

How Japanese is Japanese Literature? Discourse Analysis on the Question of a Japanese National Literature

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Abstract

A Japanese national literature and unified Japanese language emerged in the course of the nation-building process, at the start of the country's modernization in line with Western models. As a national literature (*kokubungaku* or *kokumin bungaku*), Japanese literature was to manifest the cultural identity of the new Japanese nation. The new literary canon was also intended to achieve independence from the Chinese cultural model and to establish an independent Japanese culture. The incorporation of Western literary categories led to a reevaluation of Japanese literary history and the literary corpus. The othering of Chinese literature and the background of world literature were constitutive for the establishment of a Japanese national literature.

This paper examines discourses on national literature during three historically important periods in Japan, but also in colonized Korea and U.S.-occupied Okinawa, to provide new perspectives on the relationship between nation, national culture, colonization, and subject. It argues that Japanese literature has always been connected with world literature and that it should be understood as a transcultural literature.

Introduction

What is Japanese national literature? This question has been asked repeatedly in Japan, especially during critical historical periods and times of crisis. At these historical and political turning points, literary discourses were never limited to cultural questions or even to literature itself but extended to larger questions of the country's identity and orientation.

These phases were:

1. the early phase of the modernization process and nation-building starting in the 1890s,
2. the period from the late 1930s to the outbreak of the Pacific War in the late 1930s and early 1940s (1937–1941),
3. the postwar period in the early to mid-1950s (1951–1954).

In these three periods, fundamental reflection and discussion took place on what national literature should be and mean for the Japanese nation, the Japanese people, or for people in general. These reflections and discourses are of central historical and ideological

significance — not only in literary but also in political and social contexts. In the following discussion of the relationship between Japanese literature and world literature, it will become clear that Japanese literature has always existed in relation to world literature — in particular, to Chinese and Western literature — and that it never existed as a national literature in complete isolation. The establishment of a Japanese national literature was a national and cultural undertaking, but this project could not be carried out in Japan without reference to other literatures or to world literature. Japanese literature did not begin to open up and become part of world literature only in the 1990s through the influence of globally popular authors or specifically transnational literary works, as some have claimed. Rather, Japanese (national) literature has always been and continues to be interwoven and connected with the world and world literature: As a national-cultural project that emerged in close connection with other literatures, cultures, and colonial subjects, it is a transcultural project.

1. The Phase of Establishing a National Literature

When the Department of National Literature was established at the University of Tōkyō (in 1877), a sweeping question was posed: What is Japanese literature? Is it literature written in Japanese, or literature written by Japanese people? Not only was the concept of literature not defined in Japan at that time; it was also unclear what the “Japanese language” was. Even the first Japanese Minister of Culture, Mori Arinori (1847–1889), thought that the Japanese language was a mixture of Japanese and Chinese.¹ Mori was concerned that only Chinese was being taught in Japanese schools, and that there were no textbooks, grammar, or teachers of Japanese. This view was not unusual among intellectuals of the time, since *kanbun* (Chinese texts) were actually used as written language texts in Japan, and it was Chinese works that were considered the literary classics.

Therefore, before Japanese literature could be established as a national literature, it was thought necessary to first separate it from classical Chinese literature. But if we look at the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Events) or the *Nihonshoki* (Japanese Annals), which are the oldest documents written in Japanese, the *Kojiki* uses Chinese characters to write the Japanese language, and the *Nihonshoki* is written in the Chinese *kanbun* style. I cannot go into the problem of the Japanese language and the development of the standard national language here and will confine myself to the question of national literature.² Up to modern times, Chinese literature and Japanese literature could not be separated in Japan. They formed a single entity, although what is referred to here as Chinese was written in Chinese and read in Japanese in Japanese order (*kanbun-kundoku* style). The Chinese language was not spoken

¹ See LEE 2009.

