Chapter 9

Local Literature in Ambivalence

Along with the appearance of romantic discourse in the late 1930s and 1940s, both Taiwan and Manchukuo saw an upsurge in debates over the nature of “local literature” (chihō bungaku 地方文学). The debate over Manchurian literature (Manshū bungaku 満洲文学) or Taiwanese literature (Taiwan bungaku 台湾文学) portrayed Taiwan or Manchuria as an imagined community, a geographical and cultural space, and a place that could be called home. Literature and other forms of cultural production played a crucial role in constructing the imagined community of the specific colonial region, while on the other hand, also configuring national identities. The efforts to codify and develop these “local literatures” revealed the tension between Japanese writers and the colonial space they lived in, the tension between Japanese nationalism and localism, and the conflicts that sprung up between the colonisers and colonised when they articulated their respective interests.

In her study of the debate over the notion of Manchurian literature, Kimberly Kono has chastised the Japanese critics in Manchukuo as privileging a Japanese perspective and overlooking the impressions of colonised Chinese and Manchu. In the end, according to Kono, their opinion of Manchurian literature revealed their Japan-centred attitudes, despite their claims of trying to establish an independent Manchukuo and Manchurian literature. If we compare the idea of Manchurian literature with the notion of Taiwanese literature, we can find a similar highly political tendency of privileging a Japanese perspective. As the Sino-Japanese War and the Greater East Asian War progressed, Japanese writers living in Taiwan and Manchukuo had to adjust their own literary work as often as the empire expected. However, no matter how strong the tone of independence was, there was a simultaneous return to Japan in both Taiwan and Manchukuo after 1942. All the debates that occurred in Taiwan and Manchukuo in the name of “local literature” simply became steps leading to their final immersion in the Japanese empire. The emergence of a local discourse indicated that local identities had been annihilated and successfully substituted with imperialist ones.

1 There are many possible English translations of chihō, including region, countryside, periphery, native, and local.
2 Kono, Romance, Family, and Nation in Japanese Colonial Literature, 120.
3 Ibid., 141.
However, a further question can be raised: Is there any connection between the rise of local literature in Manchukuo and Taiwan? How can we understand the emergence of local literature from a perspective of the empire? Tsai Hui-yu Caroline has suggested that within Japan’s broad “cooperative sphere”—which included Japan proper at its centre, “internal colonies” such as Hokkaido and Ryukyu where the constitution was applicable in one form or another, colonies where the Japanese constitution was not applied, those territories in China under direct or indirect Japanese military control, and the southeast Asian sphere—all had their “proper” positions. The local literature in Taiwan and Manchukuo appeared in an era when the New Order in East Asia and the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere were established consecutively, and it was therefore shaped by the grand scheme of the empire. All together the debate over local literature in Taiwan and Manchukuo revealed the complexity of Japanese nationalism as a historical process of identification.

Taiwanese Literature in the South

“Taiwanese literature” had always been a battlefield of power struggles and thus experienced a long history of controversy. The earliest germination of Taiwanese literature was the New Literature Movement around 1920. It mainly comprised local literature with a nationalist consciousness that dealt with Taiwan’s unique culture and history. Up until 1937, it referred to works by native Taiwanese writers. At that time, Japanese writers in Taiwan mostly focused on short poems, or haiku, and other genres of traditional literature, which were regarded as Japanese or naichi literature. Many Japanese intellectuals defined Taiwanese literature as native to the Taiwanese, and as a branch coexisting with Japanese literature in Taiwan. The literary arena, thus, was clearly divided into the Japanese literary world and the Taiwanese literary world.

This division was also evident in Shimada’s narrative of the literary history of Taiwan. After relocating to Taiwan, Nishikawa became preoccupied with how to enrich the Japanese literary tradition by employing Taiwanese elements. Accordingly, his writing carried a heavy Japanese heritage. Shimada praised Nishikawa, claiming that he had inherited the artistic spirit of Irako Seihaku.

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4 Ts’ai, *Taiwan in Japan’s Empire Building*, 171.
5 Liu, “Shuí de wenxue?” 49–51.
6 Although Taiwan was gaichi for Japan, those Japanese who lived on the island regarded themselves as naichi Japanese in order to stress their Japanese identity and distinguish themselves from native Taiwanese.