

# A Marxist Sherlock Holmes: Itō Ken and the Proletarian Detective in 1920s Shanghai

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## Abstract

Itō Ken (1895-1945), a proletarian writer, stated in 1930 that his collection of short stories *Shanghai Yawa* (Shanghai Night Stories) was intended to be a “detective and proletarian like popular novel.” But how can a proletarian writer with a Marxist worldview change an a-political genre such as the detective story into a weapon of proletarian literature? Could a Marxist detective reveal the crimes of capital? Examining Itō’s journalistic articles and fiction within the context of mass media and detective fiction, I aim to show how Itō Ken tried to rework the detective genre into a form of proletarian literature.

**Keywords:** Itō Ken (1895-1945), proletarian literature, Shanghai, detective fiction, Edogawa Ranpō, Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke

## Introduction

When I published *Arishima Takeo no geijutsu to shōgai* [The Art and Life of Arishima Takeo] in Taisho 15 [1926] a change in my life and thinking came about. Therefore, I’m submerged in research on history and science. I wrote mainly detective novels and proletarian popular novels. In Showa 2 [1927], to cleanse my life and love, I went to Shanghai. Here I have met various Marxists and bohemians from around the world. [...] I went to China again. This time finally, I captured the ideology. In that time, I tried to write a detective and proletarian like

popular novel [*tantei shōsetsu to puroretaria-teki tsūzoku shōsetsu*]. The setting is mainly between Shanghai and every country in the world. *Shanghai Yawa* [Shanghai Night Stories] published by Heibonsha in Showa 4 [1929] is the [result] of this attempt.<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting on his time spent in Shanghai, the proletarian writer Itō Ken (1895-1945) shares in a short biographical essay called “Ima made no michi” (The Road until Now, 1930) his attempt to merge two seemingly opposing genres, detective literature and proletarian literature. He is seriously considering how to popularize proletarian literature in order to reach a broad readership informing them on class struggles. The choice for detective literature in the late 1920s seems obvious considering that this was among the most popular genres.<sup>2</sup> However, how can a proletarian writer with a Marxist worldview change an a-political genre such as the detective story into a weapon of proletarian literature? Could a Marxist detective reveal the crimes of capital?

In this paper, I aim to show how Itō Ken tried to rework the detective genre into a form of proletarian literature. First, I will historicize Itō’s work by analyzing his contemporary Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke’s (1892-1931) theoretical essays on detective literature. Hirabayashi was active as a journalist, shared an interest in Marxism and wrote and translated detective stories. However, it is not my attempt to redefine the detective novel as a genre or engage with the large body of postwar scholarship on detective fiction. Rather, I will attempt to foreground Itō’s understanding of

detective stories and the relation between detective fiction, journalism and proletarian culture in 1920s and early 1930s Japan. Concerning journalism, I will examine Itō's journalistic and reportage pieces vital for understanding his work as a writer in general and in particular his fictional stories on Shanghai published as *Shanghai Yawa* (*Shanghai Night Stories*) in 1929, of which I will analyse one story in detail. For Itō, detectives and journalism seem to supplement each other in cases where the detective takes its content from media events and news, and journalism adapts the suspense and sensation of the detective novel.<sup>3</sup>

Examining Itō's short story collection *Shanghai Night Stories* in conjunction with his non-fiction writings on Shanghai, I argue that Itō attempted to elevate the detective novel to a political tool by placing it within a proletarian framework, at the same time keeping the suspense and entertainment which allowed him to compete with popular literature of his time. The focus on class antagonism pushes his characters to move away from the familiar sites of Shanghai to off-grid locations to reveal the unevenness of wealth distribution, the exploitation of proletarians and the crimes committed by capitalists.

Although Takeuchi Mizuho considers Itō's attempt to write proletarian detective fiction a failure,<sup>4</sup> I conclude that through a mix of detective, journalism and reportage Itō successfully opened up the possibility of a "detective and proletarian like popular novel," that might spur readers to support the proletarian cause. In other words, we can consider Itō's attempt as one of the first detective novels exploring the nature of society producing "criminals" or victims of capitalism which postwar "social detective writers" (*shakuhaiha*) such as Matsumoto Seichō (1909-1992) fully incorporated in their stories.<sup>5</sup>

## Dissecting the Detective Novel and Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke

Writing during a period of rapid capitalist development after the great Kantō earthquake in 1923, Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke located the rise of the detective novel in modernity and its scientific rationality.<sup>6</sup> He writes:

For the development of the detective novel, standardized social conditions are necessary. As long as a standardized social environment is not present, there will be no detective novel. Those social or environmental conditions are broadly speaking the development of a scientific civilization, the intellect, and an analytical mind. And strictly speaking, the crime and the way of searching become scientific, the arrest and the trial are held on the basis of reliable proof, and written laws preserve the order of the state.<sup>7</sup>

For Hirabayashi a central aspect of the detective novel is scientific rationality. He argues that the detective story could not attain popularity before the 1920s in Japan because readers were not yet trained to deal with the science of the detective since Japanese ideology was too long nurtured in an unscientific environment. Further, it is interesting to note that Hirabayashi connects the legal system with the order of the state suggesting that the state is complicit in deciding who and what to criminalize as a way to legitimize its own ruling power.

Besides such institutions as the court, Hirabayashi connects the rise of the detective novel to the broader context of science and capitalist development penetrating everyday life. If a detective story depicts a town like

Chiba as its setting and discusses a millionaire widow as one of its inhabitants, this will fail because one can easily verify that no such widow was living in Chiba.<sup>8</sup> However, from the 1920s onward, with the rebuilding of Tokyo after the earthquake and the increase of an educated middle class living crammed together but alienated and disconnected from each other, the perfect potential crime scenes emerged.

