

# The Two-Sen Copper Coin 二銭銅貨

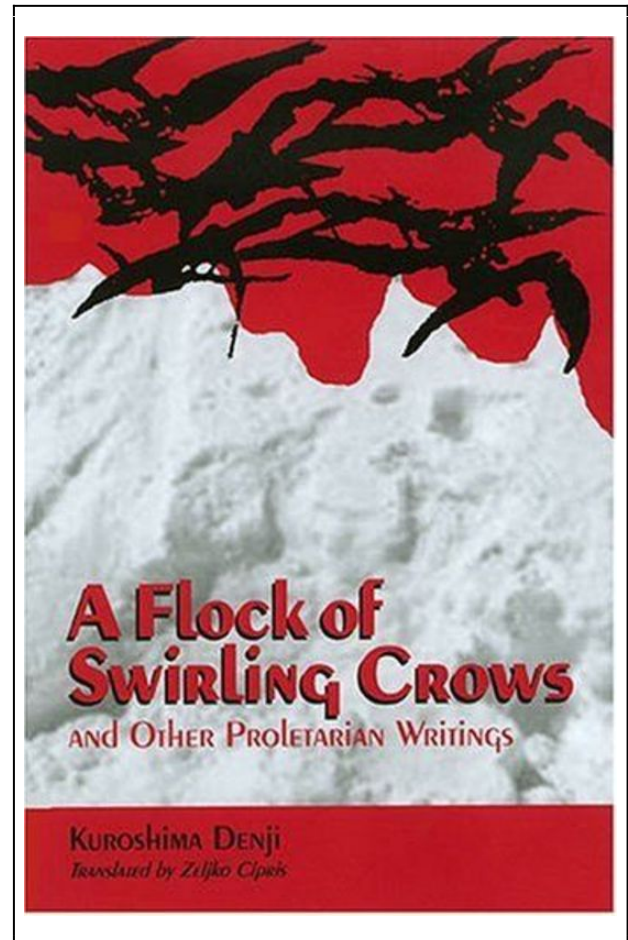
Kuroshima Denji, Michael Bourdaghs

Kuroshima Denji

Translation and Introduction Michael Bourdaghs

## Introduction

A key voice in Japan's proletarian literature movement of the 1920s and 30s, Kuroshima Denji (1898-1943) is best known for his anti-war writings. These include a number of short stories depicting Japan's participation in the 1918-1922 Siberian Intervention, as well as *Militarized Streets* (*Busō seru shigai*, 1930), a novel set during Japan's 1928 military intervention in China.<sup>1</sup> *Militarized Streets* earned the dubious distinction of being censored by both the wartime Japanese state and the postwar U.S. Occupation.<sup>2</sup>



Kuroshima was born and raised in an impoverished family on Shōdo Island in the Inland Sea. In 1917 he moved to Tokyo, where he labored in various capacities to save up money to allow him to study. He was admitted to the Waseda Preparatory School in 1919, only to be drafted into the Japanese army shortly thereafter. In 1921 his unit was sent to Siberia—providing Kuroshima with the experiences that became the material for his best-known stories. It was also in Siberia that the symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that would eventually take his life, first appeared. He returned to Japan in 1922 and made his

literary debut in 1925 with the story “Telegraph” (*Denpō*). A half year later he published the work translated here.<sup>3</sup>

“The Two-Sen Copper Coin” (*Nisen dōka*) originally appeared in the January 1926 issue of *Bungei Sensen* (Literary Front), an important proletarian movement journal. The story depicts a tragic incident that befalls an impoverished farming family. In tone and content, it provides evidence of Kuroshima’s love of Chekhov. The story’s imagery repeatedly invokes vicious circles, seemingly closed loops that trap its characters: the battling tops, the sumo ring, the circuit walked by a cow rigged up to a millstone, and of course the coin that provides the story’s title. The original Japanese language text for the story is available online at the [Aozora Bunko website](#).

