

# The Limits of Japanese-Language Exchange: On Yang Kui's "Shinbun Haitatsufu"

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This short essay is an attempt to sketch out some of the Japanese-language textual movements that occurred in the 1930s, a period marked by a simultaneous increase in Japanese military aggressions and inter-colonial literary interactions. The essay focuses specifically on "Shinbun haitatsufu" ("The Paper-boy"), a Japanese-language text by the Taiwanese author Yang Kui (1905–1985). As Japan's first formal colony, Taiwan had become home to a young generation of colonial subjects who had been educated primarily through the Japanese colonial education system by the early 1930s. A number of these individuals found an avenue to write against empire and its discontents via international proletarianism, even as they found themselves in constant negotiation, confrontation, and contention with their Japanese peers over the value and meaning of their works.

Yang Kui was one such individual. His story "Shinbun haitatsufu" centers around a Taiwanese youth ("Watakushi," or "I/me") who works as a newspaper delivery boy in Tokyo. "I" is fired after only twenty days, and denied the return of his security deposit. That same day, he receives a letter from his mother informing him that two of his younger siblings have died and that she herself is on the brink of death. Rather than try to continue earning money under an exploitative system, "I" joins a pro-labor movement. Inspired by everything he's learned in Tokyo, "I" decides at the end of the story to return to Taiwan in order to improve the conditions of his fellow workers back home.

"Shinbun haitatsufu" won second place in a literary contest sponsored by *Bungaku hyōron* (*Literary Review*) in October 1934, making Yang the first Taiwanese writer to win a literary prize in mainland Japan.<sup>(1)</sup> The panel of judges included such prominent leftist writers as Tokunaga Sunao (1899–1958), Chūjō (later Miyamoto) Yuriko (1899–1951), and Kubokawa (later Sata) Ineko (1904–1998). Printed alongside the

story were the judges' comments, many of which noted the clumsiness of Yang's prose. Tokunaga Sunao, for example, wrote the following: "This story is by no means well written. It is not even fully formed as a story. Despite that, it has great appeal. Like the subjugation of the Indians by American capital – it has the same bloody air."<sup>(2)</sup>

Why did the judges award a literary prize to "Shinbun haitatsufu," even while claiming that it lacked literary merit? One answer lies in understanding the journal itself, which was formed in the wake of such high-profile events as the Manchurian Incident of 1931, a wave of mass arrests of known and suspected communists in Japan in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the dissolution of the Japan Proletarian Writers League (*Nihon puroretaria sakka dōmei*; NALP) in February 1934. The Manchurian Incident also instigated a new emphasis on assimilation policies in the colonies, particularly when it came to raising the levels of Japanese language comprehension. Taiwanese or Korean writers who wrote in Japanese could be held up by the colonial government as proof that assimilation policies in the colonies were working; the writers themselves, meanwhile, could take advantage of that eagerness to publish things in Japanese that would have been unable to get past the censors otherwise.<sup>(3)</sup> Many Japanese proletarian writers therefore looked to the colonies (and colonial writers) as a medium through which anti-imperialist critiques could still be made.

*Bungaku hyōron* was founded in 1934 as an attempt to keep open a space (however constrained) for leftist thought. The journal particularly welcomed contributions from aspiring writers from the colonies as well as the Japanese countryside, in the hopes of enabling the transformation of workers from the objects to the subjects of class revolution. In other words, the journal's founders identified the act of writing as the very process through which a politicized,

proletarian subjectivity could come into being. The comments from the *Bungaku hyōron* judges include words like “direct,” “honest,” “earnest” – qualities that came from (not despite) the alleged clumsiness of Yang’s Japanese prose. The “poor” quality of the writing seemed to in fact authenticate the author’s own experiences and political message, one that had been untainted by bourgeois aesthetics. Notably, these same adjectives would also get applied in later issues to works by aspiring Japanese writers with a working-class background.

What the Japanese editors of *Bungaku hyōron* failed to acknowledge, however, were the tensions and ambivalences between “universal” class revolution and anti-colonial independence movements. Writing on Korean-Japanese alliances in the 1930s, Emiko Kida has argued that the “proletarian movement secretly enforced a structure within which the entire independence issue . . . had to be subsumed beneath the goal of uniting an internationally allied proletariat.”<sup>(4)</sup> But Taiwanese and Korean authors themselves often resisted the conflation of countryside and country, even as they called for cross-ethnic alliances. Rather than subordinating anti-colonialism to class solidarity, writers such as Yang Kui exposed instead their complex intersections and the specificities of social reality, as I will show below.

As previously mentioned, “Shinbun haitatsufu” was published in 1934 in *Bungaku hyōron*, but this was not in fact its first appearance in print. Yang Kui began serializing his Japanese-language story in 1932 in the Taiwanese journal *Taiwan xinmin bao* (*Taiwan New People’s News*), but the text was heavily censored and finally halted entirely in the middle of its serialization. The entire story was finally published in 1934 in *Bungaku hyōron*, and then subsequently translated into Chinese and published in Shanghai two years later. Even in this brief description we can see how publication in the metropole enabled communication beyond and despite it, primarily through the vehicle of translation.

