

—*Museum Report*—

Witnessing the Anthropocenic sceneries in Kitakyushu city through the artworks by Shikō Munakata, a woodblock-printmaker: A Report on the Special Exhibition at Kitakyushu Museum of Natural History and Human History

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Abstract

As one of emerging fields of interdisciplinary studies focusing on the environmental changes, “ecocriticism” connects the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. Interestingly, scholarly trends in ecocriticism are gradually expanding the corpus from literatures to other forms of arts. Today, we live in the newest geochronological epoch “Anthropocene” and facing the onset of anthropogenic climate changes, and thus, recent ecocriticism started to deal with the emerging concept of Anthropocene. In this short report, the artworks (woodcut prints) by Shikō Munakata, one of the most renowned woodblock printmakers, as models for ecocritical art corpus recording the changes in scenery and landscapes reflecting the industrial growth of Kitakyushu city and surrounding areas possibly reflecting the early phase, the great divergence, and the sustainable phases of Anthropocene in Japan (and Asia).

Keywords: Anthropocene, arts, ecocriticism, industrial history, museum, Kitakyushu.

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Introduction: Literature as the measures of environmental changes. How about artworks?

As one of emerging fields of interdisciplinary studies focusing on the environmental changes, “ecocriticism” connects the study of literature and the environmental issues from an interdisciplinary point of view by reexamining the texts in the literatures, even Shakespeare (1564-1616), for illustrating the historical changes in environmental states and concerns (Estok, 2005). In the United States, Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) is hosting and leading the field, through organizing biennial conference opened for the scholars handling and discussing the environmental matters in literature (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996).

It is widely considered that the pioneering work by Meeker (1974) entitled “The Comedy of Survival” should be credited as the founding study in the field of literary ecology which is “the study of biological themes and relationship which appear in literary works (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996),” attempting to study the relationship between the literary arts and scientific ecology. In the first edition of “The Comedy of Survival” Meeker also attempted to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of human species (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996).

In the latest edition (Meeker, 1997), Meeker expanded the corpus for his consideration from classical pure literary works such as Dante (1265-1321) and Shakespeare to the works of modern naturalists (researchers and writers) such as E. O. Wilson (1929-) who is known as the father of sociobiology with enthusiasm for biological and sociological behaviors of insects (chiefly, ants). In his latest work, Meeker considered comedy and tragedy as the form of adaptive behavior in the natural world which promote us for survival, and such behavior is viewed to be shaped under influence by literature, he eventually introduced the idea of a play ethic, as opposed to a work ethic. In a series of works, Meeker emphasized the importance of play as a necessary and desirable component of the comic spirit.

In Japan, the scholarly trends for literary ecology or ecocriticism have been imported from the United States in the middle of the 1990s and was gradually accepted by Japanese scholars (Yuki, 2014). Interestingly, Yuki (2014) viewed that the association between literature and nature is so deeply imprinted in the Japanese mind, thus, plenty of descriptions or expressions reflecting the changing environmental parameters surrounding the authors of literatures could be mined out through critical text reading. If the-above-mentioned proposition noted by Yuki can be considered to be true, there should be additional historical records, descriptions, or expressions of environmental and ecological status to be uncovered from non-professional Japanese authors of daily records such as diary and non-literature Japanese artworks such as drawings, paintings, printings, and sculptures, while ecocriticism generally covers the purely literally artworks and play texts.

Ecocriticism and Anthropocene

We are currently working on the emerging issues related to Anthropocene by forming an academic group named Anthropocene Research Club (ARC) (Kawano, 2019a). As we have discussed in the previous articles appeared in this media (Kawano, 2019a,b; Kawaguchi, 2019; Nakao and Kawano, 2019), today, we are facing the realistic environmental problems possibly determining the fate of Earth in the critical time point in the future along with the geochronological time scale as Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen (Revkin, 2011; Steffen et al., 2011) have coined the term “Anthropocene” in order to point out that there must be a key difference between the 120 century-old Holocene and the recent 250 years including the present time that we live in today, in which we are apparently facing the onset of anthropogenic climate changes. Since the concept of Anthropocene is attractive, one may be interested in how ecocriticism deals with this emerging concept of Anthropocene.

Interestingly, Buell (2016) has sketched an Anthropocene-triggered “panic” among the ecocriticism specialists. Buell has critically stated that ecocriticism’s recent interdisciplinary maturation has shifted its position even stronger position than ever before and environmental humanists believe that they have valuable contributions to make to re-thinking and re-dressing excessive nature of human activities in Anthropocene. Buell (2016) has strongly insisted that ecocritics (and environmental humanists) have unfortunately foregone a key opportunity as scholars avoided the controversial issue of unsustainable human population growth (1) as a sociohistorical phenomenon and (2) an impetus to creative imagination.

According to Clark (2015), the 21st century has seen an increased awareness of the forms of environmental destruction that cannot immediately be seen and localized. Clark (2015) further explored the possibility of an alternative mode of critical practice, tightly engaged with the destructive force of the global environmental crisis. From the literature-based and culture-based eco-critical point of views, he argued that the concept of Anthropocene represents a threshold at which modes of interpretation that once seemed sufficient or progressive become inadequate or even latently destructive.

