Romanticising the Empire

The beginning of romanticism in the Europe can be traced to the eighteenth century German-speaking countries that felt a strong cultural inferiority towards the progressive states, particularly France. This led to a form of German romanticism that went in search for the rich world of senses and most importantly a national spirit.1 A similar sentiment overtook Japan in the 1940s in its determination to fight the West while at the same time embrace romanticism. Kevin Doak states that the Japanese Romantic School found a way to construct Japan’s own national and cultural identity by reflecting on its own modernisation since the Meiji period.2 Tansman points out that artists and intellectuals at the time employed various cultural means to create a Japanese national identity. Among them, the invention of the myth of a nation played a crucial role.3 While the focus of the efforts of both Doak and Tansman was on the discourse of romanticism and its connection to aesthetic fascism in metropolitan Japan, Tansman, in particular, demonstrated how Manchuria could represent a mythic place for the Japanese imagination, and for the imperialist power to its gain strength.4 For example, Tansman points to Yasuda Yojūrō’s assertion:

Our young people in Manchuria and Mongolia are forging a new spirit, a new reality, a new logic, a new sensibility through a form never before formed, and they are living that magnificent conception in daily life, amidst chaos and confusion. We already feel in our hearts the stirrings of a new resolution and system, and a new myth.5

As such, Japanese colonies became mysterious places that Yasuda utilised to create a mythic national identity.6 Romanticism as the literary expression of fascist ideology not only relied on colonies for its expression of Japanese national

3 Tansman, The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism, 54.
4 Ibid., 102.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
myth, but it also found an incarnation in both Taiwan and Manchukuo. How, then, should we evaluate the deployment of romanticism in the colonies and what was the relationship between romanticism in metropolitan Japan and in the specific colonial locations?

Around 1940, in both Manchukuo and Taiwan, romanticism blossomed. Although romanticism manifested itself differently in Taiwan and Manchukuo, its rising influence in both regions can be attributed to the historical and ideological environment, stemming from the exportation of a “Japanese spirit” that was imbued with the imperialist ideology of metropolitan Japan. A comparative study of Nishikawa and Ōuchi, as well as of the Sino–Japanese literary interaction in Taiwan and Manchukuo, therefore, will reveal that the conflict between the dominant Japanese culture of the coloniser and the dominated culture of the colonised played out as a struggle between Chinese realism and Japanese romanticism.

The Rise of Romanticism in Taiwan

For Nishikawa, the meaning of romanticism changed in step with the development of his own literary career: At different times, it had different connotations in the context of the relationship between an individual writer and the Japanese colonial power. When he first came to Taiwan, the cultural heritage Nishikawa borrowed from to develop his exotic and decadent poetry was a combination of the Japanese literary tradition and the fruits of the Western literary tradition. French symbolist poetry, which was essentially a revolt against realism, had aroused great interest in Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century. It found its way into the works of writers such as Ueda Bin and Kitahara Hakushū when the Japanese literary arena became dissatisfied with the perceived dreariness of naturalist writing. During his sojourn in Taiwan, Nishikawa consciously maintained both textual and personal connections with modern Japanese writers of romantic symbolism.

As Japanese colonisation of Taiwan progressed, however, Nishikawa’s romanticism acquired new meanings. In the years around 1935, Nishikawa started to reveal his obsession with Taiwanese folklore. The Japanese colonial government expected to see more than “backward” religious practices and the “goddess of mystery” in literary writings, particularly after forty years of direct economic, political, and cultural contacts with Taiwan. Writers in Taiwan were expected to focus on the fruits of colonial modernisation and the prospect of Japan’s southward expansion. Nishikawa’s folkloric writings, however, persisted in depicting that which modern Japan tried to gloss over, namely, the superstitions of lower-class prostitutes, and local beliefs in the goddess, as