

Death Literature:

Body, Sickness, and Writing in the Meiji Period

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(University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, ICC Visiting Fellow)

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Room 301, 3F, Building 10, Sophia University Yotsuya Campus

I will offer an overview of my research on modern Japanese death literature. I define "death literature" as a body of works defined by an existential encounter with sickness and death, rather than as a literary form or genre. In my talk, I focus on works by three writers from the Meiji period: Nakae Chōmin (1847-1901), Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), and Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916). The philosopher Chōmin wrote *One Year and a Half* (*Ichinen yūhan*), and *Sequel to One Year and A Half* (*Zokuichinen yūhan*) in 1901 after a doctor discovered a cancerous tumor in his throat and told him he had a year and a half left. The poet Shiki, bedridden with spinal tuberculosis from 1896, wrote daily chronicles of his life that appeared in the *Nihon Newspaper* in 1901 and 1902: *A Drop of Ink* (*Bokuju itteki*) and *A Sickbed Six Feet Long* (*Byōsho rokushaku*). After a near death experience in Shūzenji in 1911, the novelist Sōseki came back to life and wrote *Reminiscences and other matters* (*Omoidasu koto nado*) in 31 installments in the *Asahi Newspaper*. I will look at similarities and differences in the way these writers approached sickness and death and found meaning through writing. On the one hand, they share traits that give their different works a unity as writings of the Meiji period: death is not "medicalized" nor is it solitary, sickness has no metaphorical meaning, they are agnostic toward religion. On the other hand, each writer experiences time and space, physical body and pain, and writing in a highly distinctive and individual manner.

Robert Tierney is associate professor of Japanese and comparative literature in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This past year, he has been on sabbatical leave and affiliated with the ICC at Sophia University. His recent publications include *Monster of the Twentieth Century: Kōtoku Shūsui and Japan's First Anti-Imperialist Movement*, (University of California Press, 2015); "Othello in Tokyo: Performing Race and Empire in Early Twentieth Century Japan," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62(4), December 2011; and *Tropics of Savagery: the Culture of Japanese Empire in Comparative Frame* (University of California Press, 2010). He is currently working on two new topics: a translation of Nakae Chōmin's *One Year and a Half* and a study of death writings in the Meiji period. He may be contacted at rtierney@illinois.edu.