Corrigan (2016) has reviewed the-above-mentioned work by Clark. He pointed that “we have already heard much about this threshold’s dangers: rising temperatures, rising sea levels, and worse” by citing the Clark’s view that Anthropocene as the epoch at which human impacts have passed a dangerous threshold. Corrigan continued that “*Clark probes the threshold’s imponderability, its messiness and multiplicity. However, although thresholds are the book’s pivotal concept, Clark does little to reflect directly on thresholds as thresholds*” suggesting that there should be clear discussion on the nature of threshold (Corrigan, 2016).

In our previous articles, the author and a colleague (i) employed the population dynamics for

discussing the thresholds for human population as sociohistorical phenomenon in Anthropocene (Kawano, 2019a,b), (ii) proposed the dissection of all known parameters of Anthropocene, into two types, namely, the parameters being convergent (thus, obviously approaching the limits or thresholds) and the rest of parameters seem to be divergent (Kawano, 2019a), (iii) argued that slowing of the converging parameters reflecting the finiteness of resources or the presence of capacity size limit of the ecosystem is urgently required in order to avoid the catastrophic outcomes in the ecosystem (Kawano, 2019a), and (iv) proposed a possible periodization within Anthropocene in Asia (Nakao and Kawano, 2019).

Today, Anthropocene experts (Steffen et al., 2004, 2011) consider that Anthropocene can be dissected into the early phase (initial 170 years following the industrial revolution) and the Great Divergence (outbreak of economy and anthropogenic impacts after WWII). Here, the author reconfirmed the periodization proposed in our previous article (Nakao and Kawano, 2019) that Anthropocene has already entered into the third sub-epoch reflecting the shift to greener and sustainable society, from the year (2000) when the term Anthropocene was coined by two scientists. The author view that the impact of the terminology with the concept of threshold for human survival was unignorable in determining the behavior of the public. Therefore, in this latest sub-epoch of Anthropocene, setting of the realistic and sustainable target levels/goals for the diverging parameters is highly important.

Kitakyushu as a model city for studying the onset of Anthropocene in Asia and for discussing the sustainable society

Anthropocene obviously started from the beginning of industrial revolution (in England), which became largely visible due to acceleration of the accumulation of emitted materials or chemicals which are listed as the characteristic parameters of the epoch of anthropogenic impacts (Briggs, 1979; Cossons and Trinder, 1979). Our group (ARC) views that the beginning of Anthropocene in Asia could be dated back to 1901, the year marking the launch of the first steel making facility at the nation-owned Yawata Steel Works constructed in Kitakyushu area for the first time in Asia (Nakao and Kawano, 2019). Since then, Japan and neighboring Asian countries entered into Anthropocene with 120 years of delay after the European one.

Furthermore, after analyzing the demographic changes and the industrial structural changes in Kitakyushu city, we concluded that Kitakyushu city can be viewed as a model city not only as the origin of Asian Anthropocene, but also as a blue-print model for future societies in the world along with the shift towards the truly long-lasting sustainable civilization. As discussed in the previous section, we have proposed a trisected periodization of Anthropocene in Japan and Asia into the early (1991-1950; corresponding to the half century prior to the World War II), the middle (1951-2000; the

post-war half century reflecting the great divergence of Anthropocene) and the late ages (2001-present or future; including coming future years characterized by intensive, greener, and sustainable human efforts).

Shikō Munakata, A traveling witness of Japanese sceneries

Shikō Munakata (1903-1975) born in Aomori prefecture, Japan, was a most internationally renowned woodblock printmaker in Showa era in Japan (Yanagi, 1991; Kawai, 2002). Accordingly, his activities have been largely associated with the woodcuts made under Sōsaku-Hanga (creative printing arts) movement and the Mingei (folk art) movement. His artworks also cover watercolors, calligraphy, oil paintings, and calligraphy (Kawai, 2002). In 1970, Munakata was awarded the Order of Culture from Emperor Hirohito (Showa), which is the highest honor in the arts in Japan. In addition to his popularity oversea, his artworks are highly favored by people in Japan. A number of museums all over Japan maintain the collection of the artworks made by Munakata, chiefly, Munakata collections at museums in Aomori (Shikō Munakata memorial hall at Aomori prefectural Museum), Kurashiki (Ohara Museum of Art), and Toyama (Shikō Munakata memorial hall, Nanto Fukumitsu Art Museum) are well known.

Two years after Munakata was awarded the "Prize of Excellence" at the Second International Print Exhibition held in Lugano, Switzerland (Yanagi, 1991), Munakata was invited to perform a series of exhibitions in 1954, in former Kokura city (today, known as the center of Kitakyushu city), which marks the beginning of the series of Munakata's exhibitions in Kyushu Island (according to explanation at the Special Exhibition at Kitakyushu Museum of Natural History and Human History).



