

Full Length Research

Women of Hope: *Zainichi* Writers in Postwar Japan

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The issue surrounding *Zainichi* Koreans (ethnic Koreans residing in Japan) is a relatively unknown one internationally, and has yet to be addressed properly by Japan. The social and political barriers that are still in place to this day continue to deny *Zainichi* of the same political rights, levels of education, and quality of life as Japanese citizens. I was particularly interested the literary works of female *Zainichi* writers because I found that their themes of sacrifice, hope and love were imperative to understanding the wider context of Japanese-Korean relations. Through the creation and care of children, whose existences were perverse contradictions to the mainstream Japanese identity, *Zainichi* women in these tales subverted Japan's policy of cultural assimilation. Their work served as critiques of the Japanese social system and denoted the lingering impact of Japan's thirty-five year colonialization decades after its end.

Keywords: *Zainichi Kankokujin*, Post-Colonialization, Popular Literature, Colonization, Identity

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INTRODUCTION

On-nyo notices the sun setting outside the window of the coffee shop she works at, and hurriedly finishes washing the dishes. Her head is filled with thoughts of getting home to make food for her young daughter. In her rush, she accidentally breaks the ceramic cups. As the Mama of the shop scolds her, she thinks back to the sturdy aluminum wares that were used by her family. They had cups that would never break if she threw them, and bowls which became too hot to hold once rice or soup was poured in.

This is the opening to Kim Ch'ang-saeng's 1988 novella *Akai mi* (Crimson Fruit), a story which follows On-nyo, a single mother making a living at a coffee shop in Japan who raises her young daughter alone. She is divorced from her husband, the man who had raped her. Her daughter, a witness to the assault, often disappears into an imaginary world in order to cope with the memories of domestic violence. The story alternates between the happenings of On-nyo's current life, the memories of her childhood growing up in Japan to Korean parents, her experience living with her ex-husband, and interactions with a mother-in-law who has sacrificed her own happiness for her son. The literature of Kim Ch'ang-saeng explores the lives of ordinary *Zainichi*

women who struggle with the “irreconcilable demands placed on [them] as Korean daughter, sister, wife, and mother” all the while striving to construct their own identities beyond their given roles (Ryu2011: 142).

Kim Ch’ang-saeng is just one of many *Zainichi* Koreans (ethnic Koreans residing in Japan, whom I will henceforth refer to as *Zainichi*), who has created new ways of looking at imperialist Japan from the view of a half-insider half-outsider. The works of several influential *Zainichi* female authors of the 1970s and 1980s tell similar accounts of the economic hardship and ostracism faced by those of Korean descent in the informal workplace, the factory or the home in the country of Japan. I will exclusively focus on the works of female writers because I believe that their tales of sacrifice, hope and love are significant to understanding the wider context of Japanese-Korean relations. How do the details of women’s lives reflect the tragedies for many *Zainichi* in postcolonial Japan? How do their tales of mundane events subvert Japan’s desire for assimilation? Through an analysis of the short works of three influential *Zainichi* women writers and a brief overview of life in colonial and postcolonial Japan I will show the usefulness of these stories of hope and suffering in subverting Japan’s policy of cultural assimilation.

PART 1: A brief overview on *Zainichi* writers

For *Zainichi* writers, Japan’s language assimilation policies in the 1930s led to an increased number of texts written in Japanese rather than in Korean. Elise Foxworth categorizes *Zainichi* writers of this period as the First Generation, a label which encompasses prominent authors such as Kim Sa Ryang and Kim Tal Su. The literature of this generation places a heavy emphasis on colonialism, American imperialism, the Korean War, the unification and recovery of Korean identity (Foxworth 2006:46). On the world stage, all countries had at least grudging respect for Japan for its role as a burgeoning industrial and economic powerhouse. For many authors who detested the Western imperial powers, the empire of Japan was now a symbol of hope.

The second generation of writers appear during the 1950s-1970s, a very significant time period. In the 1950s, Japan was still recovering from its defeat in World War II and was undergoing drastic social restructuring. Japan’s army was dissolved, its colonial empire crumbled and the nation’s economy and education system had to be rebuilt. These changes exacerbated many of Japan’s already existing problems, which was especially damaging to those at the bottom of Japan’s social hierarchy. *Zainichi* literature of this era tell of the social ills, poverty, unemployment issues, racism, domestic violence, alienation, and feelings of identity fragmentation associated with colonial and post-colonial projects of

disenfranchisement and racism (Foxworth 2006:47). According to Nayoung Aimee Kwon, at this time when imperial borders were in flux, imperial expansion and technology were what brought both former colony and metropole closer together (2010:425). *Zainichi* authors such as Lee Hoe Sung, Kim Ha Gyong and Lee Yang Ji emerged amidst growing public demand for *Zainichi* fiction in postwar Japan from people of both Korean and Japanese descent. Kwon uses the term “colonial kitsch” to explain this fetishization of “exotic” objects produced by the colonies (2010:437). Ironically, these fetishized works of literature produced by Japan’s former colonial subjects consciously or unconsciously condemn the very people who consume them.

