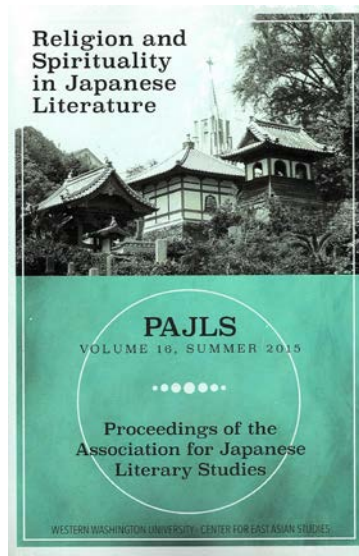


“Local Festivals and Exotic Customs: Nishikawa Mitsuru and Gaichi Bungaku in Taiwan”

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Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 16 (2015): 159–169.



PAJLS 16:
Religion and Spirituality in Japanese Literature.
Ed. Massimiliano Tomasi.

***Local Festivals and Exotic Customs:
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in Taiwan***

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Introduction

This paper will focus on Nishikawa Mitsuru, a Japanese colonial writer active in Taiwan during the 1930s and 1940s. Beginning with a description of how Nishikawa dealt with the local festivals and “exotic” customs of Taiwan, we will then go on to discuss what those local festivals and customs actually meant. Attention will also be given to the idea of *gaichi bungaku* (外地文学, or overseas [Japanese] literature) as revealed in Nishikawa’s works. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the author’s attempt to speak for the Japanese colonial policies, as well as the literary value of his writings.

First, I will provide a short biography of Nishikawa. Then I will briefly introduce the comparative literature scholar Shimata Kinji and the idea he proposed: *gaichi bungaku* (overseas Japanese literature). Then I will analyze Nishikawa’s obsession with that which he considered “exotic,” using two examples – a volume of short stories and a folktale collection – to explain how this obsession formed and how it is revealed in his writings. We will then turn to detailed discussion of three short stories – “Shenhonyasai” (城隍爺祭 or “The City God Festival”), “Genshōki” (元宵記, or “The Record of the Lantern Festival”), and “Sairyūki (採硫記, or “The Record of Sulfur Mining”) – focusing on how local religions and customs served the storytelling. Last but not least, I will provide a critical open conclusion, examining the value of Nishikawa’s literary production and also its limitations.

Nishikawa Mitsuru: a Japanese writer in Taiwan

Nishikawa Mitsuru was born in Fukushima in 1908, but he grew up in Taiwan after coming there with his parents in 1910. In 1928 he returned to Japan to attend Waseda University. After graduating with a major in French literature, however, with encouragement of his mentor, Yoshie Takamatsu, he decided to go back to Taiwan and devote himself to writing. There, he worked as an editor for the *Taiwan Everyday News*. He also founded several literary journals,

including *Kareitō* (華麗島, or *The Island of Splendor* [a sobriquet for Taiwan]) and *Bungei Taiwan* (文芸台湾, or *Literary Taiwan*). As a writer, he personally produced a considerable amount of poetry and fiction. In 1946, with the end of the Pacific War, he had to go back to Japan permanently. Unfortunately, his literary activities in this later period remain unclear due to lack of records. The only two things we can be certain about are that back in Japan he worked as a book designer, and that he also founded there a religious organization dedicated to Mazu, a deity widely worshipped in Taiwan as the goddess of the ocean who protects the safety of fishermen. Nishikawa's activity of founding the Mazu organization in Japan was obviously influenced by his experience of living in Taiwan.

