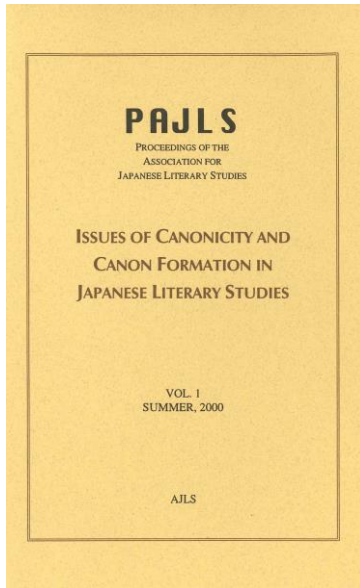


“Between Anxiety and Celebration: Resident
Korean Writers and the Japanese Literary Canon”

Melissa Wender 

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**BETWEEN ANXIETY AND CELEBRATION:
RESIDENT KOREAN WRITERS AND THE JAPANESE LITERARY CANON**

Melissa Wender
Bates College

In the past several years, authors of Korean descent have begun to attract a significant amount of attention.¹ The critic Kawamura Minato, for example, includes a chapter on *Zainichi* works in his *Sengo bungaku o tou* [Questioning Postwar Literature] and has more recently devoted a volume to the history of this minority's literature.² Such efforts notwithstanding, it would be an exaggeration to claim that *Zainichi* works are part of the Japanese literary canon, even the postwar Japanese literary canon. There was never a question in my mind, however, whether it would be interesting to consider the work of Resident Korean writers in a conference examining issues of the Japanese literary canon. The debates on canons in this country, after all, were precipitated at least in part by the increasing influence of scholars of minority and women's literature who challenged the authority of the existing canon. These scholars contended that this body of texts did not have inherent aesthetic value, as had long been thought, but rather embodied the ideals of (and served to reveal the ideology of) those with power within the culture.

It would be simple enough to argue that Resident Korean literature has been excluded from the Japanese literary canon for much the same reasons that such scholars contended that the works of, say, African American writers had been excluded from the American canon or Indian writers from

¹ Hereafter I will refer to people of Korean descent residing in Japan as either "Resident Korean" or with the adjective "*Zainichi*."

² Kawamura Minato, *Sengo bungaku o tou* [Questioning Postwar Literature] (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1995); Kawamura Minato, *Umaretara soko ga furusato: Zainichi Chosenjin bungakuron* [Home Is Where You're Born: An Analysis of Resident Korean Literature] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1999). Incidentally, between the oral presentation of this paper and the written version, a fourth writer of Korean descent, Gen Getsu, was awarded the Akutagawa prize.

the British. I could then argue that on the few occasions when Resident Korean writers have been acknowledged, such as in the three instances when they have won the Akutagawa Prize, there has been a sort of “tokenism” at work. On the other hand, I could propose that the awarding of prizes to these writers is an indication of the opposite: that in fact, the awarding of prizes to these writers—not to mention the increased critical attention to and popularity of a range of other Resident Korean writers in the 1990s—in fact indicates an actual increasing recognition or even acceptance of the presence of minorities in Japan.

Yet literary canons are not such a simple thing. I agree with John Guillory, who argues that while the conservative view of the canon—as exemplary works of “absolute aesthetic value” is misguided, so too is the liberal view I have cited above, that is to say that which sees the canon as “representing social constituencies in the manner of a pseudo-democratic legislature” (238). Instead, he argues, to understand how a canon forms,

we must see its history as the history of both the production and the reception of texts. We must understand that the history of literature is not only a question of *what* we read but of *who* reads and *who* writes, and in what social circumstances; it is also a question of what kinds (or genres) of texts are written, and for what audiences.

I wrote my proposal for this paper before reading Guillory’s words, but they fit quite nicely with a notion I began with: that to understand why and how certain texts by Korean residents of Japan have garnered critical acclaim while others have gone unnoticed one needs to contemplate not only what critics say about those authors’ works but the surrounding social, political, and economic context.