The 1990s was a period of renaissance for *Zainichi* writers who were born, raised and continued to live in Japan as permanent resident aliens. According to Lisa Yoneyama, “The early twentieth century proletarian writers’ transnational networks in East Asia and the dominant leftist concerns of the postwar Japanese literary establishment have fostered readerships for Korean writer’s Marxist critiques of the Japanese colonial system” (2000:103). Women novelists, critics, columnists, and journal editors began to emerge. The works of these later generations, who have gained visibility in a variety of genres, provided scathing criticisms of Japan’s colonial and postcolonial policies through the culture industry.

PART 2: *Placing Zainichi works in context*

The modern day understanding of hegemony is as a non-physical form of domination over certain groups through means such as deception, required assimilation and social reproduction. Karl Marx himself devised the concept of social reproduction, the idea that social inequality could be transmitted from one generation to the next through certain structures and activities that reproduce inequality (Doob 2008:10). Japan’s colonization of Korea for three and a half decades from 1910-1945 is one example of Japanese hegemony whose social reproduction of inequality and discrimination continues to have far-reaching implications for Koreans living in Japan and for those living in Korea.

The notions of the physical body and its connection to family are central to the justification of Japan’s hegemony. Ryang writes, “Culturally—and more controversially speaking, ‘racially’—Japan’s empire centers on East Asian Confucian heritage” (2000:2). For Japan, this perceived shared heritage validated its promotion of *Naissen ittai* (one body of Japan and Korea). Strongly tied to *Naissen ittai* was the analogy of East Asia as family, with Japan as the big brother figure to Korea. Lee refers to this dialogue as “imperial Japan’s double discourse of assimilation that constructed an illusion of . . . the bodily connection of Korea to metropolitan Japan”

(2007:39). With Japan leading the way towards modernization and Korea following in its older brother's footsteps to achieve similar success, Japan justified its colonialization and its harsh treatment of its Korean subjects.

Moreover, many Koreans who migrated to Japan at the turn of the 20th century, found themselves thrown in with the undesirable elements of society. The biggest wave of migration from Korea to Japan was triggered by the labor shortages in the 1920s. By 1945, it is estimated that as many as 2 million ethnic Koreans resided in Japan, most of them poor agricultural workers and farmers from Korea's southern provinces. The majority, who did not possess the necessary education and literacy ability to find well-paying jobs, found work as laborers in the construction and mining industries. *Zainichi*, according to John Lie, occupied the lowest level in the urban labor market along with *Burakumin* (a Japanese outcast group) and Okinawans (2008: 4). Needless to say, moving up on the social ladder was a challenging task for these migrants.

Migrants often settled in Korean ghettos where distinct language, clothing, and food customs were maintained. These enclaves had their own distinctive Korean food markets, restaurants, Korean shamans and doctors, among other services. Because most migrants migrated to Japan to seek out better economic opportunities, it is understandable that most, like the people living in the well-known Korean neighbourhood of Ikaino in Osaka, were by no means well-off.

For the non-Japanese populations residing in Japan at the end of World War 2, Japan's defeat had another terrible set of consequences. *Zainichi* were stripped of their suffrage and fired from government jobs because they were no longer considered Japanese nationals. Contrarily, the Japanese government justified rejecting the creation of Korean ethnic schools in 1948 by referring to *Zainichi* as members of Japanese society rather than Korean. The *Zainichi*, denied of the rights and cultural freedoms of Japanese citizens, were alienated from the body politic, reinforcing the status of Japanese as the superior group at a politically unstable time (Lie 2008: 37).

Many *Zainichi* were confronted with a dilemma after Korea's liberation. About 600,000 chose to remain in Japan while another 1-1.4 million left the Japanese archipelago (Lie 2008: 34). Some who had initially left, found themselves returning to Japan due to the lack of economic opportunities or modernization in Korea. One person who returned to Japan after six months in Korea expressed the difficulty of adapting to life away from the country he had lived in his whole life. He said, "There was no place to live, there was no place to work... Furthermore, I couldn't speak Korean well" (Lie 2008: 34-35).