Shimata Kinji and Gaichi Bungaku

Nishikawa Mitsuru was highly influenced by the idea of *gaichi bungaku* (overseas Japanese literature),¹ as conceived of by comparative literature scholar Shimata Kinji (1901-1993). Shimata spent sixteen years in Taiwan beginning in 1929, and from 1935 to the early 1940s published a series of critical essays under the title of *Kareitō bungakushi* (華麗島文学志, or *The Literary Record of the Island of Splendor*), discussing Japanese authors' writings in Taiwan. Throughout this time period, he devoted himself to establishing the idea of *gaichi bungaku*. In 1939, he stated three possible directions in which *gaichi bungaku* could develop in the essay "Taiwan ni okeru waga bungaku" (台湾に於けるわが文学, or "Our Literature in Taiwan"): "literature of nostalgia," which depicts the nostalgia of Japanese people who reside in colonized areas; "literature of exoticism," which focuses on particular scenes and cultures in colonized areas; and "literature of realism," which depicts the coexistence in occupied regions of Japanese residents and local groups.² While the concept of "literature of nostalgia" received little attention from scholars, "literature of exoticism" and "literature of realism" were heatedly debated beginning in the early 1940s, with an eventual apparent agreement that realism should be the

¹ The word *gaichi bungaku* was translated from the French *littérature coloniale*, which literally means "colonial literature." However, the Japanese translation literally means "overseas (Japanese) literature." Here I decided to translate it based on the literal meaning of the Japanese translation.

² See Hashimoto Kyōko, "Shimata Kinji 'kareitō bungakushi' ni okeru eguzotisumu no yakuwari" (The Role of Exoticism in Shimata Kinji's "The Literary Record of the Island of Splendor"). *Nihon Taiwan gakukai hō*, 2005: 8, p. 88.

essence of *gaichi bungaku*. These views were highly influenced by two important French colonial literary studies: Louis Cario and Charles Régismanset's *L'exotisme, la littérature coloniale* (*Exoticism: Colonial Literature*, 1911) and Roland Lebel's *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France* (*History of French Colonial Literature*, 1931).³ In the context of French colonial literary studies, these Frenchmen seem to have judged realism to have the most value, while literature written in the exoticism style was much criticized.

Nevertheless, the unavoidability and diversity of exoticism continued to be recognized by some Taiwanese and Japanese writers. In 1941, Shimata revised "Our Literature in Taiwan," changing the title to "Taiwan no bungakuteki kagenmi" (台湾の文学的過現未, or "The Past, Present and Future of Literature in Taiwan").⁴ In this essay, Shimata restated the necessity of both realism and exoticism, but apparently accepting the then dominant view, focused on the former. Exoticism seems to be underplayed. However, based on the real literary situation in colonized Taiwan, Shimata realized that the existence of exoticism was unavoidable. Even though he does not emphasize the importance of exoticism in "The Past, Present and Future of Literature in Taiwan," he still states that realism and exoticism should be "developed, deepened and blended together."⁵ They should not be treated separately. He also states that the core of *gaichi bungaku* should be the literary creation by Japanese writers who reside in colonized areas. Shimata's conception of *gaichi bungaku* and his discussion on realism and exoticism shows his ambition to foster a stream of Japanese literature that combines both styles in colonized Taiwan. To Shimata, it was the responsibility of Japanese writers who reside in Taiwan to create their own colonial literature and expand the scope of Japanese literature.

Nishakawa Mitsuru and His "Obsession" with Exoticism

For his part, Nishikawa Mitsuru was both a representative creator and supporter of exoticism among the colonial writers. A founder of the influential *Bungei Taiwan* and active member of the literary circle that grew up around that journal, Nishikawa was not at all willing to reject all literary production based on exoticism.

³ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴ Published in *Bungei Taiwan* in May 1941.

⁵ See Hashimoto, "Shimata Kinji 'kareitō bungakushi' ni okeru eguzotisumu no yakuwari," p. 92.