Hirabayashi continues that with the progress of civilization improving scientific and methodological reasoning, together with capitalist development centralizing wealth and creating various daily life phenomena of wealth and luxury, the ideal environment emerges for detective stories to attract readers.<sup>9</sup> Itō Ken likewise recognized a “scientification” of literature and arts as well as a growing interest among authors in science. Authors such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Ibsen, and Wilde explored “abnormal psychology” (*hentai shinri*), in particular by dissecting the minds of the lower classes. According to Itō, the detective novel is one kind of science novel (*kagaku shōsetsu*) depicting crime psychology of the lower classes.<sup>10</sup>

In 1929, Hirabayashi wrote that journals and newspapers have embraced the detective genre.<sup>11</sup> Now that the detective novel has been successfully included in mainstream literature, he lists the important ingredients totalling eleven points necessary for a good detective story. Among these eleven are the skills of “psychological analysis” (1), “observation” and (2) “wild imagination” (6). In addition, he values detective stories engaging with a wide array of “scientific subjects” (3) together with “politics and economics” (4), and a sufficient sense of reality (10). And most importantly for our discussion on Itō Ken, a murder case does not have to be the central theme of the story (11).<sup>12</sup> Following these points, Hirabayashi was among the first to recognize Edogawa Ranpō (1894-1965) as a successful detective writer

with potential. However, Hirabayashi also noticed certain “unhealthy” (*fukenzen*) aspects in Edogawa’s work diverging from European and Anglo-American detectives such as a certain darkness and abnormality (*hentai*). He characterized Edogawa’s style as popular (*tsūzokuteki*) caused by current journalistic preoccupation with decadent, sickening and grotesque themes. This is relevant for us as Itō Ken himself was a journalist for the journal *Hentai shinri* (Abnormal Psychology) and had a particular interest in *hentai* and *ero-guro-nansensu* which I will discuss in more detail below to show that proletarian authors such as Itō who were trying to write detective stories have more in common with the now best-known detective writer Edogawa Ranpō than is commonly recognized.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, from a Marxist perspective Hirabayashi located a potential danger between journalism, technology, detective stories, and the alienated masses on the one hand and capitalism on the other. He explains that through new technological possibilities the market determines the direction of journalism - often the basis for detective stories such as murders based on true stories (*jitsuwa*) - which shapes the dominant ideology of the masses. These detective stories play with the fears of the alienated middle-class for the unknown. Anyone in society can potentially be a criminal. Only with a Marxist lens, Hirabayashi argued, will the writer of detective stories be capable of pushing the genre in directions that reveal the real problems of society.<sup>14</sup> However, Hirabayashi warned proletarian writers to be aware that the dominant journalism determines what is of value in market terms. Just as journalism shapes bourgeois literature, proletarian literature views literature as a commodity (*shōhin*). In this view, potential value that can be extracted from the commodity moves journalism. According to Hirabayashi proletarian literature is no exception and operates within the logic of the market. Not only does journalism reflect the

demands of readers, in fact it produces their demands.<sup>15</sup> Itō Ken himself voiced this conflict between proletarian critiques of the market and market value when he wrote in “The Road until Now”, “I’ll write everything for money” honestly acknowledging that proletarian writers too have to earn an income to survive.<sup>16</sup> This tension is often present in Itō’s writings blurring sensation, orientalism, erotogrotesque and Marxist class criticism in order to balance the demands of the market with the aims of proletarian literature.

### Itō Ken reporting Shanghai

From the Meiji period (1868-1912) onward, Shanghai gradually became a reoccurring trope in Japanese literature. Nagai Kafū (1879-1959) in 1898 became one of the first to publish a short travelogue about his visit to Shanghai. After him, canonical writers such as Tanizaki Junichirō (1886-1965), Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927), and Yokomitsu Riichi (1898-1947) as well as lesser known authors such as Muromatsu Shōfū (1889-1961), Maedakō Hiroichirō (1888-1957), and Eisuke Yoshiyuki (1906-1940) visited and wrote about Shanghai.<sup>17</sup> Under the Japanese Empire Shanghai was one of the important sites for Japanese capital to invest in industries such as textile factories. By the late 1920s, Japanese citizens formed the largest group of foreign inhabitants to the extent that Shanghai was often treated as a Japanese province.<sup>18</sup> Japanese did not need a passport or visa to enter Shanghai, which for people living in Nagasaki, was much closer than Tokyo. Newspapers in Nagasaki reported daily on events in Shanghai and letters sent from Japan to Shanghai bearing the address Nagasaki prefecture Shanghai city (*Nagasaki-ken, Shanghai-shi*), would arrive without a problem.<sup>19</sup>

For some authors such as Akutagawa,

searching for an ancient China in the classics he had studied, Shanghai was an unpleasant city spoiled by rapid modernization. But for others Shanghai was a place to escape to and find freedom away from the stress and pressure of life in Japan proper. In addition, the political instability in China and the cosmopolitan allure of Shanghai attracted many Japanese writers. This instability made Shanghai appear as a lawless free-zone inviting crime, drug smuggling, and prostitution creating the image of “*mato*” (evil city) among Japanese writers and media. For example, Muramatsu Shōfū, a colleague of Itō Ken, wrote a novel about Shanghai with the title *Mato* (Evil City, 1924). Muramatsu’s *Evil City* was important in shaping Shanghai’s image in Japanese literature. He often expressed this concept of “evil city” through his depiction of Shanghai as a city of total freedom and sexual pleasure.

In late July 1927, two months after Chiang Kai-shek’s *coup d’état* which ended the Second United Front between the GMD and CCP, Itō boarded the ship Nagasaki-maru to Shanghai.<sup>20</sup> In the following four months, Itō met many different people. He visited the Uchiyama bookstore,<sup>21</sup> was introduced by Muramatsu to famous Chinese writers such as Tian Han (1898-1968) and met other Japanese visitors or residents. Itō wrote three newspaper articles about the people he met in Shanghai. He writes in the third article that, “I looked like a native-born Chinese and went to places where normal Japanese would not go. There I became friends with people from all over the world and from various classes. I plan to meet these people again in my novel(s).”<sup>22</sup> Having seen the famous spots of Shanghai, Itō also visited places not mentioned in guidebooks and unknown to his readers to investigate the lives of proletarians. He learned about Shanghai from people he met as he gathered information for his fictional work.

