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REVIEWS

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

By **Christina Yi**. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. xxx, 211 pp. \$65.00.

Reviewed by
Andrew Harding

Christina Yi's short but compelling book examines Japanese language literature produced across the 1945 divide by Japanese and Korean writers who shared a preoccupation with the question of national language (J: *kokugo*, K: *kugo*) and its role in defining and redefining notions of imperial, and later national subjectivity. Rather than comparing and contrasting across an assumed ethno-cultural divide, or indeed contrasting texts written during empire with those produced after its collapse, Yi's analysis examines how these divisions themselves came to be inscribed and encoded within ideological assumptions about language and national representation. Far from asserting a unidirectional Japanization of an otherwise "authentic" Korean language, Yi's analysis demonstrates how both languages have been overdetermined by the assumption of a singular national experience. In the case of either



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language, the author argues, the ideals of national self-determination that shaped debates on language and literature in the immediate postwar period served to elide the experience of national indeterminacy that was both the vision and consequence of Pan-Asianism and its attendant assimilation policies.

The book is organized into roughly two halves across six rich but digestible chapters and a concluding epilogue. The first three chapters focus on the colonial era, particularly the 1930s and early 1940s, when policies aimed at producing ideal imperial subjects penetrated further and further into the daily lives of both Korean and Japanese citizens. Chapters four, five and six turn to the immediate postwar era, a period in which discussions of national language accompanied some fevered national soul-searching on both sides of the Tsushima Strait. This chronological organization is not, however, adopted to establish a sequential trajectory or continuous narrative. Citing Prasenjit Duara's concept of "bifurcated histories," Yi similarly approaches each object of analysis as its own moment in time, unpacking the referential frameworks that constitute each text, film, or debate as a synchronic phenomenon. Indeed, the writers that are introduced to us over the course of this study—ranging from ethnic Koreans writing from the metropole during empire, such as Chang Hyokchu, to postwar *zainichi* authors such as Kim Talsu, and Japanese authors who expressed a more equivocal relationship to Japanese language and identity, such as Yuzurihara Masako and Morisaki Kazue—are grouped here for the ways in which they have emphasized the situated and dialogical nature of language in response to assumptions that national language and national history converge along a line of diachronic development.

The first three chapters examine how imperial assimilation policies (*kōminka seisaku*), the metropolitan literary establishment, and notions of establishing a canon of imperial literature in Japanese, affected the process of Korea's signification as a colonial subject and responses to this in the form of literature and film. During the 1930s, Japanese expansion into Manchuria and its increasingly aggressive stance vis-à-vis China prompted a renewed metropolitan interest in Korea as both a physical and metaphysical bridge to the continent. In Japan, Yi argues, Japanese language literature written by Koreans was seized by the movers and shakers of the literary world as a vehicle which could translate Korean difference, in all its exotic and shameful wonder, for a Japanese audience. Yi cites the example of Kikuchi Kan, whose ambition

that Japanese would one day become a world language prompted him to establish fiction writing competitions aimed at Koreans writing in Japanese (Kan would later, of course, establish the Akutagawa Prize). In demonstrating the connection between the role Koreans were expected to play as writers (a role which was explicitly encouraged through literary competitions) and the role they were expected to play as imperial citizens (enforced through increasingly draconian assimilation laws), the author is able to delineate the discursive strictures within which Korean artists were forced to express themselves.

Following scholars such as John Lie and Leo Ching, Yi contends that imperialization policies did not so much require Korean subjects to become Japanese without residue but, rather, to become “useful” (Yi’s own phrase) for the metropole. In practice, she argues, the fact that Koreans could, and indeed *were*, writing in Japanese was held up as an affirmation of the increasingly worldly reach of Japanese institutions, while the Korean “difference” that they were seen to represent maintained a clear distinction between the imperial overlords and the colonial underlings. Japanese language literature, she argues, provided the perfect vehicle in this sense; it provided a window into a world of Korean difference while demonstrating the ability of the Japanese language to capture and house such difference. By contrast, through close readings of texts written in Japanese by Koreans during this time—her reading of Kim Saryang’s 1939 short story “Pegasus” is a particularly good example—Yi demonstrates how some writers worked within the confines of these strictures to expose and critique the skewed vision of reality those limitations imposed on the text. This call-and-response structure, in which Yi delineates both the material and immaterial parameters that framed cultural production before she examines the artistic responses to these limitations, is sustained throughout the book and works well in emphasizing the dialogical nature of national identity formation in Japan and Korea.

This emphasis on national identity as an ostensibly dialogical phenomenon is particularly important in the second half of the book, as Yi transitions to an analysis of language ideology in postwar Japan and Korea. Beginning in chapter four with a comparison of Miyamoto Yuriko’s “The Banshu Plain” (1947), Chang Hyökchu’s “Intimidation” (1953), and Yuzurihara Masako’s “Korean Lynching” (1949), Yi demonstrates how attempts by both Japanese and Korean writers to discursively extricate Korea from Japan and to (re)establish them as

