

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Distant Country, Paradise, Wilderness, or Mysterious World: The Changing Image of the South Sea (Nan'yō) Islands in Japanese Science Fiction

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For Japan, “Nan’yō” is a geographical concept as well as a historical and cultural one. Taking the mid-Meiji period, post-World War I and II periods, and the beginning of the 21st century as its nodes, this paper examines various texts and compares the historical background of the South Sea Islands as imagined in Japanese science fiction, with a focus on both literature and films. The works of the four periods, through a distant view, close view, reconstruction and retrospection of the South Sea Islands, respectively, portray “Nan’yō” as a distant country for ambitious expansion; an earthly paradise of colonial ideals; a dangerous and exotic foreign land; and a mysterious world overrun with primitive civilization, with the aborigines are portrayed as ignorant and backward, and sometimes even being cast as unfamiliar and potentially threatening Others. Unlike the typical (anti-)utopian narrative, the Japanese “Nan’yō fantasy” is based on the political discourse model of civilization-backwardness, in which the differing attitudes towards the natural environment and primitive tribes reflect Japan’s ambivalence in defining its self-positioning within the cultural crossroads of the East and the West. This portrayal of Nan’yō is a product of the close interconnection between the mass media and the spirit of the times: a reflection of personal ideals and national destiny, as well as a collective vision interacting with social reality.

Introduction

Strictly speaking, the “South Sea (Nan’yō)” is not a formal geographical region. However, for Japan, Nan’yō is a geographical, historical, and cultural concept. As the name suggests, the “South Sea” refers to the vast and undefined seas and islands located to the south of Japan in the early Meiji period. As geographical information became more available, the term Nan’yō gradually became common in Japanese society: the broad sense of the term refers to the Pacific islands such as Australia, New Zealand, the Dutch East

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Indies (i.e., the Indonesian archipelago in Southeast Asia), and the Inner Nan'yō Islands in general (except for islands belonging to Asia or the United States) (Yoshino, 1915, p. 2). After World War I, Japan's colonization of Nan'yō gave this scope a more precise division: the sea north of the equator, including the Northern Mariana Islands, the Palau & Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia, which were taken over from Germany, were considered Inner Nan'yō, while the Philippines, Indonesian Islands, and other areas around Southeast Asia were considered Outer Nan'yō. After World War II, and the end of Japanese colonial rule, the term Nan'yō was lost to history. It is no longer a common word in Japanese and its occasional appearance is mostly accompanied by historical sentiment.

Japan, as an island nation, has a long and deep dependence on the sea, which is also the psychological basis for Japan's positive interaction with other islands in the Pacific. Japanese scholar T. Yano (2009) divides the history of Japan's interaction with Nan'yō before World War II into three periods. The first was in the early Meiji period when Japanese women opened brothels and grocery stores in Nan'yō for relatively primitive economic activities. Second, at the end of the Meiji period, followed a period of commercial capital formation after the Japanese trading houses and banks entered Nan'yō. Third, during the early Showa period, the concept of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" was put into practice after the evolution of *Nanshin-ron* (Southward Advance) into national policy. Between the second and third periods, a crucial historical transition occurred: Japanese colonial rule in the South Sea Islands from 1914 to 1945. Japan's domestic political orientation greatly influenced the interaction's course. Consequently, the South Sea Islands' role became heavily politicized, leading to the ever-evolving image of Nan'yō shaped by the era.

The South Seas, as a vehicle for political ideals and social aspirations, plays a significant role in science fiction (SF). Its representation characteristics change, sometimes overtly and sometimes subtly, in line with the shifting political relations between Japan and the South Seas, and the evolving political ideologies within Japan. Overall, Japan's South Sea imagination does not conform to traditional (anti)utopian extremes but rather shapes an atypical South Sea utopian image within distinct temporal characteristics. Behind this atypicality lies Japan's internal struggle to position itself within the cultural overlap between the East and the West. Based on different temporal features, this paper explores works set in the South Sea Islands at four key periods: the mid-Meiji era, the interwar period, post-World War II, and the early 21st century. It examines how these works gaze into, scrutinize, reshape, and reflect upon the South Sea Islands, observing how Japanese SF uses imagination to portray the South Seas as the Other, sometimes near and sometimes distant.

Literature and islands: Japanese writings on Nan'yō

Literature often portrays islands in multifaceted ways. They might serve as “a source of fascination and enchantment,” “the paradise where the dead, deities, or immortals reside,” or “the innocent and blessed place where mortals live carefree, idealistic lives,” as well as “wild, backward, and blank” (Su et al., 2022, p. 4). The characteristics of SF provides a more complex scene for such imagination. Thus, islands often function as vehicles for “utopian” or “dystopian” imagination in SF works. Thomas More introduced the term utopia in his 1516 book. This term is associated with a nominally perfect political, economic, educational, and social system, which More described in the book’s title as “a little, true book, both beneficial and enjoyable, about how things should be in the new island Utopia.” The latter is the horrific desert island of biological disorder in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H. G. Wells in 1896. In other words, their isolated, remote, and mysterious temperament gives islands a variety of literary functions and create space for imagination and narrative about the island, while the author’s choice is mostly governed by his political philosophy and social perception. For example, the use of unknown or non-existent lands to complement the real Pacific Islands appears in European foreign expansion adventure novels, many of them informed by European colonial empires in Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere (Abbott, 2018, p. 230). So, in many cases, this resulted in islands becoming “various political, sociological, and colonial practices” (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 13). The fantastical 1723 novel *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift set the story of the Lilliput in a fictional island in the South Pacific, satirizing the political landscape of England at the time.

