

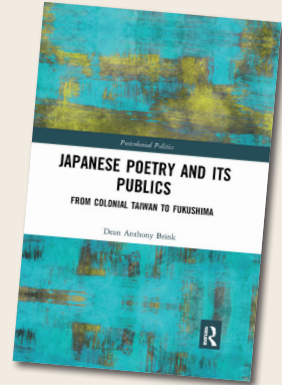
BOOK REVIEW

*Japanese Poetry and Its Publics:  
From Colonial Taiwan to  
Fukushima*

By Dean Anthony Brink

Routledge, 2018  
xii + 188 pages.

Reviewed by Laurence E. M. MANN



What is the point of studying poetry? This is a question that has crossed the mind of many a contemplative schoolchild, at one time or another. It is also sometimes a question levelled at scholars of literature by provocative colleagues, who perhaps see their own research areas as more practically useful to society, or better driven by data. It might even have been among the questions inherent in the Japanese government's 2015 challenge, to its national universities, to restructure humanities departments to "better meet society's needs."<sup>1</sup>

The answer to this question offered by *Japanese Poetry and Its Publics* is a complex and sophisticated one but, distilled to soundbite length, it might be something like: "Poetry has the power to influence society, either in the interests of, or against the interests of, ordinary people." One is reminded of Harry Harootunian's description of the relationship between discourse and ideology: "Words ... represent significations capable of mobilizing people to act or perceive their world in specific modalities, either to conform to forms of domination or to contest them."<sup>2</sup>

The overall aim of *Japanese Poetry and Its Publics* is to situate Japanese-language poetry, composed in Taiwan, in relation to a sophisticated set of interpretative frameworks that extend toward colonial and postcolonial discourses of power and identity and, beyond, to ecocriticism and media theory. The author, Dean Anthony Brink, contends that poetry can be appropriated and deployed in the service of political rhetoric and propaganda, as readily as it can be harnessed to express diverse and dynamic postcolonial identities, democratic resistance to past and present injustices, and the type of pleasure-centered excess called *jouissance* by poststructuralists. Poetry is thus not to be treated as any sort of straightforward artistic abstraction. Rather, it consists in a function of language that reifies, and is interdependent with, society and politics. Traditional Japanese poetic forms, such as *tanka*, *haiku*, and *senryū*, depend on matrices of intertextuality that lend to them a formidable potency, as tools of social critique, especially in the hands of the skilled poets introduced in this book.

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1 Grove 2015.

The volume is divided into six chapters, plus acknowledgements, an introduction, an appendix of poems, and an index. Chapters 1 and 2 begin Brink's exposition of his theory of poetic matrices of intertextuality, deployed, through classical Japanese verse forms, in support of the imperialist project in Taiwan. Chapter 1 portrays the adoption and adaption of various aspects of classical Japanese poetic imagery and rhetoric, including seasonal words and *utamakura*, as means to virtualize nature in the colony and encode Japanese possession of the island. Chapter 2 is an exploration of the complex power dynamics and intertextual frameworks in which Japanese-language poets in colonial Taiwan positioned themselves, through the case study of New Year poems in newspapers. It makes a strong case for studying Japanese poetry in colonial contexts, by highlighting the potential of matrices of intertextuality underpinning traditional poetic forms to be deployed in non-traditional environments. This is one of the core arguments of the book.

Chapter 3 continues to demonstrate the role of traditional poetic forms in the rhetoric and propaganda of the Japanese, this time during the period of its worst aggression against China and the rest of Asia, in the run up to and during the Pacific War. Through its analysis of the work of several poets, the chapter demonstrates the ability of classical Japanese poetic forms to open up a web of intertextual potencies to the colonial project and, through the mythic visions of certain neo-nativist poets, their potential to create and support affective narratives of imperialism.