Itō felt alive in Shanghai and the city energized him. He described Shanghai as a “...city which

has a big belly, but its heart has the shape of a hundred-headed snake.”<sup>23</sup> For Itō, Shanghai was the only international city in the East because of its large foreign and diverse population.<sup>24</sup> However, at the same time Itō acknowledges the “evil city” and the dark side of Shanghai. He writes in one of his articles that, “[w]hen I walk through the city of Shanghai, especially when you go near the riverbank of Shiliupu (here you have the shabby smugglers and nests of gangsters, and the whorehouses with inflamed noses for twenty sen each), and only here can you see syphilis patients and perverts. Even the dogs have syphilis. Really.”<sup>25</sup> Although one cannot deny that Itō somewhat sensationally described the dark side of Shanghai and portrayed it as an “evil city” following Muramatsu, he is convinced that he had to investigate and to report all the evils of the city to show how the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat and to change the distorted view Japanese have of China.<sup>26</sup> After coming back to Japan, Itō continued to write journalistic pieces as well as short stories about the city which he eventually published in 1929 as *Shanghai yawa* (Shanghai Night Stories).

From the point of view of proletarian writers who were eager to critique *Shin-kankakuha* (New-Sensationalist) opponents such as Yokomitsu Riichi - whose novel *Shanghai* (Shanghai, 1931) is now the canonical work on Shanghai - for failing to address core problematics of Shanghai, namely capitalist exploitation and how to resist it. Itō Ken criticized Yokomitsu’s work writing that both Yokomitsu Riichi and Eisuke Yoshiyuki wrote about Shanghai, but without talking about the China problem.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Itō was satisfied with almost no work on Shanghai. He wrote of his colleague Muramatsu that he is a bourgeois China connoisseur neglecting the proletarian class in his novel *Evil City*. In a 1932 article “Shinatsū Dangi Ge” (Discussion of Chinese Connoisseurs Part 2) published in *Yomiuri Shinbun*, Itō wrote:

“You [Muramatsu] like China so much. However, that is because to you China always appears as a mysterious country, as a large country with easy-going people. You are part of the curiosity-seeking group, and you do not look at the lives other than those of the bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie. Even if you are in Shanghai you do not talk about the trade union, and even when you go to Southern China you do not look at the Hailufeng (Kairikuhō) Soviet organized by the peasant movement.<sup>28</sup> You are interested in the Chinese military government, but you do not problematize the class struggle. That is because Muramatsu-kun is a China connoisseur who has a very bourgeois-like Chinese view.”<sup>29</sup>

Not only was Muramatsu the target of Ito’s critique, he attacks other writers such as Tanizaki, Akutagawa and Satō Haruo (1892-1964) for being more interested in ancient Chinese culture and lacking an interest in contemporary China and its struggles.<sup>30</sup> For proletarian writers, Shanghai contained a revolutionary potential embedded in the struggle between the CCP and the GMD which inspired them to use the city for their stories. However, Itō also critiqued proletarian colleagues such as Maedakō and Satomura Kinzō (1902-1945) whom he accused of being poorly informed about the political situation in China.<sup>31</sup>



氏憲東井るけ於に宿旅の海上

**Itō Ken wearing Chinese clothes during his stay in Shanghai. Itō Ken, "Shanghai nisshi yori," *Bungei Jihō* 45 (1927): 3.**

Then what constituted a perfect depiction of late 1920s Shanghai for Itō? In order to better understand the context of Ito's *Shanghai Night Stories*, it is important to examine his journalistic work on Shanghai as a proletarian reporter. Itō's articles on Shanghai cover a wide range of topics dealing with food, clothing and fashion, the publishing world, politics, crime, to name a few. Besides these articles, Itō also tells his readers what books and studies on Shanghai and China are worth reading.<sup>32</sup> This shows that he thoroughly examined Shanghai from various angles as well as locating it in the larger context of late 1920s China.

Itō also reported on crime and homicides in Shanghai. For instance, in his article "Kokusai toshi Shanhai no satsujin jiken" (A homicide in the international city Shanghai) published in

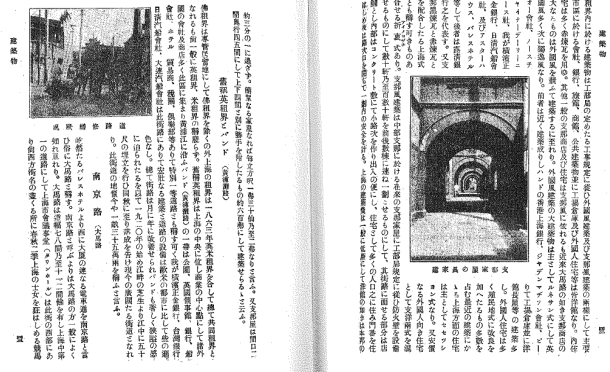
the popular journal *Fujin Kōron* (Women's Review), Itō wrote about a murder committed by a man of Japanese-Portuguese origins who killed a proletarian Chinese woman and sent her corpse to Japan. Like a detective, Itō reconstructed the murder within a referential grid mentioning all the places and street names in Shanghai relevant to the crime. This created a sense of recognition among readers many of whom had visited Shanghai or knew these places from articles and photographs published frequently in the media.<sup>33</sup> Adding to this system of reference pictures of the suspect and victim, Itō analysed the murder in utmost detail giving all the exact times of each event until the murder and uses a scientific approach to probe the background and subconscious of the criminal. Finally, Itō summarized the entire event as if a "detective novel" (*tantei shōsetsufū*) blurring the distinction between journalism and fiction.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, in another article, "Mato no himitsu chizu" (Secret Map of Evil Cities), Itō discussed three cities, Shanghai as the city of criminals, Nanjing as the city of villains, and Harbin as the city of spies. In his description of Shanghai following the approach of contemporary guide books (see figure 3 & 4), Itō combined anecdotes of crimes at famous locations such as the Golden Bridge, the horse race, and Nanjing Road, with actual photographs of these locations to insert meaning into these locations as sites of crime (see figure 2). In doing so, readers started to associate these prominent locations in Shanghai with crime creating a referential system useful for Itō's detective stories on Shanghai.<sup>35</sup>

