

Weimar Germany's Proletarian Theater in Japan

- with a Focus on the Reception History of Karl August Wittfogel's Drama

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On a hot late summer evening in September 1926, the city Tokyo was still on the difficult road to recovery from the devastating damage caused by the 1923 Great Kantō Earth Quake. In Tsukiji Shōgekijō (築地小劇場 Tsukiji Little Theater), a puppet play entitled “Who was the Biggest Boob?” was brought on the stage. Like most of the plays performed during the early period of Tsukiji Little Theater, this fairy-tale-like and imaginative puppet play was also an importation from Europe and had the contemporary social conflicts between entrepreneurs and working class in Weimar Germany as its background.

This play was originally written upon the request of the puppet theater in Leipzig. Under the suggestion of Tsuji Tsunehiko 辻恒彦, a student of German literature and activist in Japan's early proletarian literature movement, the puppet play “Who was the Biggest Boob” was selected to be apart of the program of the Ningyōza's (人形座 Puppet Theater) first public performance in Tsukiji Little Theater. Its author, a certain Karl August Wittfogel (1896-1988), was for the first time introduced to the Japanese-speaking writers and intellectuals. Compared to his more eye-catching analysis of the Chinese society, Wittfogel's plays had no more than a peripheral role in history of Weimar Germany's workers' theater (*Arbeitertheater*). Nonetheless, following the performance of “Who was the Biggest Boob”, five of Wittfogel's eleven dramatic works were translated into Japanese during the second half of the 1920s, some of which were even performed on stage in various circumstances. Until the Japanese proletarian literature movement faced its virtual demolition in the first half of the 1930s, the energetic young Japanese leftists, possessing considerable ability in reading German and having received the Communist baptism, had not only brought several of Wittfogel's dramas to the stage, but also translated a considerable number of his early polemic writings on various topics including Marxist aesthetics, theory of dramatic practice, as well as his analysis of proletarian culture in general. In 1931, as the Japan

Proletarian Cultural Federation (Nihon Proletaria Bunka Renmei, abbreviated as KOPF) was brought into being as a united front of Japan's leftwing organizations in the fields of literature, theater, music and Esperanto etc., Wittfogel, together with Maxim Gorki and Lu Xun were even elected as an "honorary delegate" of the Federation. It thus seems to be reasonable to presume that Wittfogel's writings on drama may have played a much more significant role than the available historiography tells us.

For better or for worse, the previous studies on Japan's proletarian literature movement have usually been undertaken within the framework of national history and focused primarily on works written by Japanese authors and discourses unfolded among them. On the other hand, Wittfogel's life and intellectual pursuits mostly laid their attentions on his notorious interpretations of Oriental societies. It remains largely unknown how Wittfogel's long forgotten plays and his undeveloped contemplation of the art of drama had provided his contemporary young literary enthusiasts in the Far East Asia the impetus to reflect on the limits and potentials, the forms and contents of modern theater. Based on positivistic analysis of Wittfogel's original texts and their Japanese translation, as well as of his contemporary Japanese readers' engagement with these texts, this article discusses the reception of Wittfogel's early literary pursuits in Japan and tries to answer the question, how the early Wittfogel was perceived and introduced to the network of Japanese leftwing intellectuals. By reconstructing the story of how Wittfogel, a Marxist advocator of secondary importance, was made known in Japan, this article tries to outline the networks and processes through which the Japanese leftists of the late 1920s encountered and introduced works of their contemporary German colleagues.