

## Shimazaki Tōson and the Assimilation of European Literary Culture

William E. Naff, Spring 1992

This seminar will test the proposition that the Japanese assimilation of European literary culture was essentially complete by around 1920. This is not to suggest that any body of humanistic knowledge is ever complete but rather that, for at least the past three quarters of a century, Japanese scholarship on, and literary applications of, the major European literary traditions have been more immediately and usefully comparable to scholarship and application of literary ideas and techniques across linguistic boundaries within the European cultural world than they are even with earlier, mid-19th-century, Japanese efforts to come to terms with the European artistic and intellectual tradition. The process through which Japanese scholars, writers and critics have achieved a level of assimilation that makes such propositions arguable may in turn generate further comparisons and propositions to be tested in the relationships between other European and non-European traditions and, possibly, in questions of intra-European relationships as well.

In using the life and works of Shimazaki Tōson as the point of departure for examining these questions, the seminar will also be testing the proposition that they have a particular utility for this purpose. That proposition rests on the fact that Tōson's life and career was in many ways archetypal for his time: the impoverished young country boy who comes to the city and, through rigorous discipline and hard work, makes himself a major figure in the artistic and intellectual life of his time. Although he lacked the high connections, imagination and intellectual brilliance of the other two giants of early twentieth century Japanese fiction, Mori-gai and Natsume Sōseki, Tōson was nevertheless a diligent scholar and a thoughtful writer whose six volumes of informal essays written over the course of some forty years (and still unavailable in translation) constitute an invaluable spiritual and intellectual record of Japanese life. There is now enough of his fiction available in translation to make it possible to demonstrate the applicability of what he explored in those essays: questions and personalities that illuminate both popular and high literary culture in a way that no other major writer of his time does. He focussed an early summation of his own point of departure in the "Afterword to The Chikuma River Sketchbooks" (1912) in this way:

As I look back at their labor of introducing European literature, I am struck by how very good most of the pioneers of Meiji literature were at what they did. The special qualities of their own country had something to do with it. They could not only draw on the heritage left them by the writers of the Tokugawa period but also on a long nurturing by Chinese literature.

If this is true, and I believe it is, then many of the depictions of Japanese spiritual malaise arising out of unresolved cultural conflict that still appear regularly in European-language discussions of mid and late twentieth century literature will have to be re-examined and perhaps those for other non-European countries as well, and any sound reading of that literature will have to take this starting point into consideration.

**Prerequisites:** Completion of Third-year Japanese, or an ability to read effectively in some other language besides English, or instructor's permission. It is most likely that all students will not be able to read all the languages represented in the discussions but all seminar members will be expected to do some of their research in at least two languages including English, Japanese, Chinese, French or German. Those with a background in English literature or in the latter three languages are particularly encouraged to participate even if they do not know Japanese.

**Requirements:** Keeping up with the assigned reading, participation in class discussion; developing a research topic; presenting the instructor with a formal, written research proposal by the end of the fifth week; an oral presentation to the class during one of the final meetings, completion of a term paper to be due during examination week.