What I will do, therefore, is to make a paranoid argument, to show that despite the fact that writers were chosen—all, incidentally, at moments of heightened interest in things Korean, the early 1970s, the mid- to late 1980s, and the mid-late 1990s—they were at the same time chosen for the fact that they could simultaneously be excluded. It is not my claim, however, that these choices of exclusion were made, in Guillory’s terms, by some “pseudo-democratic legislature.” In addition, I want to be careful to note that while the texts encourage exclusion as they include, they by no means

preclude true inclusion, and I want to leave open the possibility that in the 1990s a more genuine form of inclusion is taking place.

Let me now, however, return to the late 1960s. Second-generation Koreans, whose native language was Japanese and most of whom were literate, had come to outnumber their parents' generation and had come to adulthood. Not surprisingly, at this time, a number of second-generation Resident Korean writers emerged. In addition, these years saw a shift in the power balance in Asia. In part as a result of the loans and investment ushered in by the Japan-Republic of Korea Normalization Treaty of 1965, the South Korean economy had started to flourish. At the same time, the United States was pulling its hand (i.e., troops and money) out of the balance to the extent that it could. U.S. influence in South Korea was giving way to that of Japan; critics characterized Japan's moves as "neo-colonialist." At the same time, the late sixties and early seventies witnessed the emergence in the U.S. of the black power movement and ethnic rights movements and in Japan, the beginning of civil rights' struggles by Resident Koreans.³

It was in a seemingly progressive cultural climate that Ri Kaisei (Yi Hoe-song) was the first Resident Korean awarded the Akutagawa, in 1971. Ri's work was at times boldly revelatory about discrimination in Japanese society and, more than many of his contemporaries, he worked hard to incorporate the language and culture of first-generation Koreans into his fiction. In 1970, Ri participated in a *zadankai* with two other writers, Kim Sok-bom and Oe Kenzaburo, entitled "Nihongo de kaku koto ni tsuite" [On Writing in Japanese].⁴ In this discussion, the reason for his incorporation of such cultural elements becomes evident. The main issue raised in this debate is whether it is possible for formerly colonized peoples to write in the language and literary form of the colonizers without inheriting their ideology. The determination of the three seems to be that it is, and that in fact the effort to undermine language and literary form is at the heart of good litera-

³ I write about many of these issues in the second and third chapters of my dissertation, "Lamentation as History: Literature of Koreans in Japan, 1965-1999" (Univ. of Chicago, 1999).

⁴ Oe Kenzaburo, Kim Sok-bom, Ri Kaisei, "Nihong de kaku koto ni tsuite" [On Writing in Japanese], *Bungaku* 38.11 (1970): 1-27.

ture. While the discussion is couched in literary terms, it is clearly also a political conclusion.

That it is for this oppositional stance that Ri was awarded the prize becomes clear not in the award committee's appraisal of his story (in some cases what seems to concern them is simply that he is *Zainichi*),⁵ but rather in other critical evaluations of his work. Ri was almost always compared favorably to the writer who might best be called his competitor, Kin Kakuei, who was nominated for the prize several times but never won. According to such critics, Ri's work masterfully incorporates Korean humor, reveals a storytelling ability in the sense defined by Walter Benjamin, speaks to a real audience, and shows that he has "absorbed the expressions" of all Resident Koreans. Kin's work is seen as everything Ri's is not. Worst of all, it is similar to literature by Japanese writers: it seems to lack purpose and a real audience.⁶

The political legacies of the 1960s are clearly at stake here. What is seen as positive in Ri are features lacking in Japanese writers: not only political purpose but also a connection between the creator and the consumer of art (hence the reference to Benjamin). The emphasis on orality and community echoes the premodern, for which there is a longing (not so strange coming from Ōe, I suppose). The inclusion of a writer like Ri therefore simultaneously serves as an *exclusion*, for it depends on his writing being seen as different from that of his Japanese contemporaries. Kin Kakuei's writing, in contrast, was much more threatening precisely because its style and language were Japanese; his writing proposed, perhaps, that Japaneseness was something that could be achieved.