² On the emergence of the Japanese national language, see LEE 2009.

in Japan: Chinese and Japanese are very different languages with the exception of the common Chinese characters that were adopted and integrated into Japanese. In the following, I therefore use the Japanese term *kanbun* to refer to Japanized Chinese texts. Not only was it impossible to separate the Japanese language and literature from *kanbun*; the entire epistemological system in Japan was shaped by the Chinese science of *kangaku*, making Chinese science the central point of orientation for science in Japan.³ As Haruo Shirane shows, the hierarchy of writings in the canon (of the human sciences) in medieval Japan was as follows 1. Buddhist texts, 2. Confucian texts, 3. historical writings, 4. anthologies of Chinese poems and texts, 5. Japanese poems (*waka*), and 6. Japanese narrative literature.⁴ As early as the eighteenth century, there were attempts by *kokugaku* (national philology) scholars to overthrow this (China-oriented) canon and establish a new canon in accordance with what they considered to be the Japanese order. However, these attempts were unsuccessful, and it took a long time for the idea of a national literature to gradually emerge at the end of the nineteenth century, due to the difficulty or near impossibility of separating Japanese literature from the Chinese system of knowledge. This situation clearly shows the difficulty and artifice required to create a “national” Japanese literature. The framework for this was the national language and national unity or nation-building, both of which were Western concepts developed in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries.⁵

Even the discourse on Japanese national literature has a transcultural character, beginning with the terminology, but also with the definition, norms, forms, and contents of literature according to the Western model, which was introduced in the mid-nineteenth century. The term for literature in Japan to this day is *bungaku*⁶. However, the word *bungaku* comes from Confucius’ *Lunyu* and originally meant “learning”, the study of Chinese classics, and also the title of the Confucian scholars.⁷ In 1870, according to Shirane, the philosopher Nishi Amane (1829–1897) first used the term *bungaku* in the Western sense of “literature,” and since then it has been used in Japan to refer to literature and the humanities. This also reflects the change in the concept of literature in Europe in the nineteenth century to the idea of literature as free, individually driven creative work.⁸ Japan’s “national literature”

³ KUROZUMI 1999.

⁴ SHIRANE 1999: 18ff.

⁵ Because the national culture creates differences outwardly and unifies inwardly, diversity within Japan itself has been suppressed. Thus, the language and culture of the Ainu or Okinawans were not only disregarded but suppressed; they were forced to learn and speak standard Japanese as their own language until 1945.

⁶ See SUZUKI 1998.

⁷ According to SCHAMONI “our term *bungaku* [...] exclusively meant ‘learning’; namely, the study of the Chinese classics — besides, it was the title of the scholar who lectured on them to imperial princes.” (SCHAMONI 2000: 37).

⁸ SHIRANE 1999: 24.

therefore embodies Western constructs and norms of what and how literature should be. During this period of transformation, everything that had been written in Japan up to that point had to be measured against Western ideas and standardized. With the establishment of the canon of national literature, the entire world of knowledge and literature in Japan was shaken up and indeed overturned in a way that I cannot go into here. The Chinese world of knowledge and the Chinese system of knowledge were devalued, and the (until then) “light” literature written in Japanese, such as short stories and poetry, which had previously been held in low esteem, became highly valued as national literature and was incorporated into the canon. Individual literary works were thus subjected to fundamental reevaluation according to Western standards.

Japanese Literary Historiography

In the process of modernization in Japan, not only the language and literature, but also the whole system of knowledge was reorganized. In 1890, the first Japanese literary history was published by Mikami Sanji and Takatsu Kuwasaburō under the title *Nihon bungakushi* (History of Japanese Literature). According to the Western understanding, a literary history should express the specific characteristics and traits of the nation. Independent of writings on Japanese literary history, the first writings on Chinese literary history (*Shina bungakushi*) were published in 1898. At the University of Tōkyō, the departments of Japanese and Chinese literature were first combined under the name of *Wa-kan-bungakka* (Japanese-Chinese Literature Department) and were divided in 1885 into the Department of Japanese Literature (*Wabun gakka*, since 1889 *Kokubun gakka*) and the Department of Chinese Literature (*Kan gakka*). The latter was then divided in 1904 into the departments of Chinese philosophy, history, and literature according to the Western system of scholarship. Although Chinese philology was now considered an “other” discipline (separate from Japanese) outside Japan, the influence of *kanbun* was still very strong in Japan. For example, Confucian morality was promulgated in the *kanbun* style in the “Imperial Rescript on Education” (*Kyōiku chokugo*) of 1890. Since *kanbun* texts were the basis of science and education in Japan, they were influential on Meiji intellectuals and the Meiji elite. Chinese poetry was still highly regarded during the Meiji period, and the most common written texts were Japanized Chinese texts (*kanbun*). Although there was always a debate in Japan about whether to abolish Chinese characters in the Japanese written language, Chinese compounds played an important role during modernization as translations for Western scientific, technical, and other terms for which there were no corresponding terms in Japan, such as democracy, society, and equality. Since each Chinese character has a specific meaning, it was possible to create composite Chinese characters that corresponded in meaning to Western terms and thus to introduce new terms into the Japanese language. Many of these terms were later

reimported to China, including culture (*bunka*), civilization (*bunmei*), science (*kagaku*), law (*hōritsu*), and ideology (*shisō*).