PART 3: The works of influential *Zainichi* writers

By the early 1970s, three-quarters of *Zainichi* were Japanese-born. The rapid economic growth of postwar Japan also improved the living standards for many *Zainichi*. However, it is important to note that housing discrimination and participation in Japan's education system still presented a challenge to integration into Japanese society (Lie 2008: 34). In Chong Ch'u-Wol's "*Waga aisuru Chōsen no onnatachi*" (The Korean Women I Love), published in 1974, the gap between the *Zainichi* standard of living and the rest of the nation was keenly felt.

Chong Ch'u-Wol portrays the pains of motherhood and of raising children in *Ikaino-ku*, the Korean neighbourhood in Osaka. In the story's introduction, the narrator states that prior to becoming a mother, she strongly felt that she was "only a woman-in-training" (Wender 2011:114). In the foreword, Chong alludes to the essence of *Ikaino* women's lives when she writes:

Supposing that 10,000 of those people are women who have been connected with reincarnation through their own flesh, those days of the 10,000 of me are filled with the unrewarded love that is maternal love, with the actions willed by maternal love... For women, the home is like the head of a Korean folk dancer. A head that tosses back and forth furiously and spins around. The ribbon flowing from the headdress like beams of light. The craziness and ecstasy of the ribbon can purify, make more beautiful, bring a feeling of rightness to, women's hips, which never break the rhythm of daily work, making them like feet planted firmly on the continent.

(Chong translated in Wender 2011:114-115).

Her introduction evokes an image of home as a place of healing, but also as a place of incessant busyness. Chong links parts of the body associated with motherhood (the hips and belly) not only to positive feelings of healing and love, but also to the weight of a mother's duty. Her subsequent stories, a collection of different fictional women's tales, touch upon the joys and trials of motherhood, mothers' connection to the earth through their ability to produce life, and the physical pains of their obligations to family.

The first story is the tale of Nyo-hwa, a forty-two year-old mother of two sons, and the wife to an abusive husband. During the day, he works diligently making lapel pins out of the hazardous pin press on the first floor of their small house, but at night, he drinks heavily and occasionally beats her. "But Nyo-hwa was not silent," Chong writes. "Nyo-hwa believed that to return his hits and screams was an expression of her love" (Chong translated in Wender 2011:115-116). Marx's concept of social reproduction explains why these rough living conditions, a familiar scene for many *Zainichi*, were hard to escape from for disadvantaged families. Families needed money and most men and women could only find

dangerous and tiring work due to their lack of qualifications. Men would often direct their frustration at their wives, creating a degree of physical danger for these women, and turning the home into a breeding ground of discontent.

The second story is of Chŏng-Sun, a thirty five year-old mother of two girls. She makes money from home sewing, but her husband is sure to “snatch up whatever money they’ve got and run out the door” (Chong translated in Wender 2011:116). He goes off to the gambling den, and after he’s been gone for a couple of days, Chŏng-Sun will go around to the bars and restaurants he frequents to look for him. If he’s lost big, she will probably be found in the mah-jongg parlor. Once she drags him back home, she begins her work again, “[sewing] herself an armor of leather”, feeling secure because her husband is now at home (Chong translated in Wender 2011:116). The story continues, “Chŏng-sun finds one ray of hope in the yelling of her sulking husband... He’s too kind. Chŏng-sun’s husband, with his kind disposition, screams ‘Shut up! You’ve got no fucking luck.’ His scream reverberates, spreading equanimity.” (Chong translated in Wender 2011: 117)

The third story is of sixty-year-old Ok-Hŭi, a widow with seven children. She provides for her family by selling kimchi, bean sprouts, and dried fish at the Korean market. She is proudest of her eldest son, who set up a business of the dirt floor of his own house and became a subcontractor to the place where he used to work. When the company began to cut back on costs, she goes to borrow money from a *Tanomoshikō*, or money-lending circle, to help her son’s business. The *tanomoshikō*, Chong explains, is “the sole source of financing for *Ikuno-ku* women which did not require collateral or a guarantor or a seal or technical language or complicated forms.” She goes on to write, “The goddess of good fortune smiled upon Ok-hŭi, and as a result, she found herself owing 9,900 yen in interest, rounded off, for each 10,000 yen that she borrowed.” (Chong translated in Wender 2011: 117-118). The author uses irony here because Ok-hŭi is being charged an exorbitant amount of interest by the *tanomoshikō*.

The next story is of Chun-ja, a fifty year old widow who glues soles onto sandals for a living. The sandal sole-making gives her severe blisters and the ventilation fans of the factory next door blow in toxic adhesive fumes which she breathes in. Much like Ok-Hŭi, Chun-ja’s grown son is her pride and joy. As a horse race bookie, her son “has the world—a factory worker, all sorts of men in business for themselves, such as the manager of a business dealing in paper recycling—wrapped around his little finger.” Her son rids himself of the money he earns by purchasing alcohol. “In the silent streets, while everyone sleeps, her son walks along reciting poetry. ‘Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it.’” (Chong translated in Wender 2011: 120).