Existing research on the depiction of Nan'yō in Japanese literature can be summarized into three main approaches: one perspective puts it within the domain of maritime literature, considering it within the framework of literary analysis; the second perspective concentrates on its political aspects with a focus on colonial history; the third perspective delves into its supernatural elements through fantasy fictions.

Maritime literature in Japan first emerged in the early Meiji period and gained momentum by the late 1880s. Yanagida (1942) conducted a survey of the works centered on maritime themes between 1868 and 1941. He classified Japanese maritime literature as idealistic within political fiction and believed that its development was closely related to two historical contexts. The first was *Nanshin-ron* (Southward Advance). The second was the modernization and transformation of Japanese literature. Before this, Japanese literature, which was dominated by realistic literature, paid little attention to the ocean.

In the examination of writings of Nan'yō, Japan’s colonial history emerges as a central issue. For instance, Sudo (2010) places particular emphasis on the connection between Japanese literature and Japan’s colonial endeavors in Nan'yō. This is evident in the discussion of various works, such as Yano Ryukei’s *Tales of the Floating Castle* (浮城物語, 1890), novels set in Nan'yō by Nakajima Atsushi (1942), including *Tales of the south islands*

(南島譚) and *Atolls* (環礁), as well as the film *Godzilla* (ゴジラ, 1954). Sudo (2003) summarizes these literary expressions as “Nanyo-Orientalism” (p. 2), pointing out that these works reflect the construction of the Other by Japanese colonizers in the South Sea Islands and their anxieties and fantasies about the colonies. Tierney (2010) suggests that early Japanese authors incorporated the framework of global civilization in their writings to depict stories of Japan’s colonization and conquest of Indigenous people. For example, Shimada Keizo’s comic story *The Adventurous Dankichi* (冒険ダン吉, serialized from 1933 to 1939) tells the story of a Japanese boy who builds a civilized society on a remote South Sea island. This setting was designed to inspire young readers, promoting the idea that colonialism was something simple, joyful, and achievable even for the most ordinary and inexperienced Japanese individuals (Tierney, 2010). The image of the islanders in this work embodies stereotypes originating in the West, with black skin, wearing grass skirts, and only having a number as their identity (Ombrello, 2014). Wagatsuma (1967) argues that this depiction promotes a notion that originally cannibalistic and warlike natives, once civilized, can transform into loyal subjects. In contemporary works such as *The Sunset Beach Hotel* (サンセット・ビーチ・ホテル) by Arai Mitsuru (1988) and *The Hottest Island in the World* (世界でいちばん熱い島) by Kobayashi Nobuhiko (1995), there is a reflection on post-colonialism and colonial history. However, Sudo (2004) argues that contemporary Japanese authors are portraying the Pacific as a remedy for an identity crisis, which is, in fact, a manifestation of stubborn exoticism rooted in colonialism.

There is also a category of research that focuses on the portrayal of the ocean in fantasy works. Noviana (2020) discusses Miyazaki Hayao’s fantasy animated film *Po’nyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (崖の上のポニョ, 2008) and notes that the Japanese view the ocean as a source of life, prosperity, strength or energy, beliefs, and beauty. This perspective is somewhat general but largely reflects the worldview in Miyazaki’s works. Miyazaki utilizes the ocean to convey his ecological and environmental themes in his works, including *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* (風の谷のナウシカ, 1984), a SF film (Asai, 2011). Ombrello (2014) points out that in the societal consciousness of Japan, the South Seas has long been shaped as a supernatural space inhabited by beings with limitless supernatural powers, and its presence and manifestations remain quite ambiguous.

While some of the previous studies mention SF works, few delve into the intellectual value of imagining the South Seas within science fiction. In this regard, Schnellbacher (2002) focuses on the portrayal of the Pacific in Japanese SF from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s, including the film *Godzilla*. The author argues that the depiction of the ocean in works such as *The Revenge of the Orang Pendek* (オラン・ペンデクの復讐) by Kayama Shigeru (1947) and its sequels, *Inter Ice Age 4* (第四間氷期) by Abe Kobo (1958-59), and *Japan Sinks* (日本沈没) by Komatsu Sakyo (1973) is related to Japan’s national identity, particularly pre-1945 Japanese imperialism and

“the idea of Japan as a Pacific sea power” (p. 382). Schnellbächer (2002) also points out that *Japan Sinks* marks the end of traditional Japanese maritime narratives and is no longer a primary backdrop in contemporary mainstream Japanese storytelling.

Within the existing research framework, the international academic community still has significant research space for the exploration of the portrayal of the South Seas in SF works. This is partly related to the vague positioning and marginal status of early Japanese SF. It is also related to the decline of maritime elements in post-war Japanese literature on the Other. Based on existing research, it can be observed that in Japanese literature, the South Sea Islands are often portrayed as the Other, shaped by the dual influences of Japan's self-positioning and Western culture. So, what are the characteristics of the South Seas in SF works? The imagination within SF works is unconstrained by reality, yet it maintains a high degree of intertextuality with reality. Suvin (1988) indicated that the settings of theme and plot in SF reflect real-world issues and concepts, and the role settings serve as a symbol to contemplate relationships within human society. From this perspective, the South Seas in SF works exhibit a higher degree of plasticity, allowing for a more explicit expression of themes through the power of imagination. Furthermore, existing research has largely concentrated on the (post)colonial aspects of constructing image of Nan'yō, with a greater focus on works from the Japanese colonial era. There is still a lack of longitudinal observation from a diachronic perspective regarding the construction of the image of the South Seas in Japanese SF, making it difficult to gain a detailed glimpse of its full picture and uniqueness. It is also difficult to reflect Japan's Nan'yō imagination and the spirit of the times. Considering this, this article identified works in Japanese SF with the South Seas as the theme or background. The selection criteria primarily refers to *A History of the Japanese SF Spirit (Complete Edition)* (2018) by Nagayama Yasuo and the list of winners of the Hayakawa SF Awards. These works have been analyzed and divided into four distinct periods considering their creative background, surface characteristics of the South Sea image, creative intentions, and the societal influence of some works. Through this analysis, the paper aims to offer insights into Nan'yō imagination of different eras in Japanese society and its reflection of the spirit of the times, or dialogue with that spirit.