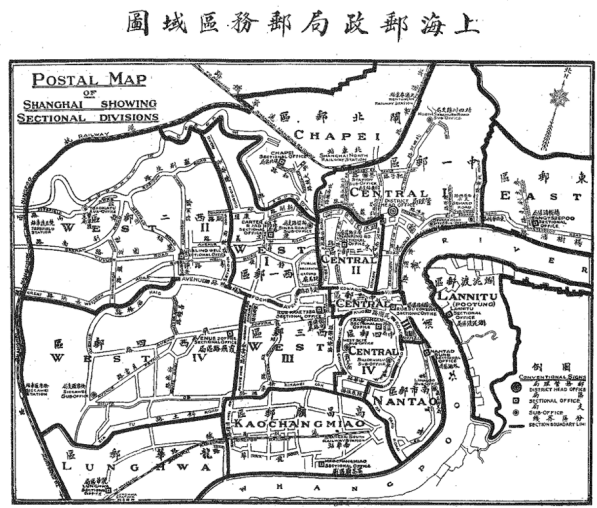
These two articles, among many others, contributed to a referential system of Shanghai in Itō's own work. That is, as in figure 2, Itō's detective stories and journalism contain mutual references of events and locations in Shanghai mixing fiction and reality. As a result, readers' perception of Shanghai was formed by such references and they associated localities in

Shanghai with characteristics presented by authors such as Itō. Moreover, Itō's writings were connected to the larger referential system of Shanghai in the Japanese media and literature of the late 1920s and early '30s such as the guidebook shown in figure 3. Not surprisingly, Fujita Tomohiro states in the commentary of a published collected volume of Japanese detective stories set in Shanghai, that "rather than the detective stories with Shanghai as setting, it is the true stories and reports covering Shanghai, that contributed to the image of [Shanghai] as a 'city like a detective novel.'"<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Takeuchi states that Itō's *Shanghai Night Stories* was shelved as a reportage work on the history and geography shelf and that this mistake was likely due to Muramatsu's reportage work on Shanghai.<sup>37</sup>

in Shanghai with stories of crime.



Below, guidebook *Shanghai Annai* (Shanghai Guide, 1927) describing popular localities in Shanghai supplemented with images. These images invoke among readers associations of crime based on narratives from sensational crime journalism and detective stories.



Above Itō's article "Mato no himitsu chizu" linking images of popular localities

A map of Shanghai in *Shanghai Annai* (Shanghai Guide, 1927). Combining geographical maps with descriptions and images of popular localities of Shanghai formed a system of referentiality for readers linked to descriptions of the same localities in sensational crime journalism

and detective stories.

### The Proletarian Detective in Shanghai and *Shanghai Night Stories*

As mentioned in the introduction, Itō Ken wrote in his biographical piece that *Shanghai Night Stories* was intended to be a “detective like popular proletarian novel.” After the publication, Itō further elaborated in a newspaper article titled “Tantei shōsetsu no shinhōkō - puro tantei shōsetsu shutsugen no kiun -” (The New Direction of the Detective Novel - An Opportunity for the Appearance of a Proletarian Detective Novel) in the *Shin-Aichi* newspaper that current bourgeois detective novels lack a class critique and do not question why criminals become criminals.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the criminals in these novels are proletarian figures and their arrest only serves to secure bourgeois profits. According to Itō a proletarian detective novel instead needs to depict the lives of proletarians before they break laws as well as their engagement in strikes. Finally, he states that the real criminals are the capitalists and the detective needs to reveal their crimes using proletarian science.<sup>39</sup>

From this article, we can better understand Itō’s intentions and the framework of the narrative in *Shanghai Night Stories*. Itō seems uninterested in writing stories following the logic of detective fiction proper which only focuses on how to catch the criminal, hence distracting the reader from considering why criminals exist in society in the first place. Instead, Itō wants to show how and why capitalist society creates criminals. These criminals are often forced to commit crimes to deal with their poverty and to make a living. In addition, Itō often shows in his stories how the political system in power deliberately criminalizes its opponents through the institutionalized legal system which allows the ruling class to arrest these “criminals.” Itō explains that these “criminals” are not the real

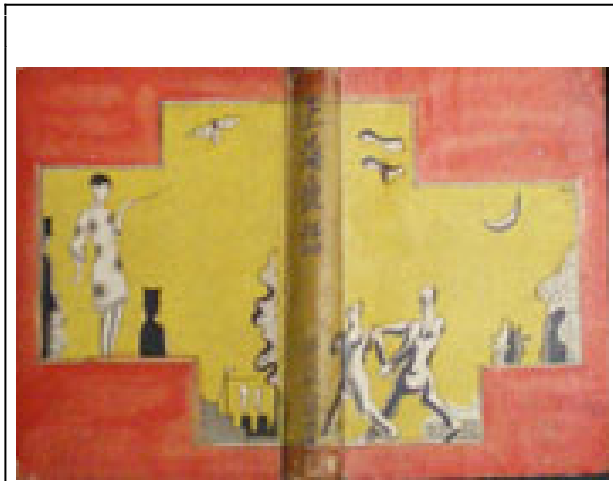
“criminals”; rather the political system itself is the criminal.<sup>40</sup>

*Shanghai Night Stories* was not Itō’s first attempt to write proletarian detective fiction. Itō wrote several short stories either presented as detective stories (*tantei shōsetsu*) or containing crimes, mysteries, and spies which could be read within detective fiction of the 1920s such as his “Tantei shōsetsu - Bakuatsu suru kaban” (Detective fiction - The exploding suitcase, 1926). Many of these stories take place in Shanghai or deal with China. The fact that many of Itō’s stories are set abroad, more specifically in areas either part of or within the sphere of influence of the Japanese empire, was quite common for detective stories written in the 1920s and ‘30s. Itō aimed to examine exploitation by the Japanese empire and urged his fellow Japanese proletarian writers to become more “international” in their writings and their own lives to overcome their “island nature.”<sup>41</sup> In a special issue of the journal *Shuka* titled “Tantei shōsetsu no Ajia taiken” (The Asian experience of detective fiction, 1999), the editors write that Japanese detective fiction contains many international stories because the most popular detective journal in prewar Japan, *Shinseinen* (New Youth), had a particular interest in Japanese detective stories set abroad, many detective writers had experience abroad, and the “wild imagination” of “non-realist” writers was facing “outward” rather than toward the “domestic.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, for Itō it was important to consider such trends when writing his *Shanghai Night Stories* in order to compete with non-proletarian detective stories.