His stories are usually set in Taiwan, and the focus is often on the Taiwanese characters, even when the perspective character is Japanese.⁶ Local cultural elements frequently appear in his works. Food, natural scenery and local religious practices (such as festivals that take place in Mazu temples) play important roles in Nishikawa's stories and poems. He even introduced many words that exist only in Chinese directly into his Japanese writings in order to keep the original flavor. Hashimoto argues that Nishikawa's "obsession" with this "exotic flavor" possibly resulted from his concern about the danger of his writings sinking into the trivialities of daily life in Taiwan.⁷ Shimata pointed out that Nishikawa's art lay in its distance from reality, and that he created an abstract artistic fantasy world based on the exotic in Taiwan. To Nishikawa, this exotic flavor was an important element in *gaichi bungaku*, and the only way to increase the level of acceptance of *gaichi bungaku* on the Japanese mainland was to keep the exoticism.

Both Shimata and Nishikawa believed that literature should support imperial policies. Therefore, in order to change a colonized land into a permanent living area for "homelanders,"⁸ it was important to create the land's own Japanese literature.⁹ A problem with this was that Taiwanese writers' creations, especially proletarian literature, received little attention. Also, Japanese colonial policy was barely mentioned, which seems strange, especially for Shimata. As mentioned before, he stated that realism should depict the coexistence of residents of Japanese ethnicity and those of local groups. In this context, debates and discussion on the imperial-subject (*kōminka*, or 皇民化) policy should not be avoided. Shimata's statement—that *gaichi bungaku* should support the political environment in the colony—seems to contradict his understanding of realism.

⁶ See the following two stories: 稻江冶春詞 ("Tōkō yashun shi," or "Spring on the Rice River") and 赤崁記 ("Sekikanki," or "Record of the Red Fort") from *Nihon tōchiki Taiwan bungaku Nihonjin sakka sakuhiinshū*, Vol. 1. Ed. Nakajima Toshio. Tōkyō: Ryokuin Shobō, 1998.

⁷ See Hashimoto, "Shimata Kinji 'kareitō bungakushi' ni okeru eguzotisumu no yakuwari," p. 101.

⁸ *Naichijin* 內地人, or Japanese residents in Taiwan.

⁹ See Matsuo Norifumi, "Taiwan jidai ni okeru Kawai Saburō no bungaku sakuhiin: aru zaitai naichinin sakka ni totte no kōminka seisaku" (The Literary Works of Kawai Saburō from His "Taiwan Period": The Perspective of a Homelander Living in Taiwan on Colonial Policy). *Core Ethics*. 2009: 5, p. 306.

A Short Story Collection from the Island of Splendor (1935-1937)

In one of his earliest literary works, *A Short Story Collection from the Island of Splendor* (*Kareitō kenpūroku*, or 華麗島頭風錄), local cultural elements become the theme of every story. The themes can be divided into several categories. The first category is local temples, with stories that feature detailed descriptions of such religious centers as the City God Temple and the Mazu Goddess Temple, and important events associated with those temples. The category of local annual festivals includes stories that describe how local people celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Ghost Festival, the Lantern Festival, and the Qixi Festival (七夕, *tanabata* in Japanese). Another group are records of Taiwanese people's important life events, such as a child's first birthday, weddings and funerals. The fourth category includes stories that describe how local people practice their beliefs. For example, in the story "The Gender-Reversal Spell" ("Saika kanto," or 栽花換斗), the main character is a courtesan. At the beginning of the story, she discovers she is pregnant and using a magical counting method determines that it is probably a girl. Unwilling to see her daughter end up like herself, she asks a shaman to cast a spell to change the baby's gender. At the end of the story, the shaman leaves her a flower and tells her to plant it in water. If it survives, her wish will come true. In "The City God Temple" ("Jōkōbyō," or 城隍廟), the main character (also a courtesan) prays in front of the City God for a happy future for her and her lover. She lights incense and prays, then collects the incense ash and brings it home because she believes that her wish will come true after drinking the ash mixed with water.¹⁰

Also, in this story collection, as mentioned above, Nishikawa adopted into his Japanese narrative some elements of the local language, Min Nan (or Southern Min, a form of Chinese). For some words native to Taiwan, instead of translating them into Japanese, he took the characters – the *kanji* – directly from Min Nan, and using attached phonetic markers – *furigana* – indicated they should be read in the original Min Nan, Chinese, pronunciation. This is proof of how eager Nishikawa was to preserve the exotic flavor of his writings.