A distant view: a distant country for ambitious expansion (1880s-Early 20th century)

In 1868 the Meiji Restoration ended Japan's two-and-a-half-century-long era of seclusion and opened the way to modernization. The development of capitalism in Japan achieved significant success, and various foreign expansionist trends emerged in Japan. The “Southward Advance” to the South Seas became an increasingly powerful political proposition. This was closely related to the following historical events. First, successful colonial experiences of the European colonial powers like the Dutch and the UK

in the South Seas served as models for Japan to emulate. Second, Japan sought access to the abundant natural resources of the South Seas, making it the ideal choice to fulfill its economic and defense requirements (MOFA, 1936). Third, Japan desired to expand its modernized naval armament. The triggers were the 1886 Japan-China “Nagasaki Incident” and the Japan-British “Normanton Incident.” Finally, the Philippine national independence movement at the end of the 19th century raised concerns in Japan, which had been closely monitoring the colonial situation in Asia.

Science fiction literature in Japan began to take off in the mid-19th century. At this time, the SF genre in the modern sense had not yet taken shape. Early works of SF often incorporated features of traditional Japanese fantasy literature, modern political novels, adventure novels, and other genres. As time progressed, several excellent examples of Western maritime literature entered Japan such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 and Jules Verne’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1869-1870), which were translated and published several times. Japan clearly recognizes itself as a maritime country and these maritime adventure novels opened the door to a new world for it. The most common interpretation of Robinson’s story in Japan at that time was that Japan should not limit its development to the inland sea, but rather explore the uninhabited islands overseas like Robinson Crusoe did to expand the territory of the Japanese Empire (Yanagida, 1942). In this context, numerous maritime science fiction novels from the 1880s depict Japanese individuals venturing to the South Sea Islands to establish themselves as colonial rulers. Such as Sugiura Jugo’s *The Tale of Hankai’s Dreams: A Story of a Commoner’s Return to Power* (樊噲夢物語: 一名新平民回天談, 1886), Sudo Nansui’s *Expeditionary Triumph: The Rising Sun Flag Fluttering* (遠征奇勲: 暁の旗風, 1887), *A hazardous enterprise: The Great King of the Pacific* (冒険企業: 聯島大王) by Komiyama Tenko (1887), and *Hōchi’s Strange Rumors: Tales of the Floating Castle* (報知異聞: 浮城物語), etc.

Among them, *The Great King of the Pacific* received significant praise, both for its narrative flow and for its alignment with the government’s goals. In the novel, the protagonist Daito Ichiro, a war veteran in Yokohama, repairs a stranded South Sea ship, initiating a lucrative trade between Japan and Nan’yō. With sharp business acumen, he profits from high-priced South Seas minerals. He skillfully negotiates between the Qing government and France, ultimately becoming the King of Nan’yō through exploration of uninhabited South Sea islands. In such a setting, the mainstream orientation of Japan at the time toward the development of the South Seas emerges: economic gain through trade was considered the most desirable. For Japanese geographer Shiga Shigetaka (1887), one of the proponents of Nanshin-ron, it was “the mission and urgent task of the day.” The Japanese economic historian Suganuma Teifu (1888) also affirmed this in his “Plan of Migration to Nan’yō.” In other words, unlike other works that rely on military power to conquer the sea, this novel shows the possibility of occupying the South Seas through economic activities, reflecting the intellectual class’s idea of

