

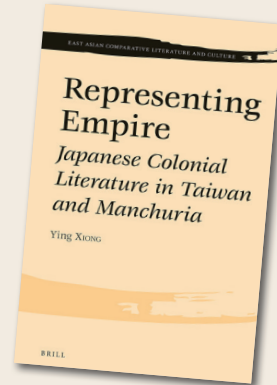
BOOK REVIEW

Representing Empire: Japanese Colonial Literature in Taiwan and Manchuria

By Ying Xiong

Brill, 2014
xxvii + 375 pages.

Reviewed by Andrew ELLIOTT



Ying Xiong's study of literary works and literary scenes in colonial Taiwan and Manchuria during the 1930s and 1940s focuses mainly on two influential expats, Nishikawa Mitsuru (1908–1999) and Yamaguchi Shin'ichi (1907–1980), better known by his pen name, Ōuchi Takao. Both Nishikawa and Ōuchi left Japan while still young (the former when two years old, with his family to Keelung, the latter to join his uncle in Changchun when in his early teens), and both returned to live only when repatriated at the end of World War II. In their work as writers, editors, and translators, both Nishikawa and Ōuchi played key roles not only in the production of literature in Japan's colonies, but also in debates about the nature of colonial literature itself.

Representing Empire draws on a large, varied selection of contemporary and later sources in Chinese and Japanese (as well as English, French, and German) to provide a transnational perspective on intra-empire, multidirectional cultural flows, between two distinct colonial spaces as well as metropole and colony. For these reasons, it is a good fit in Brill's series on "East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture." In particular, Xiong explores "colonial literature as an illuminative site to reveal the complicated relationship between Japanese writers and the colonial project that contributed to Japan's modernity" (p. 42). She uses Nishikawa and Ōuchi's literary activities and writing as a means to map their shifting identifications with state, nation, and empire. While Nishikawa from the beginning of his career consistently argued for colonial literature in Taiwan as a regional subcategory of Japanese national literature targeted at metropolitan readers, China expert Ōuchi espoused the possibility of an independent, multinational, and multilingual Manchurian literature. Yet, as Xiong argues, whatever their early differences, "both writers responded to the call to join the 'decisive battle' of Japan in the 1940s and were caught in colonial integration based on the universal idea of *kokumin*" (p. 320). From this point, literary production, as with other areas of social and cultural life across the empire, was increasingly subsumed under Japanese national goals in the mobilization for total war.

Many of the key, underlying arguments here about the role of knowledge accumulation and representation in the justification for, and expansion of empire have been made elsewhere. Evidence for the intrinsic relationship of knowledge/power (its introduction in chapter 7 is, for this reader, inexplicably late), the cultural dimensions of imperialism, or

the fractures, contradictions, and shifts in colonial discourse has been well-amassed in the decades since Edward Said's *Orientalism* was first published in 1978; and Robert Tierney has considered at length the ways in which postcolonial models can be applied to the modern Japanese case.¹ More specifically, the chapters on Nishikawa's work as literary editor, views of colonial literature, and romanticism cover similar ground to research by Faye Yuan Kleeman.² Xiong builds on this earlier work, as the introduction, later citations, and the bibliography show, and in particular offers illuminating, comparative data and analysis of Taiwan and Manchuria.

Yet in the textual readings especially, a more sustained dialogue with previous scholarship on the workings of colonial discourse in literature, inside and outside the Japanese empire, might have been fruitful. For example, in Xiong's discussion of romantic discourse in Nishikawa's poetry and folklore writing, she writes that his "exotic literary approach was fundamentally distinct from Japanese colonial policy" at the time), arguing that his valorization of the local, customary, and decadent signaled the failure of colonial modernity: "For Nishikawa, literature retained a certain degree of independence from its political and moral influences" (p. 117). No writer is a political mouthpiece, and polyvocality might be claimed for any written text. But in this case, whatever his beliefs about art for art's sake, surely Nishikawa's literary excavations of the vestiges of alleged "Taiwanese backwardness" could just as easily be seen to justify the further imposition of colonial power? Anti-modern though Nishikawa's approach to writing Taiwan may have been, the trope of nostalgia does not necessarily challenge colonial discourse, as Renato Rosaldo and Ali Behdad have both explored.³ In a transnational study of this kind, it would have been interesting to get a more precise sense of inter-imperial links or divergencies, especially because of the stylistic connections between Nishikawa and the French colonial travelers of Behdad's study; though perhaps this is too much to ask of an already expansive work.

In this exploration of writers' connections to the colonial project, the material often takes precedence over the symbolic. Part III takes up a greater range of colonial writers and their works, but the focus elsewhere on "two personalities" (p. 319), their motivations, interests, and influences puts great emphasis on the biographical, somewhat unexpectedly in a book entitled *Representing Empire*. Biographical criticism is as valid a form of literary criticism as any, but cannot always offer persuasive explanations for the intersection of poetics and politics that occurs within colonial literature, or the reproduction of some representational modes but not others. Recourse to the exotic in the colonial writing of Satō Haruo is presumably not simply because "it was natural for visitors to feel distant and strange in Taiwan since their stays were only short and casual" (p. 60). Nor is Xiong's excellent, nuanced analysis of omissions and changes in Ōuchi's literary translations from Chinese—whereby a critique of colonial modernity is transformed into its celebration—developed much by the knowledge that Ōuchi "sincerely believed that the Kwantung Army was aiming to spread the benefits [of agrarianism] to China and Mongolia" (p. 282).

1 Tierney 2010.

2 Kleeman 2003.

3 Rosaldo 1989 and Behdad 1994.

Mistitling may be one problem. Out of nine main chapters, only four are dedicated to textual analysis. Another might be an editorial one: the long preface, which acts as an introduction, is then followed by a much longer “Introduction,” which makes for a somewhat repetitive, not to mention (for this reader at least) confusing entry point, theoretically locating the book in a great variety of ways, of which the final, and one might assume, most important is the representation of empire in colonial literature. Yet upon entering the main body of Xiong’s book, the reader discovers that it is the contemporary debates, discussions, and activities of the colonial literary scenes in Taiwan and Manchuria—all fascinatingly and richly explored here—that appear center stage.

REFERENCES

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