And yet the text itself seems to acknowledge the dilemma faced by the colonial writer of Japanese, who inscribes the centrality of the metropole in his speech even as he uses it to speak against his colonizers. Told in the first person, “Shinbun haitatsufu” at first makes no mention of the narrator’s ethnicity, making him indistinguishable from his Japanese peers. In the open-

ing pages, we learn that the as-of-yet unnamed “I” has come to Tokyo from the countryside (*inaka*) in order to find work. Although later details about his upbringing hint at his Taiwanese origins, the narrator himself never voices the name of his village or the name of his family.<sup>(5)</sup> By withholding the precise location of the narrator’s rural origins, the text seems at first glance to privilege a universal understanding of city-countryside economic tensions. In this sense, the text could be read as an attempt to conjure up an alternative international community, one in which ethnic difference is transcended through proletarian solidarity.<sup>(6)</sup>

What I wish to point out, however, is that such an erasure of ethnic difference can only be achieved if one assumes that the Japanese language being used is transparent or neutral – when it is anything but. One might consider the moment in which the narrator’s ethnicity is finally made explicit. Having been fired from his job, “I” decides to return to his old boarding-house. As soon as he steps through the door, he is greeted by the landlord with the following line: “Hey! If it isn’t Mr. Taiwan [*Taiwan-san*]. Long time no see.”<sup>(7)</sup> The landlord’s call to “I” can be interpreted as a kind of interpellation, one that marks “I” both discursively and socially as the colonial other. Even if the narrator had wished to speak to the reader as a universal proletarian, at that moment his speech is recontextualized through the colonial structures (and strictures) that mark him first and foremost as ethnically Taiwanese. This hailing within the text can also be linked to the paratextual elements that surround it in *Bungaku hyōron*: the ethnic particularity of the name “Yang Kui” attached to the story; the format and political goals of the journal contest; and the demands of the largely Japanese readership.

Significantly, the hailing by the landlord is triggered by the arrival of a farewell letter from Taiwan written by the narrator’s mother (who, we later learn, has already passed away by the time of the letter’s arrival). Like the narrator’s hometown, which has been irreparably transformed by Japanese capital and power, the mother’s letter is a relic of a now-inaccessible past. After reading the letter, “I” decides he will return to Taiwan in order to fight the capitalist exploitation that destroyed his village. But this moment of resolution is voiced not to his mother (who, being dead, cannot hear him) or to his fellow countrymen but to his Japanese friend Tanaka, the man who had

first introduced him to the idea of organizing strikes and labor unions. The narrator's use of the Japanese language may have opened up avenues for communication, but only after – or through – the violent foreclosure of other possibilities.

Nowhere is this dilemma more clearly symbolized than in the final pages of "Shinbun haitatsufu," which ends with the narrator on a boat headed back to Taiwan:

Look at that! Even still, the workers . . . . .  
 . . . . .!

— My studying these past few months! That was the most faithful response I could make to my mother's last request.

I was filled with conviction. From the deck of the Hōrai-maru, I gazed at Taiwan in the spring, which on the surface was lush with beauty; one prick with the needle, though, and it might unleash a torrent of putrid foulness.<sup>(8)</sup>

Literally positioned somewhere between mainland Japan and Taiwan, "I" resolutely looks forward to a future in the latter (which is also home to his past). But the specifics of that future, in this particular story, are unuttered – are in fact unutterable, as indicated by the deletion marks (*fuseji*) left on the printed page.<sup>(9)</sup>

These manifestations of imperial authority may have served to remind both author and reader alike of the consequences of anti-Japanese speech – consequences that became even more severe in later years, when Japan launched into a state of total war. However, the gaps opened up by the deletion marks can also be seen as ironically productive: protest made visible and indelible in its very redaction. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the complicated intertwinings of imperialism, censorship, and literary practice in full. For now, let me end by simply stating that Yang Kui's writings prove that the possibility of alternative futures, even if unutterable, could still be imagined and anticipated even within the strictures of empire, just under the surface of the censored page.

October 1934 edition of *Bungaku hyōron*. All quotes from "Shinbun haitatsufu" are taken from this same edition.

- (3) See footnote #9 for resources on censorship systems in Japan and its colonies.
- (4) Emiko Kida, "Japanese-Korean Exchanges within the Proletarian Visual Arts Movement" (trans. Brian Bergstrom), in *positions: east asia cultures critique* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 520.
- (5) References to *hokō* (an administrative system specific to Taiwan) and to *kōgakkō* (common schools), for example, strongly suggest that the narrator comes from Taiwan without ever explicitly using the word "Taiwan." See "Shinbun," 215.
- (6) Faye Yuan Kleeman has astutely noted that the story raises "the possibility of forming alliances across ethnic and class lines . . . In order to change the system in Taiwan, it is necessary to initiate the change from within Japan." Kleeman, *Under an Imperial Sun* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 165.
- (7) "Shinbun," 220.
- (8) "Shinbun," 233 (end). The ellipses, which are replicated in the original text, are *fuseji* (deletion marks) that were imposed during the pre-publication censorship process.
- (9) Some valuable anthologies on the history of pre-1945 Japanese censorship include Kōmyōl Yōn'guhōe (ed.), *Singminji kōmyōl: chedo, t'eksut'ū, silch'ōn* (Seoul: Somyōng Ch'ulp'an, 2011); Tomi Suzuki et al. (eds.), *Censorship, Media, and Literary Culture in Japan: From Edo to Postwar* (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 2012); and Kōno Kensuke et al. (eds.), *Ken'etsu no teikoku* (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 2014).

## Note

- (1) "Shinbun haitatsufu," in *Bungaku hyōron* 1, no. 8 (October 1934): 199-233.
- (2) The judges' comments can be found on page 198 of the