¹⁰ The two stories discussed here are from *Nihon tōchiki Taiwan bungaku Nihonjin sakka sakuhinshū*, Vol. 1. Ed. Nakajima Toshio. Tōkyō: Ryokuin Shobō, 1998.

A Folktale Collection from the Island of Splendor (1940-1941) and Other Stories

A Folktale Collection from the Island of Splendor (*Kareitō minwashū*, or 華麗島民話集) is the result of the cooperation between Nishikawa and a Japanese folklorist named Ikeda Toshio (1916-1981). Similar to *A Short Story Collection from the Island of Splendor*, this collection also deals with local religions and customs, focusing on the legends of how some of the important gods and goddess were created, and their relationships with human beings. Examples include the Kitchen God, the Jade Emperor, and the god of thunder and the mother of lightning.

Stories from these two collections are usually told concisely. In Nishikawa's other, longer short stories, local festivals and religious practices do not make up the entire plot. Often, they are not even the center of the plot. However, their significance should not be ignored because they serve to represent Nishikawa's concept of *gaichi bungaku*. For instance, it is possible that the story, "The City God Festival" (1934), was developed from "The City God Temple" discussed above. A young courtesan, Ali, prays for lovers' happiness by lighting golden paper money. She draws lots to get her fortune told. However, the result does not seem good. Soon Ali encounters a young teacher and they fall in love with each other. On the day of the City God Festival, she is enjoying the bustling carnival with her lover. Here Nishikawa provides a detailed description of the offerings, the firecrackers, the music, and other activities:

The thirteenth day of the fifth month in the Chinese calendar came. The city celebrates the City God Festival on this day. The white smoke from the burning of golden paper money covers the sky until it dims the sunlight. It is so bustling and crowded that there is barely enough space to place your feet. Sincere believers from the suburban areas throng to the city. Even believers from Taipei continuously rush to Yongle Street. Around a dozen pigs with their internal organs removed are placed on the table in the temple, and the priest, who is wearing his robe and gold-colored hat, is offering a prayer with great respect...And firecrackers! The sound of firecrackers is roaring throughout the sky and the earth. Beautiful women wearing flowers are walking by...Street vendors are selling roasted seeds, pork rib soup and lotus seeds. Women are eating plantains.¹¹

¹¹ See "Shenhonyasai" (The City God Festival). *Nihon tōchiki Taiwan bungaku Nihonjin sakka sakuhinshū*, Vol. 1, pp. 9-27. Ed. Nakajima Toshio. Tōkyō: Ryokuin Shobō, 1998, p. 24.

Unfortunately, Ali's happiness does not last long. Suddenly, a stalker who has always been in love with the courtesan shows up and forces her to come with him. He is a powerful man in that area, who now threatens to harm the teacher unless Ali ends her relationship with him. At the end of the story, Ali is sitting there shedding tears, with the carnival-like festival going on around her:

The already withered jasmine flowers fell from the vase and made a sound. Outside the window, the elaborate fire dragon dance continues on. The playing of the *erhu* and *suona* sometimes sounds close, sometimes far away. It hits the glass window in the night, and it resounds throughout the street and echoes the firecrackers together with the crowd. (Nishikawa 1998)¹²

Though the lovers' fate remains unknown, readers can probably guess that it will not end well. In this story, the description of the festival seems intended to create a contrast between a happy atmosphere full of hope and the helplessness of the main character, her tragic fate. However, the problem with this story is that the social significance of the City God Festival seems to be ignored. It is entirely possible that this is something Nishikawa failed to truly understand in the first place.