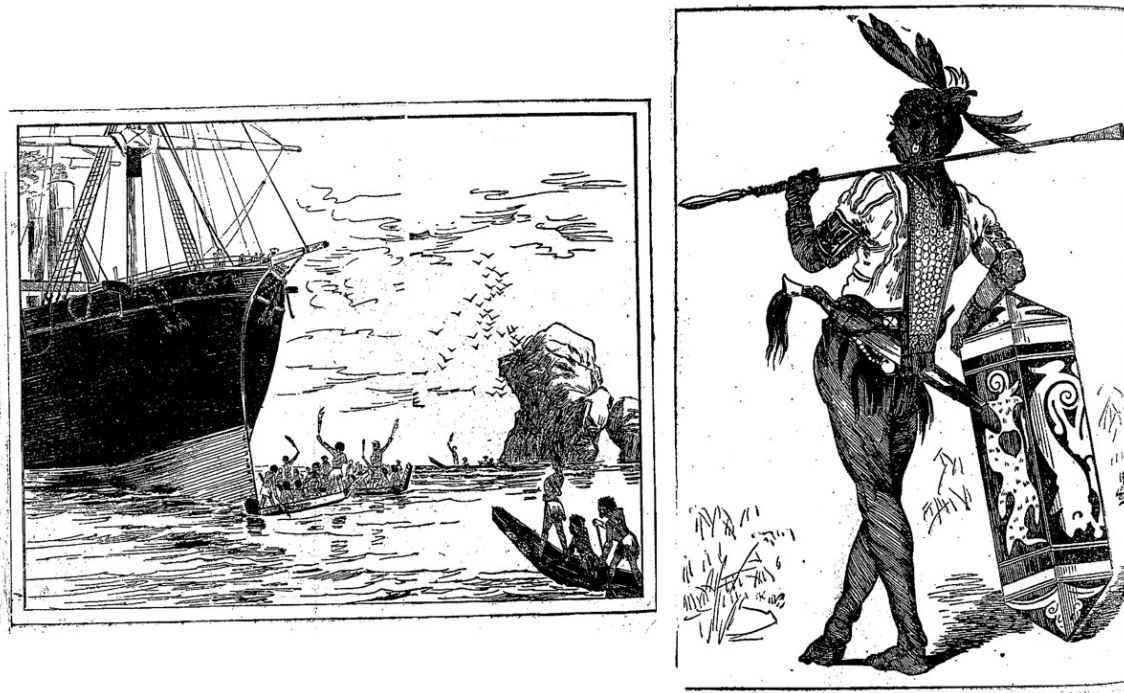


Figure 1. Illustrations selected from *Hōchi's Strange Rumors: Tales of the Floating Castle*

Left: Japanese ship besieged by South Sea Island natives upon arrival (R. Yano, 1890, p. 92)

Right: The image of barbarian warriors (R. Yano, 1890, p. 216)

advancing southward that was popular in Japanese society at the time (Yanagida, 1942). Japan wished to play a role in the international community similar to the Japanese businessman in the novel, i.e., to maneuver between the powers to reap benefits.

Oshikawa Shunro's maritime adventure novel series, *Undersea Warship* (海底軍艦) (1900-1907), have a more prominent modern SF flavor than *The Great King of the Pacific* and various new weapons such as submarines and airships appear in the works. The entire series is a significant narrative, recognized as a key work in Japanese SF literature in the early 20th century. The first part of the series *Undersea Warship* is the story of how the Japanese naval officer Sakuragi Shigeo led 37 of his men to develop the isolated islands of the South Seas. In the preface of the book, the author writes: "The laurels of honor, wealth, power and the flags of victory have long since moved away from land to the oceans of the world [...]. To be a warrior of the sea is to be a warrior of the world" (Oshikawa, 1900). The uncharted islands of the South Seas served as a testing ground for Japan's ideas of world conquest in the late Meiji era. This work contains a strong rendering of the barbaric and dangerous features of the isolated islands of the South Seas, which further accentuated the pioneer's heroic actions as powerful and impressive, and thus gained enthusiastic recognition from the Japanese military. Rear Admiral Yoshii (1900) considered this book to be effective in "fostering maritime thinking and inspiring the spirit of national concern." Admiral Shiozawa (1944) praised it as a "patriotic novel," and Oshikawa as a novelist who "cried out for Japan's southward advance" (p. 1).

It can be seen that when Japan's expansionist ideas with imperialist undertones began to swell, Nan'yō became the object of conquest in which Japan wished to test its power, and early Japanese SF literature interpreted this desire into a kind of adventure fantasy with romantic heroism, and took the lead in rehearsing its expansionist ambitions in words. It is notable that the authors Komiyama and Oshikawa never went to the South Seas, relying only on scarce indirect information and their own imaginations to construct the Nan'yō. This is especially true in *The Great King of the Pacific*, where there are very few concrete descriptions of the newly explored islands in Nan'yō. This kind of processing was relatively common at the time. One aspect of this phenomenon can be attributed to the absence of a specific and detailed conception of remote and isolated regions. On the other hand, it can be seen as an indirect strategy to avoid direct conflicts with Western European colonial powers. Therefore, uninhabited islands are a common setting for the unfolding of stories in similar works. In the works of that era, illustrations of South Seas' Indigenous people were scarce. Figure 1 provides a rare example of such an illustration, where the artist used imagination to depict the Japanese fleet's arrival in the South Seas. The power of the Japanese fleet was fully emphasized, and the image of the barbarian warrior seemed to bring together various characteristics of Indians and African Indigenous peoples.

This situation improved with the increase in both direct and indirect information. For example, the early 1896 publication *The Philippine Islands* (比律賓群島) provided a detailed overview of the Philippines. However, the book's description of the Indigenous people of the Philippines portrayed them as being prone to gambling, easily breaking agreements, lacking gratitude, habitually lying, lazy in nature, inconsistent, and lacking integrity (Minyusha, 1896). This image persisted as a stereotype of the Indigenous peoples of the South Seas in Japanese society for a significant period thereafter. Overall, the early SF works depicted a relatively homogeneous characteristics in their imagination of the South Seas: vast expanses of ocean, abundant resources, and a pristine natural environment. These fantasies may have been a reflection of the authors' personal political ideals or a product of an expansionist mindset. Actively or passively, these works served as flag bearers in the formation of the early Japanese southward advance, a role that was reflected in popular opinion. As Ombrello (2016) suggests, these science fiction and fantasy adventure stories, permeated with militarism and nationalism had a large readership, particularly among young readers, and this trend persisted into the early 20th century. At the end of the 19th century, a group of Japanese civilians, under the influence of this public opinion, went to the South Seas with the ambition of becoming the king of an island. According to historical evidence, Mori Koben, who landed alone in the Micronesian Islands on a small sailboat in 1892 and later developed and prospered through business there, was one of the passionate supporters of the *Tales of the Floating Castle* (Komatsu, 2010).

A close view: colonial dreams' experimental ground (1920s-1940s)

In 1914, after the start of World War I, Japan occupied a portion of Germany's territories in the South Seas. In 1920, after the war, Japan officially took over Germany's colonies north of the equator in the western Pacific. Japanese colonial rule in the South Seas lasted for 30 years, until the end of World War II in 1945. The establishment of colonial relations immediately closed the population's psychological distance to the South Seas of Japan, whose interest in Nan'yō had never been higher, and what was once a distant view transformed into a kind of burning "Nan'yō gazing." During this period, a large number of Japanese people went to Nan'yō to join this magnificent construction of a utopia. According to statistics, at the beginning of the Japanese occupation of some of the South Sea Islands in 1914, there were only 95 Japanese living there. By 1942, there were 86,705 ordinary Japanese residents, surpassing the native population which numbered only 51,951 (Mori, 2014; Nago City History Compilation Committee, 2008).