Chapters 4 and 5 form a distinct section that surveys the postwar activities of the *Taiwan kadan* (Taiwan Tanka Association), based on data gathered, in part, through the author's own membership of the association. This offers an insight into the diverse community of *tanka* poets living in Taiwan during this period, ranging from the Japanese-educated founding members, whose interests had been marginalized by both the Japanese and, later, the Kuomintang, to younger generations of Taiwanese, who assert new identities through an adopted Japanese voice. Invoking interpretative frameworks such as Benedict Anderson's "long-distance nationalism" (p. 138), chapter 5 focuses particularly on poems composed after 3.11. One question raised, but not fully answered, by the *Taiwan kadan* chapters, pertains to the significance of writing in Japanese for the younger, truly postcolonial, generation.

Chapter 6 rounds off the book's discussion of postcolonial identity construction and the renegotiation of affiliations for postcolonial rhetorical apparatus, through the lens of two case study poets who have created blogs dedicated to poetry in Japanese, Taiwanese, and other languages. The chapter broadens the scope of the matrixial interfaces invoked in previous chapters still further, to include the posthuman.

Part of a postcolonial politics series, *Japanese Poetry and Its Publics* delivers its own political messages with directness. Hegemons of all kinds are confronted head-on. On Japanese aggression during the 1930s and 1940s, for example, the author states: "I agree with Honda Katsuichi, who argues that ... Japan's war on China was a brutish opportunistic war of an imperialist against a country weakened by civil war and a horde of imperialists..." (p. 92). Taiwanese politicians also come in for an occasional beating—" [Sean] Lien lost the election in a back-lash against the KMT for losing touch with the needs of the people in its rush both toward an American model of neoliberalist plutocracy and cross-strait economic unification" (p. 121)—as does the post-3.11 Japanese administration that worked "to protect the nuclear power interests" (p. 140) and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, for its "exploitative and profit-fixated practices" (p. 141).

Few, in liberal democracies today, would disagree with the author's sentiments regarding the actions of the Japanese state during the years of its colonial expansion. However, the book's frank presentation of views sometimes tends toward oversimplicity, which occasionally impinges on the main theme of the text, poetry. For example, the contention, in chapter 1, that Tokugawa Japan "lived in the shadow of China" (p. 24), and that *kokugaku*-inspired rhetoric on the superior poetic capabilities of the Japanese was "somewhat of a bluff" (p. 24), since "in Taiwan, the Chinese composed far more sophisticated Chinese verse" (p. 25), is problematically reductionist. The notion that the Chinese write "better" *kanshi* and *kanbun* than the Japanese was itself sculpted by nationalist discourses and has injured scholarship of those types of text. Throughout the book, the author objects, rightly, to the reverse prejudice, against Taiwanese people composing Japanese verse.

Likewise, the treatment, in chapter 2, of a newspaper poem by a local Taiwanese poet, to commemorate the Japanese capture of Nanjing, raises more questions for me than it answers. The poem, translated by Brink as "Even pine decorations are stood up / to face the flag of the rising sun on the Nanjing Wall" is said to display "the inherent arrogant humour in naming anything as performing an imagined fantasy" (p. 75). The description continues: "The pine decorations thus take on an eerie presence in this poem, reflecting both the arrogance embodied even by a Taiwanese and the unmentionable transgressions of the violence" (p. 75). Where and when do the decorations take on this eerie presence? Is it in the reception of the poem in Taiwan today? Or in 1938? Did the poet, or readers, know much about the transgressions that had taken place, just a few weeks earlier? The author puts this last question aside (p. 73), but it is, in fact, an important one. To portray the poem as an "arrogant" distortion of the heinous realities of the Nanjing Massacre suggests that the poet was privy to some of the terrible truths of which we are now aware.

In conclusion, there is much to be learnt from this book. Perhaps its most significant contribution is to underscore that poetry can thrive in its entanglements with (sometimes unsavory) political rhetoric. In this, it echoes research by the likes of Elisabeth Kendall, who has highlighted the role of the Arab poetic tradition in the rhetoric of jihadi terrorist groups. In privileging the close relationships between poetic language and rhetoric, *Japanese Poetry and Its Publics* demonstrates the power of rhetoric. Like Plato, it is also concerned about the ends to which that power is deployed. Ultimately, the power to choose whether to appraise art in light of its support for, or opposition to, hegemonic discourses rests with the critic.

## REFERENCES

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