

# Super Secret Tales from the Slammer

(*Gokunaibanashi*)

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## Introduction

Narushima Ryūhoku's "Super Secret Tales from the Slammer" takes us inside the world of two institutions emblematic of the new Meiji polity: the daily newspaper and the modern prison.

The proliferation of daily newspapers in the 1870s and the emergence of a populace transformed by reading them marked a new era; as historian James Huffman has observed, "no single institution did more to create a modern citizenry than the Meiji newspaper press."<sup>1</sup> Yet as Ryūhoku's essay clearly shows, the birth of the modern press in Japan was far from painless. The Meiji government had initially looked to the newspaper as a convenient tool for disseminating information to the public and thereby furthering its agenda of "civilization and enlightenment;" to that end, it sponsored newspaper reading rooms, underwrote distribution to rural areas, and cultivated close connections with newspaper editors. But by 1874, as some newspapers began to adopt a more independent and assertive stance, the cozy relationship they had enjoyed with government authorities turned adversarial. The following summer saw the passage of two sweeping laws that sharply curtailed the freedom of the press, making it virtually impossible to criticize government policy.<sup>2</sup>

Faced with uncertainty over where the boundaries of acceptable discourse now lay, some newspaper writers began to test the limits in the following months, and Narushima Ryūhoku of the *Chōya shinbun* was among the most daring. Some journalists challenged the new restrictions by advancing arguments directly, but as we can see in this piece, Ryūhoku often chose instead to couch his points in satire, present them as parables, or adorn them with recondite allusions. He drew on these and other techniques in a series of articles leading up to the one that finally proved too provocative for the authorities to overlook: an essay he wrote with another journalist, Suehiro Tetchō, who had recently joined the *Chōya*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Creating a Public: People and Press in Meiji Japan* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the early Meiji press and the impact of these laws upon it, see Kyu Hyun Kim's *The Age of Visions and Arguments: Parliamentarism and the National Public Sphere in Early Meiji Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), esp. pp. 86–98, 260–266; Jay Rubin's *Injurious to Public Morals: Writers and the Meiji State* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1984), pp. 21–22, 32–37; and James Huffman's *Creating a Public*, esp. ch. 4.

<sup>3</sup> The provocative essay was published anonymously, but it seems both men had a hand in its composition. Prior to joining the *Chōya shinbun*, Suehiro Tetchō (or Shigeyasu as Ryūhoku refers to him in the piece translated here) edited the *Akebono shinbun*. Just one month after the promulgation of the press laws, Suehiro became the first journalist to be punished for violating them. Ryūhoku's first scrape with the laws came shortly

In December 1875, they published an ostensibly retrospective essay concerning two men named Inoue Saburō and Ozaki Kowashi: Tokugawa-era officials who had supposedly stifled free speech a decade earlier. The problem was that Inoue Kowashi (1843–95) and Ozaki Saburō (1842–1919), two Meiji officials who had been instrumental in designing the new press laws, were not particularly amused by this thinly veiled fiction, and the two journalists were ultimately fined and imprisoned.

Ryūhoku began serializing “Super Secret Tales from the Slammer” just a few days after he was released from four months of incarceration. It attracted a remarkably large audience for its time; a daily circulation of 10,000 was rare for any Japanese newspaper in the 1870s, but Ryūhoku’s newspaper obtained 18,000 subscribers in 1876, a striking success attributed to Ryūhoku’s writings.<sup>4</sup> This text demonstrates the determination of Ryūhoku and other journalists to find ways to continue writing in spite of the risks they faced. The frame through which readers encounter the piece translated here—that it is a written transcription by the newspaper’s editor of Ryūhoku’s oral account of his experience—may be seen as a resourceful adaptation to the restricted publishing climate. While it may have had some basis in reality, this frame also enabled both men to dodge responsibility for the essay’s contents: an effect likewise achieved by Ryūhoku’s occasional facetiousness or poses of uncertainty in the piece, and by the editorial incursions that work to distance the newspaper from the account’s criticisms.

In addition to what it shows us about early Meiji journalists’ struggles to establish newspapers as a public forum for debate, the piece also offers us a first-hand glimpse of life within the Kajibashi jail, the first to be constructed in Japan on the basis of Western models. There were of course penal detention facilities in Japan prior to the Meiji period, but as Daniel Botsman has shown in his careful comparison of Edo and Meiji prisons, the idea that incarceration itself would constitute the punishment of offenders was relatively new, and this first facility was also noteworthy for its attempt to achieve a new degree of surveillance and disciplinary regulation over the lives of its inmates.<sup>5</sup> As his descriptions of the facility’s structure as well as the behavior of its guards shows, Ryūhoku was well aware of the aims that shaped the new facility and he had in fact seen some of the models on which it was based during his 1872–73 world tour.<sup>6</sup> While praising some of the reforms, Ryūhoku was not shy about suggesting others: arguing as he did elsewhere for an eclectic approach to reform that took full account of Japanese environmental and cultural factors rather than simply importing Western models as-is. Yet even in proposing the most mundane policy recommendations, he did so with a distinctive literary flourish. As this essay shows, Ryūhoku’s four months in prison had robbed him neither of his sense of humor nor his interest in engaging in public debate.

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thereafter when he wrote a piece in praise of Suehiro.

<sup>4</sup> Huffman, *Creating a Public*, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Punishment and Power in the Making of Modern Japan* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), esp. chapters 5–7.

<sup>6</sup> My annotated translation of Ryūhoku’s travel diary appears in *New Chronicles of Yanagibashi and Diary of a Journey to the West: Narushima Ryūhoku Reports from Home and Abroad* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Series, 2010); see also Maeda Ai, “Ryūhoku in Paris,” trans. Matthew Fraleigh, in James Fujii, ed., *Text and the City: Essays on Japanese Modernity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), pp. 275–294.