

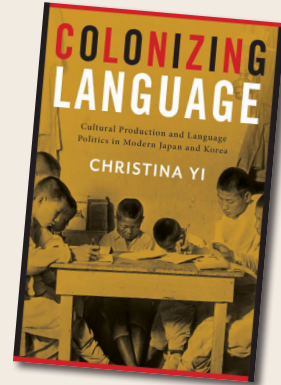
BOOK REVIEW

Colonizing Language: Cultural Production and Language Politics in Modern Japan and Korea

By Christina Yi

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xxx + 211 pages.

Reviewed by Patrick HEINRICH



In Christina Yi's *Colonizing Language*, we learn that colonialism and nationalism provide for overlapping and often contradictory ideologies that have framed discourses on language and literature until today. This book is a detailed discussion about Korea, the Japanese empire, and Zainichi (resident Koreans) in Japan from the perspective of Korean authors writing in Japanese. Organized into six chapters, with an introduction and an epilogue, Yi discusses such works of literature, the participation of their authors in literary circles, and the changing reception of their publications. Yi states that the objective is to show “how Japanese-language literature by Korean writers emerged out of and stood in opposition to discourses of national language, literature, and identity” (p. xvi). She aims to discuss this kind of literature beyond the concept of national literature because doing otherwise would erase the existence or downplay the importance of these works, and it would also hide the circumstances in which it was written, published, discussed, and read.

Chapter 1, “National Language Ideology in the Age of Empire,” prepares the ground for the discussions that follow. The tension between a national language ideology that claims unity but produces difference is discussed by portraying publication opportunities for Korean Japanese-language writers and the colonial relationship that is reproduced in the publication and reception of their work. All of this manifests in plots, characters, and in the use of the Japanese language itself. In order to illustrate this, Yi discusses works by Chang Hyökchu and Kim Söngmin.

Chapter 2, “Let Me in: Imperialization in Metropolitan Japan,” first addresses the market for and interest in Japanese-language literature written by Koreans, while the second part offers an analysis of concrete works of literature, mainly Kim Saryang's *Tenma* (Pegasus). This novel is a critical parody of the relations and the biases of Japanese editors and readers vis-à-vis Korea and Korean writers. The chapter is an illustrative portrayal of how such literature was written, published, and read.

Chapter 3, “Envisioning a Literature of the Imperial Nation,” deconstructs the center-periphery binary by drawing on the works of Yi Kwangsu, Yi Chöngnae, and Obi Jüzö. It shows how the project of national literature (*kokumin bungaku*), which put literature into the service of the nation, was fraught with contradictions and ambiguity. What exactly it meant

to be an imperial subject and what exactly the ontological position of Korean literature and Korean writers was within *kokumin bungaku* were never clear.

From chapter 4, “Coming to Terms with the Terms of the Past,” Yi shifts to the postwar. As discussed in previous chapters, the empire had been filled with ambiguities. These were not resolved in the postwar. Efforts were made to come to terms with the empire by erasing and reframing past experiences, ideas, and literary output. However, the legacy of the empire (e.g. higher fluency in written Japanese vis-à-vis Korean) ran counter to efforts of nationalizing Japanese literature. Attempts to surmount these legacies were complicated by the fact that the imperial terms and concepts lingered on in the memories of everyone involved. Yi explores these themes by discussing the works of Miyamoto Yuriko, Chang Hyökchu, and Yuzurihara Masako.

Chapter 5, “Colonial Legacies and the Divided ‘I’ in Occupation-Period Japan,” starts with very detailed background information. The sociohistorical divide of 1945 changed what it meant to be a Korean author writing in Japanese. Literature assumed new meanings, too. This is exemplified by the works of Kim Talsu. The language he uses is now no longer *kokugo* but *nihongo*, and Kim is no longer an imperial subject but a *zainichi*, and what his works imply is subject to change as well. Yi aptly discusses the “battlefield of open meanings” in this context (p. 108). There is no semiotic stability here because meaning rests in its interrelation with the changing context.

Chapter 6, “Collaboration, Wartime Responsibility, and Colonial Memory,” focuses on terminology. It demonstrates how the idea and insistence on nationhood inform the postwar discourses of the empire. The main authors discussed in this chapter are Yi Kwangsu and Tanaka Hidemitsu. In Japan this discourse is centered on wartime responsibility and in Korea on collaboration. There is seemingly no overlap between these two topics, because the idea of the nation informs these discussions and thus prevents their linking.

The epilogue offers a critical assessment how we approach Japan, Korean, *zainichi*, and Korean writers of Japanese-language works from the immediate postwar to today. It discusses various ways of how to come to grips with the colonial past and the many ways of rationalizing the transition to the postwar period. The ambiguities and contradictions manifest themselves very concretely in the lives of the Korean authors discussed in this book. While many might assume that the dominant ideas of what constitutes Japan, the Japanese, the Japanese language, or Japanese literature (and its Korean counterparts) correspond to facts, others are leading lives that are shaped by not being in line with these alleged facts and dominant frames. If there is something to be criticized about this book, then it would be only the lack of discussion about Japan’s and Korea’s autochthonous diversity, experiences, and literature, that is, Cheju, Okinawa, and Hokkaido, which also shared a similar fate.

Colonizing Language can be recommended to a wide range of readers. It connects discussions on the complex relations between colonizers and colonized, the role and position of Korean writers in the literary world of the empire and postwar Japan, and carefully explores the difficulties in coming to terms with the past. It is the skillful combination of these three strands that make this book so insightful and enjoyable to read. Yi strikes an excellent balance between concrete details, texts, and background information with more

abstract discussions and analysis. Her writing is insightful and elegant. Her book can be recommended to all students of social studies, sociolinguistics, the history of thought, and of course literary studies.