Difficulties in Separating Japanese from Chinese Literature

When Japanese national literature was established according to the criteria and categories of the Western scientific system, *kanbun* and *kangaku* were defined in terms of otherness as “foreign” literature and science, and thus as completely different from Japanese literature and science. Nevertheless, they continued to play an important role in the development of Japan’s national literature — now as the “other,” the counterpart, the negative foil, the projection surface. Even in the “Imperial Rescript on Education” (1890), the Confucian ethic of loyalty and filial piety continued to shape Japanese moral norms throughout the Meiji period and until the end of World War II. Thus, Chinese and Western knowledge systems always functioned as two major poles of orientation, that varied in strength depending on the time and context. After the Japanese victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the general attitude and view of the Japanese toward China changed to disdain and even contempt. Guided by Confucianism, the Japanese generally judged Chinese philosophy and thought as “pragmatic-realistic and conservative”.⁹ These “Confucian characteristics” were considered “alien” to the nature of literature in the modern era.¹⁰ As summarized by literary scholar Sasanuma Toshiaki, the historian and intellectual Tsuda Sōkichi (1873–1961) judged Chinese culture to have caused great damage in Japan — he said it was born from the Chinese mentality and lacked universality.¹¹ According to Confucianism, literature was degraded by its use as a means to achieve moral and political ends. Tsuda, according to Sasanuma, confirms the stereotypical view of Confucianism as “formal,” “pedantic,” and “practical.” Through a negative image of China and its antithesis, a positive image of Japan, it was possible to justify in Japan what Japanese literature should be and what it should not be. Sasanuma shows that this tendency continued after 1945. In the early 1950s, when discussions of national literature increased in Japan, the importance of Japanese people’s literary traditions became a subject of debate. The origin of this literature was sought in the mythological heroic era before the advent of imperial rule. This literary imagination of the Japanese people was contrasted against the continental Confucian tradition. Literary historian Saigō Nobutsuna, for example, criticized the worldview of the author of the *Nihonshoki*, written in the *kanbun* style, as “poisoned” by Confucian ideology, and his bureaucratic attitude as completely alien to the Japanese heroic era and “foreign” to literature as a whole.¹² The “formalistic,” “bureaucratic,” and “moralizing” influence of

⁹ SASANUMA 2010: 20.

¹⁰ SAIGŌ 1951: 52–53, quoted in SASANUMA 2010: 21.

¹¹ TSUDA 1916–1921, quoted in SASANUMA 2010: 20.

¹² SAIGŌ, see footnote 9, quoted in SASANUMA 2010: 21.

Confucianism on Japan was regarded as an alien factor coming from outside, and the effect of this “foreign” *kanbun* culture was even described as a kind of “colonization”.¹³

The social discourse on the establishment of Japanese national literature in the 1890s began with the victories in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) in the general mood of heightened national consciousness. This discourse took two directions: One emphasized that a national literature should be based on the national mentality and spirit, while the other emphasized connections in Japanese literature to world literature. The literary theorist and writer Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935), for example, believed that national literature should express the characteristics and tendencies of the nation, but it should also be a great literature capable of moving people throughout the world.¹⁴

How *Genji monogatari* Became a Classic of Japanese Literature

At the beginning of the Meiji period, the Japanese literary canon was overturned and a new order was established in the discourse on national literature and literary historiography, as evidenced by the change in the reception and evaluation of the tale *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji).¹⁵ With the introduction of modern Western literary norms and canons, Japanese prose literature, which had previously been neglected in the history of Japanese literature, took the place of works written in Chinese. The tale *Taketori monogatari* (The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter or The Tale of Princess Kaguya; 910), which had been completely ignored until then, was now regarded as the origin of the Japanese novel/narrative (*monogatari no oya*), and the *Genji monogatari*, written by the court lady Murasaki Shikibu in the 11th century, as the culmination of this genre and often praised as “the world’s first realistic novel.”¹⁶ In his book *Shōsetsu shinzui* (The Essence of the Novel; 1885–1886), Tsubouchi Shōyō called realistic prose literature (*shōsetsu*) the most highly developed form of literature and considered *Genji monogatari* its great pioneer. Although *Genji monogatari* had been highly regarded since the Middle Ages, it was considered important only as a guide to *waka* poetry, not as a literary work in its own right. In addition to the *Genji monogatari*,

¹³ Sasanuma analyzes Saigō’s interpretation and quotes his expression “*shokuminchika kosumoporitanka*” (colonization and cosmopolitanization), without citing the exact page of Saigō’s passage (SASANUMA 2010: 22).