## -1-

It was when spinning tops were all the rage. Tōji dug up an old top his older brother Kenkichi had used and gripped the three-centimeter nail pounded in to form its stem between his left and right palms to make it spin. His hands were still not very strong, so the top only stayed spinning for a little while before it toppled over. Since early childhood, Kenkichi had been the sort to get obsessed over things. He had polished the top and replaced the slender, wire-like stem it came with using the three-centimeter nail. It spun better that way, so it was a strong competitor in top battles. It was already some twelve or thirteen years since he had used it, but the top was still sturdy, shiny black, and it was heavy, as if it were made of good hard wood. It was well oiled and coated with wax. The quality of its wood and everything else were completely different from the sort they sell in stores nowadays.

The top was so heavy that Tōji had trouble making it spin. He spent half a day trying to make it spin on the floorboard of the doorframe without any success.

“Ma, buy me a top string,” he begged his mother.

“Ask Pa if it’s okay to buy one.”

“He said it’s fine.”

His mother was the sort to make a fuss about everything. In part, this was due to their strained household budget. Even after it was decided that they would buy it, she made a point of first looking through the storage room, to make sure that they didn’t have an old string used by Kenkichi.

The children of the little riverside hamlet gathered in front of the local temple. They wound new strings around their new tops and set pairs of tops into battle competitions. The children called this game “Kottsuriko.” They’d wind the string and then pull it back as hard as they could to make their tops spin cleanly. Two children would set theirs spinning at the same time, each taking turns aiming his at the other child’s top. The game continued until one of the tops toppled over. The one that fell first lost.

“I’m the only one who has an ugly old black top like this. Buy me a new top, too,” Tōji pestered his mother.

“You already got a top and now you want me to buy you a new one?” his mother answered.

“But it’s all black....and everyone else’s got a new one!”

Kenkichi, confident that his old top was perfectly fine, chimed in. “Don’t be stupid! This top is *much* better.” He also seemed somewhat reluctant to see his brother be given money to buy a top.

“Well....” Tōji always believed whatever his older brother told him.

“You’ll see, this one is much better. Just try it out in a battle. Nobody’s got a top that can beat this one.”

With that, Tōji was persuaded to stick with the old top. But when he went to the store with his mother to buy the new string, he couldn't help fingering covetously the new tops, brightly painted red and blue, on display in a wooden box.

As the woman who owned the general store showed her the strings they had in stock, his mother scolded, "Hey, Tō-boy, don't mess around with the store's merchandise. Your fingers will smudge it."

"It's okay, touching won't hurt them," the owner said affably

There were dozens of strings, all cut to the same length. But among them was one a foot shorter than the rest. When they had measured them all out to cut them, there wasn't quite enough left for the last one.

"How much?"

"Ten sen each. But I could let you have the short one for eight sen."

"Eight sen?"

"Yep."

"Well, if that's the case, the short one will be fine."

The mother handed over ten sen and received a two-sen coin in change. She felt pleased, almost as if she had made a profit of two sen.

When she told Tōji it was time to leave, he was once more fiddling with the new tops in the box. Anyone could see how much he wanted one. But he obediently tagged after his mother when she left, without saying a word about buying a new one.

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A troupe of sumo wrestlers who toured the countryside had come to the temple compound

of a neighboring hamlet. All the children went together to see it. Tōji wanted to go, too, but it was in the middle of rice harvesting. Not only that, in the cowshed a cow had been rigged up to the millstone for grinding grain so it would walk round and round the central pillar, and it was his job to keep an eye on it.

"What's so important 'bout watching a cow?" Tōji complained, which was unlike him. He wrapped the top string around the pillar supporting the barn's eaves and pulled with both hands on its end.

"If that's what you're going to be doing, then why don't you come out and chase away the sparrows instead?"

"No."

"Don't you talk to me like that! What'll we do if the grain doesn't get milled and the sparrows come and steal the rice?" his mother demanded in a harsh voice.

As if he were engaging in a tug-of-war with the pillar, Tōji bent backward and pulled on the string. After a pause, he spoke in a small voice.

"But everyone else is going to see the sumo."

"Poor folks like us have no business with anything like that!"

"Yeah, I know," said Tōji in a crestfallen voice, again tugging on the string.