This close contact allowed more Japanese individuals to gain practical experiences of the South Seas, rapidly enriching the descriptions of Nan'yō. In most of the writings about the South Seas in this period, two contrasting images can be essentially identified in relation to Nan'yō: one is the natural environment akin to a "terrestrial paradise" (Hara, 1914, p. 31), and the other is the uncivilized Aborigines. For instance, in 1935, the *Ten Years' Record of South Sea Development* (南洋開拓拾年誌), the history of a trading company promoted by the Japanese government as published by Nan'yō Boppatsu Kaisha, depicted the Nan'yō Islands as a paradise with pleasant climate, picturesque landscapes, and abundant food resources (Matsue, 1932). Renowned for his criticism of colonialism, Nakajima Atsushi (1942) also expressed admiration for this pristine utopia in his work *Tales of the South Islands* (南島譚) using various literary devices. However, he repeatedly emphasized his inability to comprehend the Aborigines.¹ This sense of detachment is also reflected in Ishikawa Tatsuzō's 1943 novel *A Diary of Red Insect Island* (赤虫島日誌) set in the Palau Islands. In it, he describes the place as being at the center of maps, but the local people live as if on the edge of the world, forgotten by civilized nations. These two extreme images even appeared in Japanese government-produced textbooks in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, in the elementary school textbook, *A Letter from Truk* (トラック島便り), narrated from the perspective of a Japanese soldier stationed on Truk Island, describes the enticing South Sea ambiance to children in Japan, while defining the South Sea Aborigines as "savage

¹ Regarding Nakajima Atsushi's attitude toward Japanese colonialism in the South Seas, there are differing views in the academic community. Refer to relevant literature by Sudo (1998, 2004) and Tierney (2005, 2010). As Nakajima's relevant works are not SF, this article does not delve into this further.

and in need of civilization” (Nakamura, 2001, pp. 107–109). Within this public opinion environment, Japanese colonial ambitions in the South Seas intensified.

This was also the period when modern Japanese SF officially began and rapidly developed. Advanced scientific technology became a necessary element in SF works, and mystery became a popular element at the time. Perhaps because the South Seas lacked the cultural traits required for envisioning future technology, there were fewer SF works set in the South Sea Islands during this period compared to earlier times. Among them, the novelist Koga Saburo's serialized SF novel *Floating Devil Island* (浮ぶ魔島), published in the *Monthly Mechanics and Science* (科学画報) in 1928, is a noteworthy work. This work both continued the earlier adventurous imagination of the South Sea Islands and cleverly condensed the realities of colonization into an alternate underwater kingdom. In the novel, mad scientist Dr. Tanimura creates a high-tech underwater empire beneath a remote South Seas Island known as “Demon Island” due to its periodic surfacing and seabed discharges.

The first notable feature of this work is its imagination of future high technology. These include ape-men evolved through biotechnology, 20-horsepower giant robots, synthetic food, video surveillance, death rays, and machines capable of converting speech to text and transmitting thoughts through brain waves directly. All these elements contribute to the profound sense of mystery associated with the underwater kingdom. The second characteristic of this work is dystopian narration. The underwater kingdom boasts exceptional lighting, air circulation systems, and abundant food production capabilities, but it is actually a dark empire under the rule of King Tanimura, who manipulates giant robots to oversee the 50,000 ape-men serving as both laborers and a military force. This is a highly centralized authoritarian society, with King Tanimura exerting absolute control over lower-status citizens using technology. Dr. Tanimura's ambition is evident: to utilize the underwater kingdom to lead the ape-men and robots in a quest to conquer humanity and dominate the world. He even teaches the ape-men to learn Esperanto,² a constructed international auxiliary language, to achieve this goal. This language was once popular in early 20th century Japan and carries the heavy imperial and colonial connotations of that era.

Based on the points mentioned above, the underwater kingdom serves as a metaphor for a colonial society. Dr. Tanimura's ideology of rule, which is the third characteristic of the work, alludes to the ideal colonial model Japan hoped to establish. Tanimura believes that humans dislike labor and complain about injustice because they possess self-consciousness, and he suggests that only by mechanizing humans can the world be changed. This is challenging

² Esperanto, a constructed language, was created by Dr. Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, a Polish Jewish doctor, in 1887, based on the Indo-European languages. Japanese writer Futabatei Shimei published a related textbook titled *Esperanto* in 1906 and established the Japanese Esperanto Institute in the same year, promoting its popularity in Japan.

to achieve in the real world. Thus, he chooses to build an artificial underwater kingdom on an uninhabited island in the South Seas. He creates two kinds of subjects: the semi-self-conscious ape-men and the entirely non-self-conscious robots. However, the former might revolt, and the latter cannot generate energy by themselves, making them imperfect for enslavement. Therefore, Dr. Tanimura is developing an ideal artificial human being that possesses human physiological functions but lacks self-awareness, making them capable of labor like machines. In reality, Japan implemented aggressive assimilation and educational policies in Taiwan and Korea, which led to sharp conflicts with Indigenous populations in the colonies. Meanwhile, Japan's colonial education in the South Seas encountered new problems because the islanders, deemed "undeveloped" and "lacking intelligence," did not meet the educational standards. As a result, the colonial authorities had to begin by "teaching them the everyday norms of human behavior and transforming their habits" (SPMEA, 1938, p. 171). The methods used became increasingly extreme and violent (Naoui, 2022), and even religious power was employed (E. J. Lee, 2012). The shift from "education" to "taming" was a change in strategy, emphasizing the gap between backwardness and civilization to validate colonial rule. In the story of *Floating Devil Island*, the underwater kingdom ultimately falls apart due to the unintended intrusion of a young scientist. However, the author's colonial simulation experiment under an uninhabited island in the South Seas artfully mirrors Japan's colonial history. Through its dystopian narrative, it creates an artificial sense of terror in this paradise of nature.