¹⁴ Tsubouchi 1895, cited in Naitō 2014: 8.

¹⁵ Similar to the prose genre, other literary genres were also reevaluated. The *Heike monogatari*, which had previously been considered historical writing, was recognized as literature in the Meiji period and canonized as a national epic after World War II. The three major literary figures of the Edo period, Itō Jinsai, Arai Hakuseki, and Keichū, were replaced in modern times by Bashō (for poetry), Saikaku (for prose), and Chikamatsu Monzaemon (for drama). Shirane noted that Saikaku was not included in textbooks until after 1945 (SHIRANE: 25).

¹⁶ “*Sekai de saisho no shajitsu shōsetsu*” (SHIRANE 1999: 22).

the diary literature of the Heian period — which was written in Japanese mostly by women, especially by court ladies — came also to be highly regarded. *Genji monogatari* was partly translated by Suematsu Kenchō in 1882, then repeatedly translated into Western languages in excerpts until Arthur Waley began its complete translation into English in 1925 (1925–1933). Through this translation process, the *Genji monogatari* gradually became recognized as a work of world literature.

However, this valorization of Heian-era prose literature written by women in a “woman’s hand” (*onnade; hiragana*), an elegant style with much psychological self-reflection, was met with an ambivalent reaction from male literary scholars and historians, since national literature was supposed to reflect the “national spirit.” The historian of ideas Tsuda Sōkichi expressed a certain irritation at the dominance of women’s literature in Japanese literary history, and sought an explanation in the fact that women wrote more freely in the Japanese language and script, far from the *kanbun*. Tsuda believed that the thoughts and feelings of the nation could not be expressed freely when writing in a foreign language [as men did].¹⁷ In line with Suzuki Tomi, Shirane also pointed out the ambivalence of male literary theorists toward the phenomenon of women’s literature. These theorists, Shirane wrote, showed displeasure with women’s literature, appreciated the influence of China and Buddhism, but still wanted to exclude this influence, judging the mixed style of Chinese and Japanese (*wakan konkōbun*) since the Middle Ages to be “more dynamic and masculine than the [female] Japanese style in Japanese writing.”¹⁸ According to Shirane, these male literary theorists emphasized that Japanese national literature and the nation had progressed through the dynamic masculine Tokugawa literature, which subsumed and abolished the foundations of the “feminine” style of Heian literature.¹⁹ However, despite many contradictions, the *Genji monogatari* and the Heian diary literature were established as representative literary works and classics of national literature.

It is not true, however, that Heian women writers wrote their Japanese works detached from the *kanbun* world. They were not allowed to show publicly that they knew Chinese classics well. Murasaki Shikibu based her novel *Genji monogatari* on the Chinese poem *Chōgonka* (Cheng Hen Ge; Song of Everlasting Regret; 809) by the famous poet Bai Juyi (772–846), which describes the tragic love between the Tang dynasty emperor Xuanzong and his favorite concubine and later empress Yang Guifei (Yōkihi in Japanese), and quoted several times from this work as well as from the political poetry collection *Hakushi monjū*, also by Bai Juyi. Murasaki Shikibu incorporated the Chinese love story into the love story of Prince Genji’s parents in the *Kiritsubo* volume as the background of his later life. Far from detracting from Murasaki Shikibu’s achievement, the creation of intertextual relationships adds depth

¹⁷ TSUDA 1916: 257, quoted in SUZUKI 1999: 102.

¹⁸ SHIRANE 1999: 29.

¹⁹ Ibid.

and imaginative power to the novel. On this transcultural basis, the monumental work of *Genji monogatari* became what it is today: a work of world literature.