"If you keep pulling on it like that, the string's going to break.

"Yeah, well who cares? It's shorter than everyone else's, anyhow."

"It's not going to stretch if you pull on it—if you keep doing that, you're going to fall down backward!"

"Yeah, but it will stretch, just watch."

At that moment his father returned.

“Tō-boy, don’t you start complaining!” he said, glaring at Tōji.

“There, see? Now you got a scolding—you keep a good eye on that cow!” With that, his mother left for the fields.

His father filled the funnel above the millstone with wheat and, after watching the obedient cow plod its way around and around as it glanced at the human faces, he too left.

Since his mother bought the string for him, Tōji had gone out to spin his top with the other kids and noticed that his own string was quite a bit shorter than the others. This bothered him. He lined the strings up end-to-end to compare them, and his was shorter than all the others. He was only six years old. When he competed in *kottsuriko* with the big kids who were already in school, he always lost. And with this shorter string, it seemed, he would keep on losing, too. Then he hit on an idea: if he held both ends of the string and pulled, it would stretch until it was the same length as everyone else’s, and so now he was constantly tugging at it. As he watched over the cow, he wrapped the string around the central pillar, grasped both ends and pulled with all his might in hopes of getting it to stretch. Behind him, the cow plodded on, around and around.

-3-

As Kenkichi reaped the rice, the children who’d gone off to watch the sumo returned in a large group. Along the way they stopped to spin their tops.

For a time after that, he and his parents continued harvesting the rice plants. Then, as the sun sank behind the mountains to the west, one by one the three of them returned to their house, each carrying a load.

“Awful quiet over in the cow shed, isn’t it?”

“You’re right.”

“I wonder if that Tōji ran off somewhere to play.”

The mother set down her load and went to check the cow shed—and was stunned by what she saw. “Hey, Ken, come here right away!” her voice quavered.

Kenkichi threw down his bundle of rice and raced over. Tōji, still clutching the top string in one hand, lay collapsed in the darkness of the cow shed. His neck was twisted badly, his head smeared with blood.

The red-brown cow stood motionless, harness still on its back, looking at the child. The evening sunlight coming through the slatted window reflected in the cow’s eyes. One or two flies hovered near the cow, their wings buzzing....

“Damn it!” Father took the six-foot shoulder pole they’d used to carry the rice bundles and for three hours straight flogged the cow. As if everything were the cow’s fault.

“You worthless piece of shit!”

Terrified, the cow ran round and round the shed, trying to escape.

The harness broke and eventually the shoulder pole snapped in half.

Three years have passed since then.

Whenever his mother remembers Tōji, she thinks,

“I should have let him go watch the sumo that day.

“If only I hadn’t bought that short top string! He tied it to the beam and tried to stretch it and when the end slipped out of his hand he got trampled by the cow! If only I hadn’t bought that string! All for a lousy two sen!”

Even now tears stream down her face....

**Michael Bourdaghs** is Professor in East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago. He is the author of *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon: A Geopolitical Prehistory of J-Pop* (Columbia University Press, 2012; Japanese trans. 2012) and *The Dawn That Never Comes: Shimazaki Tōson and Japanese Nationalism* (Columbia University Press, 2003). He is an active translator as well, including most recently Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange* (Duke University Press, 2014).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A translation of *Militarized Streets* and a number of Kuroshima's short stories are available in Kuroshima Denji, *A Flock of Swirling Crows and Other Proletarian Writings*, trans. Zeljko Cipris (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005); an [excerpt from that translation](#) is available online. See also Heather Bowen-Struyk, "Rival Imagined Communities: Class and Nation in Japanese Proletarian Literature," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 14.2 (2006) 373-404; and Kuroshima Denji, "Siberia Under Snow," trans. Lawrence Rogers, *Critical Asian Studies* 38:2 (2006), 309-319.

<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Abel, *Redacted: The Archives of Censorship in Transwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 117-120.

<sup>3</sup> For biographical details, see Zeljko Cipris's "Introduction" in Kuroshima, *A Flock of Swirling Crows and Other Proletarian Writings*, 1-13.