

Book Review

Review of John Lie ed., *Zainichi Literature: Japanese Writings by Ethnic Koreans* (Berkeley: University of California, 2019)

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According to its editor John Lie, the term “Zainichi” is used as “a common referent to a demographic group: postcolonial ethnic or diasporic Koreans in Japan.”¹ As Lie notes in his introductory essay, “Zainichi are overrepresented in the top echelon of the literary world,” especially throughout the postwar era.² In 1972, for example, Lee Hoesung (Ri Kaisei) won the Akutagawa Prize—the most prestigious literary award in Japan—for *A Woman Striking a Washing Board* [*Kinuta wo utsu onna*], depicting his mother in prewar Japan. “The event,” Lie writes, “inaugurated a Zainichi Korean literature boom in Japan.”³ Another and more recent instance is Che Sil’s *The Puzzle of Jini* [*Jini no pazuru*], which was published in 2016. For this celebrated debut novel that “traces the ‘puzzle’ of the Zainichi protagonist’s identity struggles from her ethnic Korean school in Japan to a school in Oregon,” she received a number of awards, including the Gunzo New Writers’ Prize—one of the most promising pathways to success for emerging writers in Japan.⁴ Likewise, since the end of the Second World War, within the field of poetry, Zainichi Koreans have shown notable achievements. Kim Sijong who “wrote extensively in prose about Zainichi identity” is one among many examples of a prominent postwar Zainichi Korean poet.⁵ It can thus be argued that Zainichi writers have made significant contributions to the development of the Japanese literary world.

As a consequence of these distinguished accomplishments, “the secondary literature [on Zainichi writers] in Japanese is immense.”⁶ Major works by popular Zainichi novelists and poets are available in

school libraries in Japan. Nonetheless, John Lie points out, “almost all the major bookstores in Japan [have] placed works of Zainichi literature under the category of foreign literature, not as part [of] Japanese literature, presumably on the ground that ethnic Koreans were foreigners in monoethnic Japan.”⁷ As Lie hints, this categorizing decision, which is characteristic of the ethnic homogeneity of modern Japan, is deeply relevant to the pressing issue of hate speech targeting ethnic Koreans in Japan—yet, this is the subject for another book. In contrast with the affluence of Japanese materials, with few exceptions, there are almost no English translations of the works of Zainichi writers. Academic papers that we can read in English on Zainichi Korean literature are also very limited. Hence, “there is nary any recognition of Zainichi literary achievements, perhaps even its very existence, elsewhere”; and Lie declares that *Zainichi Literature* “seeks to redress the neglect.”⁸ Here lies the unparalleled importance of this ambitious publication. I would also like to highlight the significance of the unique methodology adopted in order to make the edited volume possible. According to the author, Lie and his collaborators co-organized two workshops that centrally involved students. In the workshops, students translated several literary works of Zainichi writers in cooperation with researchers. One of the contributors of the book states that these opportunities provided her students with “new learning experiences” for understanding “the social context, historical background, and cultural nuances” behind each piece, prompting them to continue studying the related topics voluntarily.⁹

Zainichi Literature consists of seven chapters that contain various writings—essays, novels, and poems—of Zainichi Koreans, from the interwar period to the 1990s. These constitute, in their totality, “the considerable diversity of style and substance within the common lot of Zainichi life,” which seek to challenge the widespread essentialist discourses concerning Zainichi Koreans.¹⁰ The first and second chapters include some relevant Zainichi literary pieces created during the colonial period: Kim Saryang’s “Letter to Mother” and “Colonial Koreans and Peninsulars” (Chapter 1), and Kim Talsu’s “Trash” (Chapter 2). Both Kim Saryang and Kim Talsu are Zainichi Korean novelists who became prominent in wartime Japan. “Letter to Mother,” “a pseudo-

autobiographical” essay describing the experience of a young man who “went to Tokyo to be educated in the colonial education system” and “rose to the limelight of the Japanese literary establishment,” foregrounds one of the colonial divides left by Japanese imperialism.¹¹ At the very end of the letter to his “Beloved Mother,” the sender suggests to her mother to ask her daughter (that is, the sender’s sister) to “translate this letter from Japanese” so that she can read it: a linguistic gap opened up by Japan’s colonial assimilation policies.¹² “Colonial Koreans and Peninsulars,” written by Kim Saryang in response to a Japanese person’s question “what do you people really prefer to be called, a colonial Korean or a Peninsular?” deals with “the issue of naming and labeling the racialized.”¹³ The story recalls John Lie’s contention in his concluding essay that the name is “one of the most salient issues in the making of Zainichi identity.”¹⁴ Kim Talsu’s “Trash,” “a short, humorous sketch about a Korean colonial subject making his living in mainland Japan as a scrap collector,” based on his own experience of working as a junk collector, captures the oppressive climate of imperial Japan through the eyes of colonized Koreans.¹⁵ The writings by three contemporary Zainichi Korean novelists appear in the third, fifth, and seventh chapters: Yang Sögil’s “In Shinjuku” (Chapter 3), Won Soo-il’s “Lee-kun’s Blues” (Chapter 5), and Yü Miri’s “Specimens of Families” (Chapter 7). In divergent manners and from different angles, these all depict the Zainichi Korean community—their inner political struggles, their inter-generational discrepancies, and their complex identities, both as individuals and as members of wider communities.