Itō’s *Shanghai Night Stories* (see figure 5) consist of thirteen stories about Shanghai and takes place after the 1926 *coup d’état* by the military forces of Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>43</sup> Itō had published three stories separately before he wrote the rest of the stories specifically for *Shanghai Night Stories*. Although every story can be read as a separate short story, several



characters appear repeatedly such as the two main Japanese protagonists Shimura and Yitō (old spelling and in *katakana*) as well as the Japanese born Italian Old Man (*Itaria no oyaji*). This reappearance of characters creates a sense of interconnectedness among the stories and allows one to read the stories as a larger narrative.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, using the *katakana* spelling of Itō's own name further blurs the line between his journalism and fiction.



**Cover *Shanghai Night Stories* by Nakajima Matsuji (date unknown)**

When comparing Itō's *Shanghai Night Stories* with Hirabayashi's requirements for writing a good detective story, the commentaries by and dialogues between characters contain scientific, political, and economical dimensions. Further, the mysterious characters and grim situations depicted in the stories resemble the "psychological analysis" and "wild imagination." Therefore, Itō's stories were likely to have been considered detective stories in the 1920 and '30s. Takeuchi states that detective tricks are absent in Itō's detective stories as Marxist doctrine has no puzzles and is clear about who the villain is.<sup>45</sup> However, halfway through the book we see that Itō tries to engage with tricks in the stories "Sottō shita bishōjo", (The beautiful girl who fainted), "Ganzō ginka to Shina musume" (Counterfeit

silver and a Chinese girl), and "Hokuro wo suru hanashi" (A Story about Stealing Moles). Each story involves a trick; either a missing item being found, people tricked with counterfeit money, or tricks involving facial changes. An interesting fact is that "Sottō shita bishōjo" and "Hokuro wo suru hanashi" were also published separately in the popular magazine *Fujin Kōron*, the same journal in which Itō published some of his articles. Nevertheless, these stories lack a clear depiction of class antagonism and therefore are considered the least proletarian in *Shanghai Night Stories*.

If we consider Itō's protagonist detectives (often also the narrator), then Shimura and Yitō are not more than amateur detectives as opposed to private detectives such as Sherlock Homes. This is not uncommon as Edogawa's detective Akechi Kogorō too started as an amateur.<sup>46</sup> Both Yitō and Shimaru in *Shanghai Night Stories* are new temporary residents in Shanghai which makes it difficult for them to engage in detective work without any personal connections. Rather than being professional detectives, they introduce themselves as novelists collecting data, interviewing people, and exploring the famous and unknown localities of Shanghai in detail to inform readers of current class struggles. Takeuchi states that the detective is absent in Itō's stories as there are no cases to solve, but instead it is the proletarian novelist himself who probes the social meaning of the cases.<sup>47</sup> Adding to this, we could say that the proletarian detective is not physically embodied in a human being, but rather woven into the narrative itself. In other words, the narration creates a detective-like suspense taking the reader step by step through the process of exposing and solving the crimes of capitalism.

Yitō and Shimura write pieces of proletarian reportage literature forming an interconnected detective narrative. Each story is a piece of a puzzle that reveals a tiny part of the huge crimes committed by capitalism and all the

stories together reveal the ongoing process of disclosing and capturing the criminals responsible.

Itō added a layer of reportage to his stories by engaging with references of Shanghai seen in his own articles as well as in other media resulting in a strong appeal to the “popular” (*tsūzoku*).<sup>48</sup> Itō’s *Shanghai Night Stories* often open with a description of the area using markers such as street names and landmarks to create the setting for the story. In addition, the usage of real names of establishments and people connect the story with other media such as guidebooks and newspapers. Referentiality also functions through the association of characters with establishments or activities taking place within the urban space of Shanghai. Simultaneously, Itō challenges the same referentiality as characters such as Shimura and Yitō aim to investigate the unknown parts of proletarian life. These parts lack referentiality because they are ignored in literature and other media. This forces the narrator to explain the area to the reader in order to connect it to the existing grid of references. How then do the stories engage with referentiality between the known and unknown areas?

After having established this clear and recognizable map of reference for his readers linked to the meta-referential of his other works and the interconnectedness with other media on Shanghai, Itō’s protagonists are eager to break with this referentiality and deviate from the well-known locations on the map producing suspense. Walking gives the characters a certain agency that vehicles cannot give. This agency through walking allows characters to stop and turn whenever they like or access areas which vehicles cannot enter such as narrow alleys. Characters such as Shimura and Yitō use their agency to move freely through Shanghai and deviate from the existing grid. They walk through places where neither public transport nor (motorized)

vehicles could bring them and visit areas which are not on maps or in guidebooks. A lot of these areas are alien to tourists, foreigners, or temporary visitors and even locals from other areas avoid these areas. The proletarian class lives in these areas without facilities or entertainment and is considered dangerous or unhygienic. Shimura and Yitō, however, deliberately visit these parts of Shanghai in order to record them in their fiction as well as to report about the problems that the proletariat encounters. Both known and unknown parts of Shanghai appear in *Shanghai Night Stories* and Itō tries to connect the two. In order to overcome the gap between the two, unknown parts are either described in detail making them known and creating the possibility of being added to the grid or known parts in the vicinity of the unknown are described as linking the two together.