Nishikawa's interest in Taiwan's history developed after he came back to Taiwan in 1933. In his historical narratives, unsurprisingly, exotic elements are everywhere. "The Record of the Lantern Festival (1941)" is centered on Pan Yongqing (潘永清) (1821-1873), a local celebrity. He was a spiritual leader of the Bazhilan (八芝蘭) area¹³, and he also worked with local residents, rebuilding the neighborhood after it was damaged in a war. At the beginning of the story, people are planning a celebration for the recently rebuilt neighborhood, but Pan is actually facing a dilemma: some people outside the area want to build a western-style tea house there. Pan knows that it will probably bring them more income, but he is afraid that it will change the traditional value system, and more people will turn to pursue material pleasure. After discussing the matter with local residents, they make their decision: to say no to the tea house. They then decide to make the Lantern Festival a grand celebration for the rebuilt neighborhood. At the end of the story, surrounded by many happy faces, Pan smiles:

People who were around Yongqing also joined him and sincerely prayed for the children's healthy growth. "When you grow up, you'll become an excellent scholar!" said Yongqing, and he stroked the baby's head. Children who were

¹² Ibid. p. 27.

¹³ It is the current Shilin area in Taipei.

wearing masks and women who were offering fish were passing by. On the fifteenth night of the first month, the moonlight was bright and clear. The noise of the crowd sometimes resounded like distant thunder. “Father, light the lantern!”...Yongqing squinted, and carefully lit the flower lantern his daughter was carrying. (Nishikawa 1998)¹⁴

The celebration of the festival at the end of this story seems to reaffirm what the main character believes – the traditional value system should be cherished because it brings people happiness. In “The Record of Sulfur Mining” (1942), Nishikawa focuses on Yu Yonghe (郁永河) (1645-?), a Fujian government official in the Qing dynasty. In 1697, the gunpowder store in Fujian burned down. Yu took the responsibility and went sulfur mining in Taiwan. This story is based on Yu Yonghe’s *Diaries of Sulfur Mining*, which tells the story of how Yu encountered Taiwanese aborigines.¹⁵ Yu communicates with them through an interpreter and persuades them to join his mining team. In this story, Nishikawa included descriptions of two festivals. The first one is the Taiwanese aborigines’ Harvest Festival. Women offer rice wine to the guests, while men drink deer blood and dance around a bonfire.

Making wine is always the young women’s duty. They always chew the rice first and then put it in bamboo stalks in order to make wine. The flavor was not bad. Yonghe finished drinking it, and the aboriginal woman who offered him the wine looked delighted and mumbled some words that Yonghe of course did not understand. In the central square, a few deer were killed and their pure red blood was spurting out. A group of men drank all the blood straight from the open wounds and formed a circle...“Anyhow they are such simple and pure people!” Yonghe smiled.¹⁶

It is the first time that Yu realizes that the aborigines are so genuine and charming, although he is just an outside observer. The second festival he describes is the Ghost Festival. Yu explains to the aborigines what Han people do on the day of Ghost Festival. For ghosts who lost their lives on land, people hang lanterns on bamboo poles to pray for their peace. For ghosts who lost their lives in water, people place water lanterns in rivers. After Yu tells them of these

¹⁴ See “Genshōki” (The Record of the Lantern Festival). *Nihon tōchiki Taiwan bungaku Nihonjin sakka sakuhinshū*, Vol. 1, pp. 301-317. Ed. Nakajima Toshio. Tōkyō: Ryokuin Shobō, 1998, p. 317.

¹⁵ Now called *pingpu zu* (平埔族) in Taiwan.

¹⁶ See “Sairyūki” (The Record of Sulfur Mining). *Nihon tōchiki Taiwan bungaku Nihonjin sakka sakuhinshū*, Vol. 1, pp. 359-422. Ed. Nakajima Toshio. Tōkyō: Ryokuin Shobō, 1998, p. 395.

things, an aborigine from the mining team named Nahan sincerely asks him to place a water lantern for his lover's ghost. On the night of the ghost festival, Yu places the water lantern he made in the river and prays for the beautiful girl, with some Han people and aborigines standing around him.