The fourth and sixth chapters introduce the world of Zainichi poetry. Lee Jungja’s *tanka* poems (the thirty-one-syllable poem composed of the 5-7-5 upper phrase and the 7-7 lower phrase) selected from *Nagune Taryong: Eternal Traveler* (Chapter 4) and Oka Masafumi’s poetry writings extracted from *I Am Twelve* (Chapter 6) describe the difficult Zainichi identity in different styles. Lee Jungja’s “Tinnitus” in the fourth chapter portrays “the poet’s struggle in the dichotomous framework between Korea and Japan.”¹⁶

there is a poem

generated
 while stepping on the heart
 that can fully trust
 neither japanese [nor] korean¹⁷

At the same time, and in contrast, it should be underscored that Lee shows an “attempt to transcend such contradictions” and tries to “express the moment of joy in between.”¹⁸ The sixth chapter, which contains poems written by Oka Masafumi when he was a teenager, is particularly impressive and utterly heart breaking. The father of Oka Masafumi is Ko Sa-myeong (Kō Shimei), a well-known second-generation Zainichi Korean essayist. One summer day in the mid-1970s, Oka Masafumi threw himself from a high-rise building. When he tragically committed suicide, he was just twelve years and nine months old. What was left behind him was only a notebook where he had written a large number of poems. *I Am Twelve* is the title of the book that includes these poems, which was subsequently published by Ko Sa-myeong and his wife—that is, Oka Masafumi’s mother—Oka Yuriko in 1976. The word “myself” repeatedly appears in Oka Masafumi’s poems. One clear example is the painful line “Give myself back.”¹⁹ This seems to portray Oka Masafumi’s struggle in desperately pursuing a concept of subjectivity detached from the constraints of ethnicity.

Zainichi literature includes two insightful essays by John Lie at the beginning (Introduction) and at the end (Appendix). In his Introduction, Lie outlines the historiography of the literary works of ethnic or diasporic Koreans in Japan. In delineating its historical trajectory, he stresses the complexities involved in trying to state a meaningful definition of “Zainichi literature,” which naturally impacts how one might study this subject properly. However, precisely due to these difficulties, as Lie asserts, the “[c]lassification of Zainichiness and Zainichi literature raises the inevitable question of belonging and identity,”²⁰ Lie’s essay, “Zainichi Recognition: Kin Kakuei in the 1960s,” which follows the final chapter, discusses the literary pieces of Kin Kakuei that he created chiefly in the 1960s. Although his work is not included in the volume itself, Kin is an outstanding Zainichi Korean novelist whose most important work

is *The Frozen Mouth* [*Kogoeru kuchi*], which was written in 1966 (Kin killed himself at the early age of 46). Dispassionately narrating one long day in the life of a Zainichi Korean who stutters, the model of which appears to be Kin himself, *The Frozen Mouth* portrays the protagonist's uncertain identity, polarized as it is between two national communities, namely, Japan and Korea. This enforced polarization casts a critical eye on the issue of a fixed identity, at the same time as it sheds light on the oppressive nature of a homogeneous community. Referring to, while at the same time challenging, the oft-cited concept of "minor literature" as has been theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Lie attempts to unearth "the possibility of being in between Korea and Japan: Zainichi identity" in Kin Kakuei's oeuvre.²¹

In conclusion, I should like to raise two questions in relation to the subject of Zainichi literature. The first is about "the burden of representation," the phrase employed by cultural studies scholar Kobena Mercer at the beginning of the 1990s. In the midst of the rise of black British art (the art of black people who share the ethnic background of the former British colonies), Mercer critically discusses "the burden of representation." He maintains that black British artists "are burdened with the impossible task of speaking as 'representatives,' in that they are widely expected to 'speak for' the marginalized communities from which they come."²² It seems to me that a similar "burden" has been imposed on Zainichi cultural producers. How do we continue to explore the largely neglected realm of Zainichi literature—not by enforcing the impossible burden of representation placed on the shoulder of Zainichi writers but by entering into critical dialogue with their marginalized voices? The second question is: how do we compare Zainichi literature with other ethnic minority or diasporic literatures, in order to generate new insights? In this regard, *Minor Transnationalism*, the volume co-edited by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, may be helpful. Instead of seeking to identify "minor" subjects solely in opposition to hegemonic discourses, we might aim to "examine the relationship among different margins."²³ Given "that the minority and the diasporic live within the space of increasing global integration brought on by globalizing forces in communication, migration, and capital flow, within the circulation of

global cultures, ideas, and capital,” how do we connect the different, and sometimes geographically remote terrains of ethnic minority or diasporic literature productively?²⁴ John Lie’s edited collection of Zainichi literature offers itself as an indispensable reference to begin addressing these difficult questions.

Notes

¹ John Lie, ed., *Zainichi Literature: Japanese Writings by Ethnic Koreans* (Berkeley: University of California, 2019), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28, 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

²² Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 235.

²³ Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, introduction to *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.