In story number eight of *Shanghai Night Stories*, called “Dōraku kurabu no chikashitsu” (The basement of the debauchery club), Shimura the novelist meets with a recently acquainted doctor called B. Doctor B has an English-Chinese background and he has studied medicine in Japan and Germany. He often speaks a mix of four languages depicting him as an international character. The pronunciation script next to *kanji* often amplifies this internationality by using Chinese and English pronunciations written in *katakana* instead of the Japanese pronunciation. Doctor B and Shimura met in the proletarian quarters of Nanshi at a workers’ bar where mainly coolies and thugs congregate. After several months of friendly encounters between the two, Doctor B invites him to a top-notch gentleman’s club called *Kōshi* – a club not mentioned in any guidebook – which he considers to be a useful experience for Shimura’s literary writings. The two go by car to the club and the narrative quickly unfolds a map of their directions to guide the reader through Shanghai following street names. They pass the famous Nanjing Road and the Suzhou River followed by

Northern Sichuan Road before stopping at Laobazi Road (Old Range Road). The two must walk the final part to reach the club.

“We go right. We enter this alley. Mister Shimura, don’t get hit by a tram.”

It was more likely that he would be hit by a tram with his habit of crossing the road like that. On the left side of the alley there was a new three-story tenement house together with a barber shop and a candy store making it like a business street. But all houses had their shutters down and [people] were asleep. And those houses with light coming from the second and third floors were probably absorbed in *Mahjong*.

“It is strange that this place has such shops, right?” said Shimura while looking around. At that time, Doctor B turned into an alley next to a large white building looking like a café on the right side in front of the barber.

That alley had a particular Chinese pavement of Ningbo stones and the surroundings resembling a tunnel had two or three lamps, which lit up like dark strange eyeballs casting a faint light a few inches away. The paving stones were as slippery as oil and filled with a stinging odor of urine.

When Shimura turned towards a rear entrance near the end of a brick wall, he looked up feeling intimidated. The building with a strange overly big head was very dominant like an expressionist landscape made of strong straight and curved lines sent towards the sky. And the stars shone like shoulder decorations informing the infinity of the sky.<sup>49</sup>

As Shimura leaves the familiar behind and enters the unknown, he describes very precisely the directions by telling the reader when the two men turn right or left and what buildings or markers are present. In this way, the reader can supplement the existing map from the media and guidebooks with the provided markers connecting the two. The frequent use of adjectives such as “strange” and “dark” describing the ambiance increases the suspense. The unhygienic and intimidating surroundings predict that Shimura is heading towards a scary and grotesque place.

At first sight, the club *Kōshi* seems like a standard place to Shimura where rich gentlemen enjoy the company of young local and foreign girls. When the night progresses, however, the club gradually unfolds as a mysterious and ambiguous place as Shimura observes gentlemen occasionally leave the dance room with a girl and come back alone. Watching these gentlemen, Doctor B tells Shimura that “the power of money makes people evil and crazy.” Soon after, the two see a customer harassing one of the girls and rescue her by calling her over to their table. The Portuguese girl, called Kate, studied music in France and shares her interest in literature after she learns that Shimura is a novelist. Here Itō revises the stereotypical image of Shanghai dancers as objects of lust and desire by depicting Kate instead as an intellectual with an interest in politics and awareness of exploitation by the rich. Shimura asks for the washroom and Kate gives him directions, but he discovers this is not the way to the washroom. Shimura uses his agency to leave the existing grid entering a secret place. As for the reader as well as Shimura the location that follows is not presented on maps in guidebooks nor is it discussed in media continuing the suspense of the unknown.

As he was told, Shimura walked to the end of the long and lonely

hallway toward the mirror where he descended the stairs. He descended the beautiful stair of the third and second floor decorated with engraved dragons. Then he approached an awfully dark stone staircase and realized that it was strange that such a fancy building had no washroom on the third floor. Or he thought he might have made a mistake, but he clearly remembered that she had ordered him to go all the way to the right. So, he continued slowly descending the stone steps, which gave him the chills. When he thought about it later, he realized that the lady had deliberately showed him this place. But still, why did she want to show him such a secret place? The more he thought about it the more doubts boiled up. Just a prank out of curiosity? Or did it have some deeper meaning? That was difficult to tell just based on her facial expressions. But it was clear that she had intended to show him something. If that's the case, he understood that she wanted to reveal the dark side of their lives by showing this terrifying place and was asking for help of some kind. That is how he eventually understood it.

Shimura felt doubt and malaise, but also a strange curiosity. When he descended the grey stairs all the way to the end, he saw a small sign saying "basement." He was hesitant for a moment, but then he continued into the stained and dim hallway.<sup>50</sup>

The "detective-like" description slowly reaches

its zenith and reveals the crimes of the gentlemen. Shimura like a detective following hints discovers (*hakken*) their secret and finds many skinny and sickly girls incarcerated in pigsty-like cages. This is where the gentlemen commit their crimes by buying girls as their toys and locking them up. A guard notices Shimura and scares him away. Shimura can do nothing but report about these crimes in his stories. The two leave the club late at night while the gentlemen continue to party producing a stark contrast with the coolies and rickshaw pullers who have already started to work.

The story ends with Shimura back in Japan corresponding with Doctor B. In one of his letters, Shimura has asked Doctor B if the club still exists. Doctor B replies telling him that due to the war between the communists and nationalist the club has closed but these gentlemen will continue to commit crimes as long as nobody stops them. Itō asks his readers for sympathy with the girls and to stop the exploitation by the rich. Although an actual detective is absent in this story, we see how the narrative acts as a detective revealing the crimes of the capitalists toward his characters and readers.

### Conclusion

Returning to Itō's attempt at writing a "detective and proletarian like popular novel" we can see how he managed to develop proletarian literature. He weaved elements of reportage, journalism and detective fiction together with a class-based critique of exploitation resulting in a powerful collection of stories. By examining Itō's writings of the late 1920s and early '30s, it becomes clear that he actively engaged with the contemporary discourse on Shanghai to have proletarian literature intervene in mass culture and media. While Itō's writings were not free from reproducing certain market demands such as

sensational and orientalist depictions, his contribution consisted of providing what bourgeois media and culture left out of narratives on Shanghai. Itō's characters take the reader from the familiar sites to the unknown by diverting from the common paths in Shanghai exposing the exploitation hidden behind the façade of Shanghai glamour. By doing so, Itō skilfully enriched the possibilities of proletarian literature showing how formats considered unfit for proletarian critique turned out to be useful.