It was not until 1988 that a second author of Korean descent won the Akutagawa. This second author was Yi Yang-ji. There had not been, however, two decades of silence, as this single fact might suggest; authors like Ri Kaisei continued to write and a good number of other authors published in minor presses, local magazines, and the *mini komi* of the *Zainichi* community; and Yi herself had begun publishing in the early eighties.

⁵ The committee's comments appear in *Bungei shunju* 50.3 (March 1972); 312-17. The prizewinning story appears in the same issue.

⁶ "Kyokaisen no bungaku—Zainichi Chosenjin sakka no imi" [Literature on the Borderline—The Meaning of Resident Korean Writers], *Shin Nihon bungaku* 278 (September 1970): 54-56. The citation is from page 56.

By 1988, the most famous of *Zainichi* movements, that against the fingerprinting requirement of the Alien Registration Law, was in full swing; in addition, there was a growing recognition of the rising influx of non-Korean foreign workers into an increasingly prosperous Japan. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, South Korea's increasing economic power came into the spotlight with the Seoul Olympics. Several critics have observed the extent to which *Yuhi*, the novella for which she won the prize, puts forwards stereotypes of Koreans held by Japanese, stereotypes that are typical of many dominant cultures' views of minorities: as dirty, violent, uncivilized.⁷ Though this novella is more complicated than this, there is some truth to this observation.

Cynically, I will argue that Yi Yang-ji's success, which began with the publication of her first work in 1982, depends less on this sort of crude image of South Koreans than it does on a certain reading of the Resident Korean women characters in her work.⁸ After all, much of Yi's fiction—but notably not *Yuhi*—revolves around Resident Korean female characters who have affairs with Japanese men. Often these women are masochistic in their sexual proclivities.

This is very much the case in *Koku* [Koku], a work about which the author Nakagami Kenji and the critic Kawamura Minato got into a little

⁷ For example, they have pointed out that since in *Yuhi* the main character seems unable to come to terms with her Koreanness since she finds much about (South) Korean culture and society—which appear in the text in a stereotyped form—distasteful, readers might have 1) uncritically accepted the notion that Korean ethnicity was a source of pain or 2) have been happy to find a confirmation of their negative views of Koreans. The former observation is from Takeda Seiji, "Rikai sareru mono no 'fuko'—Yi Yang-ji *Yuhi*" [The "Unhappiness" of Being Understood: Yi Yang-ji's *Yuhi*], "*Zainichi*" as *Foundation* 302 and the latter from Norma Field, "Texts of Childhood in Inter-Nationalizing Japan," Laura García-Moreno and Peter C. Pfeiffer, eds., *Text and Nation: Cross-disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities*, 167.

⁸ Helen Koh, in an unpublished paper, points out that Yi's portraits of Korean women as promiscuous and highly sexual may have led readers to develop stereotypes of Korean women as hypersexual.

spat.⁹ In this work, the main character begins seeing her *kayagum*, a Korean instrument not unlike the *koto*, as a living female body, and in one painful scene, she grows disgusted with it and cuts its strings one by one.

Nakagami describes this image as one of a “*kayagum* that cannot stop singing the tale of *han* [grief/ melancholy/ resentment],” and he feels that this story consequently serves as a “counteroffensive” against the more common, bestselling stories of Resident Koreans throwing off their Japaneseness and embracing their homeland.¹⁰ Kawamura, for his part, focuses on different aspects of the novella and interprets Yi’s work as indicating a desire to escape from her Korean and her feminine identity.