The combination of a rich natural environment with an uncivilized Aborigine population allowed Japan to construct an atypical "utopia" through colonization in the South Seas. As Ochiai (1996) says, all observations and dialogues at this time are based on the colonial thinking as "North = civilization," "South = barbarism," "North = observer," and "South = observed" (p. 56). As the Pacific War expanded, the colonial contradictions between Japan and the South Seas escalated, and the portrayal of the South Seas also changed.

A reconstructive view: the dangerous and exotic foreign land (1950s-1970s)

In the early 1940s, World War II quickly swept through the South Sea Islands, and many Indigenous people joined the fight against Japan. The topography of the islands was complex, with dense primeval rainforest and a changing climate. Environmental factors coupled with the comprehensive war that the United States waged against Japan, led to intense and devastating battles for Japan on islands such as Kwajalein Island, Eniwetok Island, and the Palau Islands. The history of the war shattered the beautiful fantasy of Japanese society about Nan'yō: the blue sea and white sands turned into a field of corpses, the coconut grove was filled with gunfire, the obedient native people became hostile, and the earthly paradise turned into an earthly

purgatory. The war not only terminated Japan's dream of a Nan'yō utopia, but also caused the Japanese to become emotionally distant from the South Seas. Moreover, after the war, Japan embarked on a rapid economic development path, while the South Sea Islands lagged behind, creating a growing disparity in power, which gave Japan a significant psychological advantage when facing its former colonies again after a few years.

At this time the South Sea Islands appeared to the public with a new image. The depiction of the South Seas in the SF monster film series *Godzilla* is an remodeling of Nan'yō image under the psychological filter described above. The first *Godzilla* was born in 1954, and the political implications behind it are the focus of many studies. *Godzilla* is a submarine Jurassic monster awakened by nuclear testing, therefore, the early 1950s American hydrogen bomb tests. Japan's nuclear history during World War II, the memories of the war, and protests against American dominance are considered the primary political metaphors in the film (Igarashi, 2000; Ombrello, 2014). In this film, the setting of *Godzilla's* awakening location: 24°N, 141°2' E, which is near Iwo Jima, is also a highly political element that this article aims to discuss. Schnellbacher (2002) suggests that the appearance of the monster on a remote but still Japanese territory implies Japan's identity in the Pacific. In the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945, the Japanese military suffered a death rate of over 95%, and it was this battle that accelerated the end of World War II. This small island, located between the mainland of Japan and Saipan Island in the South Seas, has been closely linked to the memory of defeat and death ever since. Sudo (2003) suggests that in this film, Japan is re-colonizing the South Seas. When viewed from the perspective of the story's setting, this perspective holds some merit.

In the 1960s, conflict between Japan and the United States escalated and an anti-American trend emerged in Japanese society. The 3rd episode of the *Godzilla* series, *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962), captures this social flashpoint with a fictionalized showdown between the two countries' most iconic monster figures. In the film, King Kong appears in the Fallo Islands (fictional) of the Solomon Islands, a setting that is meaningful because it is obviously reminiscent of the Japanese-American South Pacific battlefield in World War II. Compared with *Godzilla* in 1954, *King Kong vs. Godzilla* is clearly positioned to entertain, and also earned the largest number of viewers among all generations of *Godzilla*. The plot set on Fallo Island portrays a funny and ridiculous picture of the South Seas: the uncivilized Indigenous islanders, ignorant folk rituals, fierce and savage big octopus monster. The Fallo islanders in the film are played by Japanese actors who paint their bodies dark brown. As a visual language, their exaggerated facial expressions and body movements become expressions of stupidity and inferiority.

This stereotypical depiction of the South Sea Islands appears several times in *Godzilla's* subsequent series, such as Lech Island in the 7th film *Ebirah, Horror of the Deep* (1966), Sollgel Island in the 8th film *Son of Godzilla* (1967), and the monster island in the 13th film *Godzilla vs. Megalon* (1973).

Outside the *Godzilla* series, SF monster films of this period such as Mondo Island in *King Kong Escapes* (1967) and Sergio Island in *Space Amoeba* (1970) are also fictional islands in the South Seas.

It is evident that the South Sea Islands have become a staple setting for monster SF films, with the idyllic beaches and crystal-clear waters turning into a fringe zone for monster habitats and secret paramilitary organizations. In other words, the complex image of the South Sea Islands has been further simplified, with its more primitive and savage elements exaggerated, and danger and mystery becoming new key themes. The “traumatic” memories of war mentioned earlier are crucial clues to understanding this shift in imagery. However, as the memories of war recede, this dangerous aspect of the South Sea image is gradually fading away. In the late 1970s, the later works in the *Godzilla* series began to depict the South Sea Islands in a more entertainment-oriented way. On the one hand, they highlighted the region’s beautiful natural scenery, while on the other hand, they used the backwardness of the South Sea Islanders for comedic effect. This stereotype became increasingly prevalent in the Japanese public’s perception of the South Seas, especially as it gained prominence in the entertainment industry, with travel programs and similar content featuring these portrayals on television screens, becoming a mainstream image.