Previous studies of Japanese literary and journalistic writings on Shanghai have often ignored the contributions of proletarian literature. However, I think that examining the large body of proletarian writings, of which my discussion of Itō's articles and fiction is one example, can significantly enrich our understanding of Japanese literature on Shanghai and China in particular and Japanese literature in general.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Itō Ken, "Ima made no michi", in *Shinkō bungaku zenshū 6*, (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1930), 194-195. Translations are mine unless stated otherwise. For a complete biographical overview of Itō Ken see, Itō Ken kenkyūkai, *Itō Ken: Hito to sakuhin* (Shizuoka: Itō Ken kenkyūkai, 2001) and Ishihara, Masayoshi, "Haishō, Shanghai, feminizumu - Itō Ken", in *Kindai Shizuoka no senkusha: jidai o hiraki yume ni ikita jūkyūnin no gunzō* (Shizuoka: Shizuoka Shinbunsha, 1999), 321-44.

<sup>2</sup> For studies on detective fiction in Japan see Itō, Hideo, *Taishō wo tantei shōsetsu* (Tokyo:

Sanichi Shobō, 1991); Itō, Hideo, *Shōwa no tantei shōsetsu: shōwa gannen--shōwa 20-nen* (Tokyo: Sanichi Shobō, 1993); Itō, Hideo. *Kindai no tantei shōsetsu* (Tokyo: Sanichi Shobō, 1994); Kawana, Sari, *Murder Most Modern: Detective Fiction and Japanese Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Saito, Satoru. *Detective Fiction and the Rise of the Japanese Novel, 1880-1930* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012). Itō Ken was not the only proletarian writer engaging with detective fiction. Other proletarian writers are Hirabayashi Taiko, Hayama Yoshiki, Hayashi Fusao, Murayama Tomoyoshi, among others. See Nakajima Kawataro, "Nihon tantei shōsetsu-shi nōto 2 - puroretaria bungaku no hitobito," *Gen'eijō: tantei shōsetsu senmonshi* 1 (no. 10, 1975): 130-136.

<sup>3</sup> Kono Kensuke finds this combination in many detective works published in prewar Japan. See Kono, Kensuke, *Tantei shōsetsu to Nihon kindai* (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 2004), 259.

<sup>4</sup> Takeuchi, Mizuho, Taishūka wo meguru "Kōtsū", Itō Ken Shanhai yawa ni okeru puroretaria tantei shōsetsu no kokoromi, *Nihon bungaku* 58, (no. 11, 2009): 53-54. See also chapter 10 "Puroretaria bungaku no "rinkai" he: Itō Ken Shanhai yawa ni okeru puroretaria tantei shōsetsu no kokoromi" in her book "*Hentai" to iu bunka : kindai Nihon no "chiisana kakumei"* (Tokyo: Hitsuji Shobō, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Ōmori, Shigeki, "Sasupensu no kōzō to "Kurain no tsubo" "Jenosaido" no hikaku kōsatsu," in *Nihon tantei shōsetsu o yomu: henkō to chōhatsu no misuteri-shi*, edited by Oshino, Takeshi; Morooka, Takuma, (Sapporo: Hokkaidō Daigaku Shuppankai, 2013), 233-234.

<sup>6</sup> During this time in Weimar Germany Marxists thinkers such as Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Bloch shared similar concerns. See for example Siegfried Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman - Ein Philosophischer Traktat*; Ernst Bloch, "A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel," and Walter Benjamin, "*Kriminalromane, auf Reisen*" (Crime Novels, on Travel). Some of these texts were published after the war.

<sup>7</sup> Hirabayashi, Hatsunosuke, *Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke bungei hyōron zenshū vol. 3* (Tokyo: Bunsendō Shoten, 1975), 221.

<sup>8</sup> Hirabayashi, *vol. 3*, 402.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, *vol. 3*, 222.

<sup>10</sup> Itō Ken, "Kagakusha no tachiba kara mita bungei (1), (2), and (3)" *Bunshō Kurabu*, (Febr., March and April 1924).

<sup>11</sup> Hirabayashi, *vol. 2*, 210.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, *vol. 3*, 401-404. The numbers are from Hirabayashi's list.

<sup>13</sup> Itō Ken wrote two books on *hentai*, *Hentai ninjōshi* (A History of Abnormal Feelings, 1926) and *Hentai sakkashi* (A History of Abnormal Writers, 1926). For more on *ero-guro-nansensu* see Silverberg, Miriam, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Reportage literature was a new genre evolving among proletarian literature used to expose the crimes of capitalism and imperialism. See for example Aono Suekichi' study *Sarariiman no kyōfu jidai* (The Panic Era of the Salaryman, 1930) and Siegfried Krakauer's *Die Angestellten* (The Salaried Masses, 1930). For a theoretical essay on reportage literature see "Hōkoku bungaku-ron" (Treatise on Reportage Literature, 1930).

<sup>15</sup> Hirabayashi, *vol. 2*, 45-46. See also Ikeda, Hiroshi, "Tenkō to tantei shōsetsu: Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke botsugo gojūnen ni yosete, *Shisō* (no. 11, 1981): 172-73.