Nahan shook the interpreter's arm; he seemed to be begging for something. "Master," the interpreter said, "this guy's woman recently fell off a cliff and died. He requested that you place a water lantern for her."...Suddenly, Yonghe remembered the appearance of that cheerful girl, sitting together with Nahan on a rock that day..."Nahan, let's set the lantern adrift in the water."...Yonghe squatted by the shore and lit the lantern. The lantern slowly floated on the river, and the light flickered five or six times, as it quietly flowed downstream. Yonghe put his hands together and prayed. Nahan stared at the dim reflection of the lantern in the water, looking like he was possessed. The wind seemed to start to rise a little. The lanterns hung on the bamboo poles started to twinkle and were about to go out at any moment. (Nishikawa 1998)¹⁷

This is unquestionably a truly beautiful and sentimental scene. Much like the previous example, the function of this description is to confirm that the mutual cultural understanding between Yu Yonghe (representing the government and the Han people) and the local aborigines has been reinforced. Nevertheless, in actuality this Ghost Festival story does not exist in Yu Yonghe's *Diaries of Sulfur Mining (Bi hai ji you, or 裨海記遊)*, which means the events described in the story probably never happened. Why Nishikawa created this story and the significance that lies therein certainly deserve further consideration.

Conclusion

The answer to the question above is related to the conclusion of this study: how should we evaluate Nishikawa Mitsuru's colonial literature? In Faye Kleeman's *Under an Imperial Sun: Japanese colonial literature of Taiwan and the South*, she points out that Nishikawa was highly influenced by Sato Haruo, who belonged to the Japanese romantic school.¹⁸ As we can see, Nishikawa's short stories are infused with romantic sentimentality. Even his historical narrative is romanticized history. Local festivals and customs place an importance on invoking romantic sentimentality. Originally the long-term goal of *gaichi bungaku* was to create a body of Japanese literature from colonized Taiwan

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 401-403

¹⁸ For more details about Nishikawa and how he compares to Satō Haruo, please see chapters 4 & 5 of Kleeman's *Under an Imperial Sun.: Japanese colonial literature of Taiwan and the South*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003.

which could compete with the mainstream Japanese literature of the four main islands. In order to highlight its competence, it makes sense that those colonial writers like Nishikawa tended to emphasize cultural uniqueness and culture differences.

However, since Nishikawa supported Japan's imperial policies, his writings have some unavoidable limitations. First, Nishikawa mainly focused on exoticism, failing to understand the importance of realism, which seems to contradict Shimata's concept of *gaichi bungaku*. For example, Japanese colonial policy is hardly discussed in his works, which seems unnatural. Also, as Kleeman argues, he revealed the surface, which is the beauty of the colonial romanticism, but concealed the social and historical significance of those local festivals, religions, customs and history (Kleeman 2003)¹⁹. Nevertheless, it is incorrect to assume that Nishikawa never wrote about politics at all. In fact, he at least paid attention to the conflicts between East and West and recorded them in his stories. For example, in "The City God Festival," there is a part where the main character talks about how much she dislikes people from the Christian church. Moreover, in "The Record of the Lantern Festival," during the discussion about whether or not they should approve of the western-style tea house, some local residents strongly suggest that they should do everything they can to avoid negative cultural influences from westerners. If we consider the two cases in the historical writing context, we might find that this kind of anti-western sentiment has a tone of Pan-Asianism, which is probably how Nishikawa intended to serve imperial purposes and support colonial policies. On top of this binary opposition of Taiwan as the powerless one and the West as the evil one, Nishikawa seemed to attempt to validate the necessity of Pan-Asianism and Japanese colonialism.

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¹⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

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