For Japan as a nation, the *Naissen ittai* discourse of the united body and reference to family bonds was a way to deny the political boundaries between Japan and Korea. *Zainichi* literature contrastingly uses the image of the body as a symbol of heterogeneity. The expulsion of new life through childbirth and the raising of a “non-Japanese” child during motherhood became ways with which writers resist assimilation and uphold their hybrid identities. The literature of suffering “non-Japanese” people in the home, at work, and in their communities condemns Japan for its denial of the same political rights, levels of education, and quality of life as Japanese citizens.

Kwon observes that *Zainichi* writers’ “representations of the colonized” embody the ironies and contradictions of violent imperial encounters (2010:423). These stories of *Ikuno-ku* women and their families, toiling for the sake of a better future, capture the essence of the *Zainichi*’s struggle. What motivates these women are not thoughts of escape and emancipation, but thoughts of working hard to survive, of making sacrifices with the hopes that their children will be able to have a better future. While some may argue that these are cases of female submission to traditional gender roles established by the Japanese/Korean patriarchy, that belief carries with it problematic assumptions. It denies the agency of these women, by assuming that all women are after a concrete universal goal without taking into consideration significant cultural differences. As Joan W. Scott argues, “subjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them” (1991:793). In these stories of women’s struggle, the choices they make in their adverse circumstances to suffer for the sake of their loved ones is a testament of their agency.

While some of these women made the choice to stay in Japan for the sakes of their families, others left for Korea in search of a place to belong, a country where their ethnic status did not warrant unequal treatment and a place where their heritage could be accepted. However, *Zainichi* who leave for Korea often found they could not truly fit in neither in this foreign new country nor the country they came from. This confusion of hybrid identities is something that Yi Yang-ji addresses in her 1985 novel *Koku* (also readable as *Toki* meaning “Time”). Yi Yang-ji is one of the first prominent female *Zainichi* writers to receive critical acclaim for her literary works. She is a politically active author who highlights issues of ethnic identity in her writing, the exclusion from Japanese citizenship being something she personally experienced while in living in Japan. She has journeyed to Korea to study Korean language, music and dance, and these motifs have since become central aspects of her stories.

In *Koku*, her protagonist Sumi is a *Zainichi* who has gone to Korea to study Korean language, history, music,

and dance. She struggles with the lack of routine in this new country, which she feels has an “unbearably loud noise of people chattering with each other in Korean” and longs for “Japan’s soft, moist air” (Yi translated in Sherif 2011:138). She notes the barriers of language learning as a Japanese-speaking Korean in a school with other Japanese-Koreans. Sumi is the owner of a *Kayagŭm* (a Korean board zither with 12 silk strings, similar to the Japanese *koto*). One of the strings on the instrument unfortunately breaks, triggering a surge of emotion. After she violently cuts away the rest of the strings, she laments that the *Kayagŭm* looks “like a naked woman... A woman hung upside down—her mouth gaping open unattractively, a strand of her hair hanging down” (Yi translated in Sherif 2011: 135). The last portion of the story describes Sumi’s dream where she questions the existence of the world and the history of the divided Korea. “Japanese imperialism controlled Korea for thirty-six years,” Sumi says. “And now this peninsula is divided into two nations. [From] 1910, 1945, 1950, 1965, and 198—. What do you think?” (Yi translated in Sherif 2011: 141).

Yi Yang-ji’s language of the female body is quite different from the symbol of motherhood and beauty that Chong uses. The expression of the *Kayagŭm* as a disfigured woman’s body acts as a metaphor for the victimized *Zainichi* body, tormented by feelings of alienation from the place she thinks of as home—Japan—and this foreign new land she feels little connection with. In the last line, Yi seems to be addressing the reader directly, questioning why history has made *Zainichi* suffer so.

CONCLUSION

The anthropological gaze includes all forms of writing including the mundane because stories of ordinary life are often related to broader, complex social events, which Barton believes “shed light on wider processes of social and cultural change”(2010:10). At the heart of these stories we have discussed, themes of love and hope coexist with experiences of poverty and human suffering, all of which are affected by a violent history of Japanese imperialism. The struggle for identity in Kim Ch’ang-saeng’s tale, the trials of motherhood in Chong’s work, and the feelings of alienation Sumi feels in *Kokuare* as much reflections of *Zainichi* women as they are critiques of the Japanese social system which oppress them. Their stories are reminders to the reader of the damaging impact of Japan’s thirty-five year colonialization. These stories are important to writers because they are products of the authors’ own experiences of ostracization and pain while living in Japan. It is through this expression of pain and suffering that they hope to create a better world for themselves.

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