The two get even testier in a subsequent exchange, set off by an article by Kawamura in which he analyzes Yi’s work in addition to the text Nakagami had written for a photographic collection entitled *Monogatari Soru*. He criticizes Nakagami for portraying Korean back streets as a representation of Korea as a feminine space. He elaborates:

That is, for Nakagami Kenji, Korea is on the one hand the tale of ‘victimized’ [literally, attacked or raped] women—from comfort women to *kisaeng* to those who come to Japan to be prostitutes; on the other hand, it contains within it the *delusion* of the author himself being ‘victimized’ by Korea (or Japan) as woman.¹¹

He then complains that the photographs all (if one is to translate this into contemporary English theoretical language) show the gaze of a man upon a

⁹ Yi Yang-ji, *Koku, Yi Yang-ji zenshu* [The Complete Works of Yi Yang-ji] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993), 139-220. The story first appeared in 1984. For the exchange between Nakagami and Kawamura, see the following: Nakagami Kenji, “Yi Yang-ji *Koku*: Kankoku to Nihon no genzai” (Yi Yang-ji’s *Koku*: Korea and Japan Today), *Shincho* 62.5 (May 1985): 312-14; Kawamura Minato, “Sai no mukogawa—Yi Yang-ji *Koku*” [On the Other Side of the Divide: Yi Yang-ji’s *Koku*], *Gunzo* 40.5 (May 1985): 332-33; and Kawamura Minato, “Kankoku to iu kagami—Gendai bungaku fuirudo noto” [Korea the Mirror: Field Notes on Contemporary Literature], *Bungei* 24.4 (April 1985): 173-75.

¹⁰ Nakagami Kenji, “Yi Yang-ji *Koku*: Kankoku to Nihon no genzai” [Yi Yang-ji’s *Koku*: Korea and Japan Today], *Shincho* 62.5 (May 1985): 314.

¹¹ Kawamura, “Korea the Mirror,” 173.

woman; he goes on to situate this point of view in the context of the Japanese tendency to represent itself as male to Asia the female.¹² Nakagami's response is curt, even dismissive. He brushes off Kawamura's implication that the camera is being used as a violent, male machine. He argues that by virtue of the fact that it contains within its body film that will give birth to photographs, it is in fact an inherently female tool. Yi Yang-ji's *Koku*, he then adds, would not have been possible without the existence of this visual technology, for its very style is "cinematic."¹³

While I find this last argument absurd, since I do not believe cameras to be inherently gendered in one way or another, this exchange is crucial for understanding the milieu in which Yi's work was being read. It is plain that whether or not all her readers agreed that Yi Yang-ji put forth an image of the Korean woman as object of sexual desire or as the feminized victim of Japanese aggression, they would have been familiar with this line of reasoning. As with Ri Kaisei, therefore, the inclusion of Yi Yang-ji's writing serves at once also as an exclusion; or in this case perhaps rather as an inclusion only under the terms of the acceptance of a subordinated position.

We should recall here the broader sociopolitical backdrop: this is the decade when Korea was beginning to emerge as a global economic force and in which Japanese women were attaining a modicum of economic power. To be less paranoid, it is also the time when the most famous *Zainichi* grassroots movement, that against the fingerprinting requirement of the Alien Registration Law, was at its peak. Many Japanese activists also participated in this struggle, and consequently it is possible to imagine that the interest of Japanese readers in her work derived from a real desire to comprehend the legacies of colonialism.

So what happens in the 1990s, when interest in Resident Korean writers reaches heights unimaginable only twenty years before? Looking at the case of Yu Miri, the winner of the 1997 Akutagawa, will help to answer this question. Yu is an interesting case because unlike the other two writers I have spoken about, and unlike most writers identified as Resident Korean, Yu has not made explicitly Korean characters the focus of her work. Not long after she won the prize, however, book signings scheduled at prominent Tokyo bookstores were cancelled when people claiming to be members of

¹² Kawamura, "Korea the Mirror," 173-75.

¹³ Nakagami, 312.

rightist organizations called and threatened to disrupt the events. Incidentally, these callers' only gripe with Yu seems to have been her ethnicity.