A retrospective view: the mysterious world of primitive civilization’s yearning (21st century)

Since the late 1980s Japanese society has been in a long-term economic slump. In the escalation of the contradiction between globalization and nationalization, the deep-rooted problems that have been exposed have eroded the sense of national identity of Japanese people, and the resulting spiritual confusion has brought about a shaken faith. Schnellbächer (2002) points out that in several science fiction works with the ocean as a central theme in the three decades following World War II, authors to some extent critically revisited the myth of Japan as a modern Pacific hegemon. However, they could not entirely deny this myth because Japan’s modernization remained a cornerstone of its self-identity after the war. Nevertheless, this self-identity began to show signs of waning by the end of the 20th century: If there is a limit to the progress of technology and economic power, what is the driving force of human existence? In contemplating this, the original and vibrant vitality of the former colony, the South Sea Islands, triggers Japanese society to look back and think, and the traditional Nan’yō fantasy shows signs of revival. For example, in the 2002 novel *Rainbow* (虹), Yoshimoto Banana portrays Tahiti as an extremely pure and idyllic natural world. The protagonist, who is emotionally traumatized, finds solace in this setting. Some researchers have pointed out that this desire to remove all otherness, ambiguity, and uncanniness actually implies a “modern form of violence” (S.

Lee, 2022, p. 83). This literary approach carries echoes of past Nan'yō fantasy while taking on new significance in the context of the collective psyche of Japanese society in the contemporary era.

The Island of NIRUYA (ニルヤの島, 2016), by young Japanese SF writer Shibata Katsuie is an example of SF written from the perspective of folklore anthropology, an award-winning work of the 2nd Hayakawa SF Awards. The story takes place in the Micronesian Islands in 2069. Japanese cultural anthropologist Novak visits the last remaining religion in the world, Tōshūha (統集派). At that time, human beings have already invented life-recording devices which are implanted in their bodies, and people's cognition and memory are managed by data. Although human beings still have to face death, the concept of death is fading. The religious definition of the post-mortem world, the "afterlife-survival hypothesis" (p. 40), has been completely rejected, and the product of human spiritual and cultural accumulation—faith—has disappeared.

How to balance technological development and humanistic spirit is a common theme in science fiction works. The author chooses the South Sea Islands as a stage to explore the contradiction between technology and faith, which is inseparable from a vision of Nan'yō imagination which is far from modern civilization and deeply rooted in primitive customs. With this mystery of chaos, the work shows the multiple conflicts between advancement and backwardness. The Economic Coalition of Micronesia has become a technologically advanced country by actively promoting the implantation of life-recording devices. Islands that used to be scattered in the sea were linked together by steel bridges and islanders lost their freedom to go to sea for private purposes. However, the islands remained under the control of a privileged few, and the illiterate islanders did not change their traditional habits with the implantation of the chip, which let it become the soil in which the "last religion in the world, Tōshūha," was able to take root and sprout.

Noteworthy is that the author does not portray this religion as a noble spiritual purgatory but retains strong primitive and uneducated characteristics for its emergence and existence. Since faith-based funeral rituals no longer exist, the Tōshūha, who have no clear religious or cultural roots, initially gathered followers by helping the islanders with funerals for free, and later expanded their power by exploiting the conflict between the government and the islanders over mineral radiation, as well as by severe violent conflicts with atheists. This "religion" does not even have a basic doctrine, but only a poorly understood slogan: "People will go to the NIRUYA island after death." Nevertheless, it is this primitive and savage spiritual power that overcomes the rationality cultivated by advanced technology and higher education, causing foreign scholars and laborers from different cultures to rush to die in search of the NIRUYA that is nowhere to be found. In the

novel, the Japanese anthropologist, and the Swedish female neuroscientist both end up jumping on the ship to find NIRUYA as they cannot let go of the loss of their families.

Humanity's destination after death is the mysterious island of NIRUYA in the South Seas, a simple lie that easily captures the hidden desires of human beings who are manipulated by digital technology. This kind of Nan'yō fantasy emerges as a new form, but with a familiar atmosphere, which functions as a spiritual utopia in the high-tech era and to embody the most instinctive human emotions of love, hate, fear, and sadness. Although this imagination has lost its former fantasy, and the author unabashedly expresses the "uncivilized savage folly" (p. 70) of old-fashioned religious practices of the islanders, this primordial daring may become the salvation of the human spirit when people face the crisis of its autonomous consciousness being swallowed by technology and its cognition being digitally integrated. A century and a half after the Meiji Restoration, the young writer also chose to use science fiction as a vehicle to undertake an imaginary experiment in the South Sea Islands that is akin to a return. Although some scholars have pointed out that the mystical religious overtones attached to the South Seas, such as Bali, are just an illusion created by some artists and anthropologists in the 1920s and 1930s (Yamashita, 1999), these elements are still a part of the Japanese Nan'yō fantasy today.

However, it is important to mention that in comparison to the three historical periods discussed in this article, contemporary Japanese science fiction works with a focus on the South Seas are relatively fewer in number. This is because, in the earlier two periods, the South Sea Islands in SF primarily served their territorial attributes, and the third period exhibited colonial narrative characteristics within the context of war and colonization. Now, as the focal points of SF have shifted towards cutting-edge technologies like virtual space and AI, it seems that the South Sea Islands have become less central to the narrative. Even in non-science fiction novels, such as two fantasy novels by Ikezawa Natsuki, *The Stratosphere on a Summer Morning* (夏の朝の成層圏, 1990) and *Macias Gilly's Downfall* (マシアス・ギリの失脚, 1993), the South Sea Islands still appear with the stereotypical impression of being "marvelous, mysterious, and formidable" as settings for the survival of characters on remote islands (Sudo, 2010, p. 11; p. 60). In this sense, *The Island of NIRUYA* can be viewed as a valuable attempt to explore the cultural significance of South Sea Islands from an anthropological perspective, even though there might be some clichéd elements in the depiction of the islanders. It represents an effort to delve into the cultural meaning of South Sea Islands in a way that adds value to the discussion.