Fig. 1. The official poster of the special exhibition at Kitakyushu Museum of Natural History and Human History, entitled “From Kyushu! A journey of Shikō Munakata. The rediscovery of his footsteps and interaction” held between October 12th and December 1st, 2019. Image was obtained from the website of the museum (<http://www.kmnh.jp/event/290/>)

Yaskawa Electric Corporation based in Kitakyushu city (established in 1915 and developed along with the growth of Kitakyushu industrial region) made a significant effort for inviting Munakata to Kitakyushu. His visit was followed by continuous support for Munakata's activities by Yaskawa Electric Corporation. Under financial supports from Yaskawa Electric Corporation, Munakata travelled all over Japan and abstracted the sceneries into the artworks mostly in the form of woodcuts (Special Exhibition at Kitakyushu Museum of Natural History and Human History).

Here, after inspiration from the woodblock-prints made by Shikō Munakata which are presented at a special exhibition at Kitakyushu Museum of Natural History and Human History entitled “From Kyushu! A journey of Shikō Munakata. The rediscovery of his footsteps and interaction (九州発！棟方志功の旅 彫り起こされた足跡と交流)” (from October 12th, 2019 to December 1st, 2019), the author wishes to consider a variety of artworks other than literature and plays as additional corpus of ecocriticism.

The colored artwork known as “*Takeda-Kyo no Saku* (1970)” (Exhibition No. 40-13) shows two engineers in typical blue-gray-colored uniforms of Yaskawa Electric Corporation (Mr. Sumiji Ohki and Mr. Yanosuke Miwa) who were continuously guiding Munakata in Northern Kyushu area. In the exhibition in Kitakyushu, craftworks such as handmade ceramic tea bowls gifted from Mr. Miwa to Munakata were presented. These private materials suggest the tight relationship between Munakata and members of Yaskawa Electric Corporation.

Exhibition on the works of Shikō Munakata organized by the history department of the museum but not in the art museum

Kitakyushu city has both the art museum (Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art; URL: <http://www.kmma.jp/>) and the historical museum (Kitakyushu Museum of Natural History and Human History; URL: <http://www.kmnh.jp/english/>). We need to think of the reason and significance of the special exhibition of the artworks by Shikō Munakata held in 2019 at Kitakyushu Museum of Natural History and Human History, but not in the art museum. As the title of the exhibition emphasizes “A journey” and “rediscovery of his footsteps and interaction,” the aim of the curators in charge might be to highlight the historical aspect of the artist's activity.

For supporting this view, the curators on behalf of the museum (President, Dr. Kyoichiro Ueda) highlighted a series of print works by Munakata recording the symbolic sceneries and landscapes in Kitakyushu city and surrounding areas typical in the Showa era corresponding to the great divergence of Anthropocene (in the post-war half century), such as a black and white artwork known as “*Yo-ko-ro Hifuki no Saku* (1954)” based on the sketch of the structure of Higashida First Blast Furnace (Asian first Steel-making facility) still active at the time (January 6th, 1954).



Fig. 2. Higashida First Blast Furnace as the core of Yawata steel works established in 1901 in Yahata-higashi ward, Kitakyushu symbolizes the industrial revolution in Asia.



Fig. 3. Great Wakato bridge connecting Wakamatsu ward (left) and Tobata ward (right) across the Dokai Bay. At that time of construction, the Great Wakato bridge was the biggest suspension bridge in Asia.

In addition, “*Yagiyamatouge Botayama no Saku (1970)*” (Exhibition No. 40-12; a black and white artwork) showing the huge mountain-sized coal-mining spoil tips in Iizuka city shaped just like three gigantic pyramids, and “*Kitakyushu Wakako-Ohashi no Saku (1970)*” (Exhibition No. 40-8; a

black and white artwork), a sight with the Asian biggest (at that time) great steel-made suspension bridge named the Great Wakato bridge, which is connecting Wakamatsu ward and Tobata ward across the Dokai Bay (82.4 m in height, 627 m in length) form a series of good record of landscape in Kitakyushu area..

Interestingly, “*Mekarigu Tansetsu no Saku* (1970)” (Exhibition No. 40-2) witnessed the prior to the change in the landscape above the Kanmon channel dividing two major islands in Japan, namely, Kyushu Island and Honshu Island. The Kanmon Great Bridge (141 m-high steel-made suspension bridge, across the 1 km-wide Kanmon channel) was constructed and opened in 1973 as the longest suspension bridge in Asia (at that time), but this black and white print art by Munakata (*Mekarigu Tansetsu no Saku*) clearly sketched the absence of the great bridge above the channel, suggesting that Munakata made the sketch of the landscape on site and witnessed the last moment of the shrine and the channel just before the 5 year-long great construction work starts (in 1968).



Fig. 4. The Kanmon bridge across the Kanmon channel and the stone lantern belonging to Mekari shrine (viewed from Kyushu side). At that time of construction, the Kanmon bridge was the longest suspension bridge in Asia.

Conclusion

Studies in ecocriticism recently covers discussion on Anthropocene and are expanding corpus from the written literatures to other form of arts. In this report, the artworks (woodcut prints) by Shikō Munakata as models for ecocritical corpus recording the sceneries and/or landscapes under rapid industrial growth in Kitakyushu city representing the early phase, the great divergence, and the sustainable phases of Anthropocene in Japan (and Asia).

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