to the fore. If only statesmen and the masses alike would learn this one lesson, the ravages of the social revolution that was bound to come sooner or later anyway might be evaded, he thought. As for literature, though, the disaster only spelt gloom. Kikuchi surmised that literary men must now have learnt the vivid lesson that, on the borderline between life and death, literature turns into a useless luxury item, the realization of which unpleasant truth had made them lose faith in their work. As a result literature was bound to weaken, while the demand for it would go into a sharp decline (Kikuchi Kan 1923: 116–117). Nakajima Kenzō, to take a retrospective example, understands the disaster, occurring at the height of the supposedly milder climate of the so-called 'Taishō Democracy', as a 'repugnant prologue' (imawashī jokyoku) to Shōwa history:

Even on the paper scroll of Japan's cruel history from Taishō to Shōwa, the tragedy of the Great Kanto Earthquake stands out conspicuously. Here I perceive the starting point of an even greater tragedy [the war to come]. The reason is that I think that the modern state of affairs, with atrocities