As a result of this highly-publicized incident, Yu's name became linked with her Resident Koreanness in a manner her work did not necessarily call for. At roughly the same time, lectures by a journalist named Sakurai Yoshiko were cancelled in response to protests by human rights organizations. Sakurai had claimed in her talks that there was no proof that the Japanese military had forcibly recruited comfort women, and these groups demanded that she retract this statement. Some argued (for a range of reasons) that the Yu incident and the Sakurai affair should be distinguished from one another and others that they both involved restrictions of freedom of expression. What is important here is not whether or not they deserve to be linked, but rather that people did link them.

In a post-prize *taidan* with Ri Kaisei, Yu observes that a certain critic commented about both her works that her not making the family she writes about be explicitly Resident Korean results in works that don't provide adequate explanation for their readers, that the father she writes about is clearly the typical patriarchal Korean father. Yet her intention, she claims here, was not to write about her father as a *Zainichi* per se, but rather about his own specific unique actions.¹⁴ Later in the same conversation she talks about her own family as having been caught between the false constructions of them as Korean and as Japanese and, even later, about the way that writing about the family—an institution so influenced by social circumstances and the state—enables one to write about the warps in those systems. Elsewhere I read Yu's work as being about the way that contemporary Japanese state and society have bred violence, particularly within the family and against women.¹⁵

Yet critics' attention to her work nearly always focuses on her depiction of the collapsing family, and—even when they do not say so explicitly—assumes that her work is about the Resident Korean family specifically. They also assume that it is about things as they actually are, in other words,

¹⁴ Yu Miri and Ri Kaisei, "Kazoku•Minzoku•Bungaku" [Family/Nation/Literature], *Gunzo* 52.4 (April 1997): 129.

¹⁵ I spoke about this issue at last year's MAJLS conference. See my "Broken Pasts, Uncomfortable Presents: Tales of Yu Miri and 'Comfort Women,'" *PMAJLS* 5 (Summer 1999): 321-31.

that her works are *shishosetsu*, despite the fact that most are not. Ri Kaisei draws attention to this point in his conversation with Yu, expressing dismay her works are read in this manner despite the fact that they are intensely *methodological*.¹⁶ Thus when Yu writes of horrifying things in her fiction, they are read as a text of her life.

That this is the case lends further credence to my rather simplistic contention that when admitted to the club that is Japan's literary world, *Zainichi* writers have been marked as different, subordinate, or perhaps even pathological. In many cases this has deflected attention from other aspects of these authors' writings. I do not wish to overemphasize this point, however. I will not go so far as to claim that awarding the Akutagawa Prize to *Zainichi* writers has resulted in a truly multicultural canon. My cynicism emerges not so much from a sense that I feel that some community of artists has consciously or unconsciously conspired to reproduce the aesthetic and political values that have kept them in power, but in a recognition of the degree to which literature and indeed the notion of "multiculturalism" has become a commodity in Japan.

Nonetheless, I do think it fair to say that the publication and dissemination of works by these writers have opened up the possibility for a serious change in values. The availability and even prominence of their work have enabled a consideration of historical questions in a manner which official arbiters of politics and aesthetic value simply cannot control. For example, the phenomenal popularity of Yu's work suggests that its depictions of violence and the family and her own reluctance to define herself in terms of affiliation with a national or ethnic community have struck a chord with a broad Japanese readership who may not even be reading her as a *Zainichi* author. It is difficult to imagine the Japanese readers of Ri Kaisei responding to his work in such a manner.

The transformed relationship of Japanese readers to the writings of Resident Koreans has surely been influenced by certain historical shifts, including a rise in the economic status of many Resident Koreans and the changing attitude of local government to resident aliens. I wish to end on a hopeful note. If nothing else, the availability of and attention to this body of writing has made it possible—and has reinforced for us—the importance of holding this panel. I hope it will also encourage us to continually ask our-

¹⁶ Yu and Ri, 138.

selves why we choose to think and teach about particular works of modern Japanese literature.