- <sup>16</sup> Itō Ken, “Ima made no michi,” 195.
- <sup>17</sup> See for example, Okabayashi, Takatoshi, *Shanghai Kōro No Jidai: Taishō Shōwa Shoki No Nagasaki to Shanghai*, (Nagasaki: Nagasaki Bunkensha, 2006), and Fogel, Joshua A, *The Literature of Travel in the Japanese Rediscovery of China, 1862-1945*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996), A. Maiden Voyage: *The Senzaimaru and the Creation of Modern Sino-Japanese Relations*, (California: University of California Press), 2014.
- <sup>18</sup> Zhao Mengyun, *Shanghai, bungaku zanzō: Nihonjin sakka no hikari to kage*, (Tokyo: Tabata Shoten, 2000), 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Wada, Hirofumi, (et al.), *Gengo toshi Shanghai 1840-1945* (Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten, 1999), 10-11.
- <sup>21</sup> The Uchiyama bookstore, opened and run by Uchiyama Kanzō (1885-1959), possessed the largest Japanese book collection in Shanghai. The bookstore was also an important location for Sino-Japanese literary contacts including Lu Xun (1881-1936). See Keaveney, Christopher T., *Beyond Brushtalk: Sino-Japanese Literary Exchange in the Interwar Period* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 23-44.
- <sup>22</sup> Itō Ken, “Shanghai no hitobito ge,” *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 1927.11.29, 4.
- <sup>23</sup> Itō Ken, “Shanghai kikō,” *Zuihitsu*, (November, 1927): 30.
- <sup>24</sup> Itō Ken, “Shanghai-teki zakki,” *Wakakusa*, (December, 1927): 54.
- <sup>25</sup> Itō Ken, “Shanghai kikō,” 32.
- <sup>26</sup> Itō Ken, “Shanghai-teki zakki,” 54-55.
- <sup>27</sup> Itō Ken, “Shinatsū dangi ge,” *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 1932.2.11, 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Hailufeng was the first Soviet in China established in 1927.
- <sup>29</sup> Itō Ken, “Shinatsū dangi ge,” *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 1932.2.11, 4.
- <sup>30</sup> Itō Ken, “Shinatsū dangi jō,” *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 1932.2.9, 4.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Itō mentions prominent journals such as *Dongfang zazhi* (The Eastern Miscellany) and *Wenhua pipan* (Cultural Criticism) as well as books by proletarian writers such as Guo Moruo (1892-1978), Jiang Guangci (1901-1931) and Chen Duxiu (1879-1942). See Itō Ken, “Saikin no Chūka Shuppankai,” *Shomotsu tenbō* 1, (no. 5, 1931), 16-19.
- <sup>33</sup> I take the idea of referentiality from Alexander Des Forges who writes: “This city [Shanghai] space is not a haphazard or formless jumble, but a system of relations between recognizable names that direct the reader to other types of presentation: photographs, lithographic, illustrations, maps, guidebooks, lists of city streets and establishments, and newspaper articles, among others. In addition, this attention to the structure of urban space is paired with the frequent mention of markers of time - hours of the day, days of the week, and days of the month - to form a grid of reference that is central not only to each of the novels individually, but also to the development of the genre as a whole, foregrounding referentiality as a key question.” Des Forges, Alexander, *Mediasphere Shanghai: the aesthetics of cultural production* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 57.
- <sup>34</sup> Itō, Ken, “Kokusai toshi Shanghai no satsujin jiken,” *Fujin Kōron*, (no. 10, 1933), 223.
- <sup>35</sup> Itō, Ken, “Mato no himitsu chizu: Hannin no machi (Shanghai), burai no machi (Nankyō), supai no machi (Harubin), *Bungaku jidai* 2 (no. 6, 1930), 104-108.
- <sup>36</sup> Fujita, Tomohiro, *Gaichi tantei shōsetsuhū Shanghai-hen* (Tokyo: Serabi Shobō, 2006), 287.

<sup>37</sup> Takeuchi, 45 and footnote 2, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Itō Ken, “Tantei shōsetsu no shinhōkō - puro tantei shōsetsu shutsugen no kiun -” *Shin-Aichi*, 1931.2.2, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. In addition, proletarian writer Maedakō Hiroichirō offers a similar perspective on his story “Rōdōsha Jō O Burain no shi” (The Death of Worker John O’Brian), “Detective fiction does not necessarily show the criminal. Sometimes it shows only the crime.” Quoted in Nakajima Kawataro, “Nihon tantei shōsetsu-shi nōto 2 - puroretaria bungaku no hitobito,” in *Gen’eijō: tantei shōsetsu senmonshi* 1 (no. 10, 1975): 136.

<sup>41</sup> Itō Ken, “Kokusai shōsetsu ide yo,” *Sōsaku gekkan*, (no. 11, 1928), 73-74.

<sup>42</sup> “Shuka” Henshūbu, “‘Shinseinen’ no kokusaisei to Ajia: imin, shokuminchi, chōyō sakka,” *Shuka*, (no. 13, 1999): 8. This has been examined by scholars such as Faye Kleeman, who writes about Japanese crime fiction in Taiwan, and Yu Jaejin who analyses detective stories by Korean and Japanese writers in colonial Korea. See Faye Yuan Kleeman, “Body, Identity, and Social Order: Japanese Crime Fiction in Colonial Taiwan,” *Oriental Archive* 81, (no. 3, 2013); Yu, Jaejin, “Shokuminchi Chōsen ni okeru zaichō Nihonjin no tantei shōsetsu 1: tantei no tōjō tantei shōsetsu,” *Nihon gakuhō* 104, (no.8, 2015); and the two other volumes edited by Fujita Tomohiro dealing with Manchuria and *Nanyō* detective fiction.

<sup>43</sup> Besides the thirteen stories, four stories on Harbin and Nanjing are also included.

<sup>44</sup> Itō continued to write about Shanghai and published a sequence of *Shanghai Night Stories* titled *Shin Shanghai yawa* (New Shanghai Night Stories, 1932).

<sup>45</sup> Takeuchi, 54. Moroka Takuma, for example, mentions that in so-called postwar “fabricated detective” (*kyokō suiri*) stories the absence of any riddle (*nazo*) was its main characteristic. This resembles the absence of tricks in Itō *Shanghai Night Stories*. Moroka, Takuma, “Sōzō suru suiri,” in *Nihon tantei shōsetsu o yomu : henkō to chōhatsu no misuteri-shi*, Oshino, Takeshi; Morooka, Takuma (ed.), (Sapporo: Hokkaidō Daigaku Shuppankai, 2013), 263.

<sup>46</sup> Hirabayashi writes that Japanese are too bureaucratic to have private detectives. Hirabayashi, vol. 3, 222.

<sup>47</sup> Takeuchi, 53.

<sup>48</sup> Maeda Ai writes about a similar type of referentiality in his reading of Yokomitsu Riichi’s Shanghai. Maeda, Ai, “Shanghai 1925: Toshi shōsetsu to shite no Shanhai,” *Bungaku* 49, (no.8, 1981), 1-23.

<sup>49</sup> Itō, Ken, *Shanghai yawa* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1929), 131-132.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 141-142.