Conclusion

From private to governmental, from economic to political, the history of interaction between Japan and the South Sea Islands extends more than a century. During this period, Japanese literati wove depictions of Nan'yō with words and images, sometimes overlapping, sometimes parallel, sometimes

intersecting with historical reality. This paper reviews the depiction of the South Sea Islands in Japanese literary and cinematic science fiction works in the light of the characteristics of the times displayed by these “Nan'yō” imaginaries in four periods: the late 19th century, the early 20th century, the mid-20th century, and the 21st century. In the mid-Meiji period, when the modernization of Japan was beginning to take effect, early science fiction portrayed the isolated islands of the South Seas as objects to be conquered for expansionist ambitions, stimulating people's desire for adventure with heroic stories of pioneers, and serving as a powerful propaganda tool for the “southward advance.” During the post-World War I colonial period, Nan'yō fantasy was fully escalated. In SF works, the South Sea Islands became a testing ground for Japan's construction of a modernized utopia. But the memory of World War II ended the previous utopian dream, and the image of the South Sea Islands was reduced to a backward, ignorant, and slightly dangerous stereotype in SF films. However, the lack of self-identity suffered by the Japanese people brought about by social development has triggered Japan to look back to the South Seas. As a result, the mysterious, primitive civilization of the South Sea Islands has become the repository for human beings to find their spiritual home in contemporary SF works. The image of the South Sea Islands is the product of a close interconnection between the medium and the spirit of the times, but also a reflection of personal ideals and the fate of the nation, as well as a collective imagination that constantly inter-constructs with social reality. These works are the yardstick for measuring the psychological distance between an island nation, Japan, and the South Sea Islands: a mirror image of the Other, sometimes distant, and sometimes close, alternately bright, or dark.

In addition to the distinct imprints of different eras, there is also a noticeable sense of division in the portrayal of the South Seas. It is characterized by the dichotomous treatment of the South Seas' natural environment and human society. In this narrative, the South Sea Islands are sometimes depicted as a resource-rich, pristine treasure trove, at times even described as a paradise with stunning landscapes, and occasionally portrayed with traces of mysterious ancient civilizations. In contrast, Indigenous people often appear as being far from civilization, in a state of ignorance and backwardness, positioned as subjects awaiting civilization and taming. These two seemingly different tonal elements coexist harmoniously in the South Sea Islands imagination. In other words, the Japanese Nan'yō fantasy is different from the traditional utopian or dystopian narratives of Western science fiction, but it does have some atypical utopian characteristics. However, the internal unity of this dichotomy may be the core of Nan'yō fantasy: it is a vision that seems to be fragmented, but achieves self-relation in the process of Japan's pursuit of utopian dreams. It is also a cognitive expression that seems to be superficial, but behind it is a strong and straightforward account of Japanese desires, which finally completes the continuation from material desires to spiritual sustenance.

In essence, Japanese fantasies of the South Sea Islands were mostly based on a desire for its geographical conditions rather than a recognition of its human culture. In a few cases a curiosity about its traditional folklore could be seen, but this prying was always informed by the dichotomy of civilization versus backwardness. Undeniably, among the works mentioned in this paper, the portrayal of the South Sea Islands image is not solely a crude simplification of its negative aspects as a fairy-tale-like embellishment can also be observed. However, this embellishment is more prominent in the depiction of the South Seas' natural environment, rather than in the portrayal of the Indigenous people. To some extent, this mode of thinking is similar to Orientalist discourse in the Western world.

As Said (1978) put it, the so-called oriental flavor in the eyes of Western Europe is just imaginative geography, and behind the seemingly romantic imagination is actually a sort of indifferent contempt, which over time forms a mode of discourse that dominates the European world's perception of the East. Said emphasizes that these feelings of superiority, arrogance or prejudice are essentially the expression of an imperialist and colonialist political discourse. Japan's interest in the South Seas began with the rise of colonial expansion, and the first imaginings of Nan'yō were born under this keynote. Subsequent developments in imperialism pushed the South Seas fantasy to its peak. However, with the disintegration that followed the end of the imperial and colonial eras, the central themes of civilization versus backwardness and conqueror versus conquered constantly changed their forms within the discourse construction of South Seas imagination, even becoming somewhat elusive.

However, as some scholars have pointed out, Japanese colonialism in the Pacific emphasized a sense of commonality with the colonized, which is not entirely the same as the Western model that emphasized differentiation (Sudo, 2010). Japan is located in Asia and, during its modernization process, identified with Western civilization, yet it could not entirely sever its ties with Eastern civilization. This complex and ambivalent positioning led Japan to attempt to create a Japanese model in its colonial policies that differed from the West. This mentality is also reflected in Japanese portrayals of the South Seas, which, compared to Western perspectives, display more indirection and ambiguity. This can be seen as a form of Orientalism born from within the East, a product that took root within Eastern civilization, but was measured against Western civilization standards during the modernization process. Japan's Westernization and the longstanding peripheral status of the South Pacific region within East Asian civilization have made such discourse construction possible and have given it distinct regional characteristics. Behind it, there are traces left by the wheels of history, and after being washed through the convergence of contemporary trends, a world separated by the sea presents itself as fragmented pieces within the medium of text and images, serving the narratives of the Other.

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