independent, self-determining spheres of national sovereignty were unavoidably permeated by the imperialist logic of the previous years. On the one hand, the fact that the promise of imperial belonging had always been tacitly foreclosed by the barrier of ethnicity meant that the extrication of Korea from Japan hardly required much of an epistemic realignment for most. On the other hand, Yi reminds us that for many others, colonialism and its attendant program of assimilation was a *fait accompli* and remained the only explanatory framework for their experience of the present. Koreans who remained in Japan, Japanese returnees from the colonies (*hikiagesha*), and even Communists and Marxists who had been brought together in transnational anti-imperial solidarity had all been indelibly marked by the reality that had been empire. What had once been avowed knowledge—that the distinction between Korean and Japanese could be effaced by empire—thus became disavowed knowledge after empire’s collapse. What had been only tacitly acknowledged previously—that it was neither desirable nor possible that Koreans become indistinguishable from Japanese—shot to the surface of discourse as self-evident fact. It is within this framework that Yi turns to a discussion of the cultural movements in early postwar Japan and Korea in the last two chapters and asks, “who is the ‘I’ that narrates this newfound Korean national voice, makes accusations of collaboration, or laments complicity with empire?” These questions quite rightly direct her to problematize the postwar demonization of authors such as Yi Kwangsu and Chang Hyokchu as pro-Japanese collaborators; an attitude which resulted in them being struck from the Korean national canon for decades. As with her analysis of the pre-1945 period, the author’s close reading of postwar texts that are preoccupied with the question of what can and cannot be said, and of what can and cannot be heard when we assume language to be nation-talk, prompts us to consider how we might re-evaluate the colonial past as, for better or for worse, the foundation of our postcolonial present.

Synthesizing research and textual analysis across three languages, *Colonizing Language* is an important contribution to the field of East Asian studies simply in terms of the breadth of the archive from which it draws. But it is the conceptual framework that informs her analysis—one which understands national borders as being imposed on, rather than constitutive of, language *per se*—that will make this a study of interest not just for scholars of so-called “minority” literature in Japan and Korea, but for those working firmly within the national canons as well. Christina

Yi's examination of the ways in which authors have struggled to express their tentative relationship with national languages and how they have had to fight against, rather than work with, the signifying power of those languages, prompts the reader to acknowledge the tacit Cold War border logic which continues to govern area studies disciplines, and asks us to question what it is that literary canons purport to represent. In this respect, Yi's book also constitutes an important contribution to ongoing debates regarding the possibility (or impossibility) of World Literature. Yi's approach is thus very much a comparative one. Indeed, in outlining her methodology in chapter one she cites the work of Nishi Masahiko, one of the few prominent literary comparatists working in Japan today, as a key intellectual influence. Nishi's notion of Japanese Language Literature (*Nihongo bungaku*), which he defines as literature that deploys language with a conscious awareness of its inscribed borders (and not simply literature written in Japanese), informs Yi's analysis throughout, and it is this that allows her to analyze national language ideology in terms of what it renders legible or illegible, rather than as a kind of heliocentric system that measures texts in terms of proximity to a center.

By focusing its attention on national language as a system which must be negotiated by the writer, rather than simply acquired and occupied, one of the principle concerns of the book's analysis is the positionality of the writer vis-à-vis the language of their craft. Having dispensed with geopolitical boundaries as the always already assumed site of address, Yi pushes the question of whom national language speaks for to nuanced and interesting conclusions. Her intermittent discussions regarding the gender dynamics of "passing" provide some of the book's most interesting commentary in this reviewer's opinion, to the extent that the topic might have constituted a chapter by itself. By paying attention to the way national language ideology has offered access to a political community for some, while the material fact of ethnicity serves to foreclose that passage to others, Yi provides us with a glimpse of when, how and for whom imperial and later national membership has been sanctioned. Her insight, for example, that the transcendence of ethnic specificity offered by Japanese acculturation and language acquisition during empire was first and foremost a homosocial privilege for men and, indeed, required the active erasure of women from the public sphere, is an exciting step toward finding a framework outside of national difference from which to assess our postcolonial heritage in the present. Not only does it lay bare the misogynist foundations of imperial logic, it

also provides an avenue by which to critique the discursive underpinnings of postcolonial *ressentiment*; a line of inquiry which, while increasingly apparent in broader theoretical discussions of post-coloniality, has only just begun to make headway in the study of *zainichi* fiction. This is a potentially rich field of discussion and one that I hope Yi will continue to pursue in her future projects.

Beneath the Sleepless Tossing of the Planets: Selected Poems of Makoto Ōoka

By Makoto Ōoka. Translated by **Janine Beichman**, Kumamoto, Japan: Kurodahan Press, 2018, 173 pp. \$16.00.

Reviewed by
Jon Holt

Originally published by Katydid Press in 1995, *Beneath the Sleepless Tossing of the Planets: Selected Poems* is back in print. Its translator Janine Beichman and Kurodahan Press have re-released this slim but nicely sized anthology and thereby reaffirmed Ōoka's standing in Japanese literature. Ōoka's passing in 2017 was painfully felt by many, but Kurodahan has made sure that he will not be forgotten. With its bilingual format, allowing readers to enjoy Beichman's translation, *Beneath* will appeal to a wider range of readers than its previous incarnation did.

The book consists of sixty poems originally chosen by the translator across nine of the poet's collections from the 1970s and 1980s, although the majority of the poems are from Ōoka's work from the latter decade. Kurodahan kindly printed all of Ōoka's original Japanese works in the back of the book, which truly enhances its value as readers can enjoy both the poet's and Beichman's voices here, comparing as one is wont to do. It is easy to go from the Japanese originals to English translations with a running header indicating page locations. Modestly priced, this selection of Ōoka's poems will appeal to both English- and Japanese-language readers—a great place to discover his works. Essentially one is getting two books for one price. Photographs of Ōoka and reproductions