2. The Discourse on National Literature in the Late 1930s and Early 1940s

In the 1920s, the proletarian literary movement had a great and lasting influence on Japanese society, but in the 1930s it was severely restricted, and it disappeared from literary life. The extent to which free discourse was still possible in the political turbulence of the 1930s, which eventually led to World War II, is questionable. For this reason, literary history and literary discourse in general have tended to suppress or ignore this period as a dark chapter. Although discussion of *daitōa bungaku* (greater Asian literature) eventually emerged from the concept of the Greater Asian Welfare Sphere under Japanese leadership, there were serious discussions on *kokumin bungaku* (national literature) by a wide range of writers, critics, and intellectuals even before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, and with renewed vigor, in the second half of 1940. It was discussed that Japan had never had a literature such as *kokumin bungaku* and that such a literature was now needed.²⁰

Although many proletarian writers died in prison or were forced to abandon their Marxist convictions and convert (*tenkō*) under the great repression and persecution (as in the March 15, 1928 and April 16, 1929 incidents), the proletarian literary movement in Japan remained influential. Even after it had failed institutionally, there was still hope that it could feed into the formation of *kokumin bungaku*. As the proletarian movement in Japan had always been more intellectual and less popular with the people, now, in the new *kokumin bungaku*, the people as readers and subjects of literature, were finally to take center stage.

At the beginning of the *kokumin bungaku* discourse in 1937, for example, Asano Akira emphasized that national literature should be about the creation of a literature of the nation (*kokumin*) that would be read by the nation. *Kokumin bungaku*, according to Nakamura Muraō, should be a literature that could capture and express “the characteristics of the nation-state (*kokka*), the characteristics of the country, and the characteristics of nationality (*kokuminsei*)”.²¹ This discourse repeatedly referred to German literature of the Nazi era, which, depending on the position of the discourse participants, was either critically rejected or regarded as a model for national literature. According to Matsumoto Kazuya, the national literature discourse of 1937 had three main tendencies:

1. the popular-nationalist *kokumin bungaku* tendency
2. the *kokumin bungaku* tendency that arose from the proletarian literary trend, for which the readers were of great importance

²⁰ MATSUMOTO 2019: 94.

²¹ Cited in MATSUMOTO 2019: 95.

3. the *kokumin bungaku* tendency that emphasized the production of representative Japanese literature as *kokumin bungaku* without political positioning.

These discussions, which were conducted in various media such as newspapers, literary journals, and popular magazines, disappeared from published literary discourse with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and only began to have an impact around 1940; however, the discussion continued under the surface. With the enactment of the General Mobilization Law (*Kokka sōdōinhō*) on April 1, 1938, the repression and persecution of communists and social democrats became more severe, and the freedom of expression was more strictly controlled and limited. In 1940 (September 29), the Three-Power Pact between Germany, Italy, and Japan was signed, and a fascist movement called the “New Political System Movement” (*Shin taisei undō*) was launched in Japan, following the example of the other two countries.²² In this movement, the discourse on national literature resurfaced, this time focusing on how literature and writers should position themselves in the new political system. It has been pointed out that, like the term “new system” (*shin taisei*), the term *kokumin bungaku* also became fashionable in the literary world (*bundan*) of the time.²³ Since this discourse on national literature was conducted during the wartime period, when oppression and control became increasingly harsh, it is understandable that it also became more nationalistic. And it is revealing that this discourse fundamentally questioned Japan’s modernization process since the Meiji period. It addressed the question of what modernity (*kindai*) meant for Japan and what the Japanese nation was in relation to the West and China, as well as to Japanese-occupied countries such as Korea.²⁴ In 1942, the literary journal *Bungakkai* organized a symposium entitled “Overcoming Modernity” (*Kindai no chōkoku*). It was attended by 13 intellectuals, including Kyōto School philosophers, former members of the *Nihon rōmanha* (Romantic School of Japan), writers who criticized Western modernity and insisted on a return to “Japanese tradition,” and some literary and cultural critics. “Overcoming modernity” meant criticism of and resistance to the Western modernization of Japan that had been pursued since the Meiji period. This discourse ended without clear results.

²² *Shin taisei undō* (New Political System Movement) was a movement to implement the fascist general mobilization system under Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro since 1940.

²³ MATSUMOTO 2019: 101–102.

²⁴ In Korea, which had been annexed by Japan since 1910, the journal *Kokumin bungaku* was published between 1941 and 1945, and it dealt with the question of how Korean literature could be possible under the difficult colonial conditions. More on this later in this text.

Hayashi Fusao's Novel *Seinen* as a Prototype of the Shift from Proletarian Literature to *kokumin bungaku*

A revealing example of this phase of national literary discourse can be found in the historical novel *Seinen* (Young Men) by Hayashi Fusao (1935–1975). Hayashi was a proletarian writer who was imprisoned between 1930 and 1932, where he announced his conversion, and later became a nationalist supporter of the emperor. Hayashi's case is emblematic of the proletarian movement's failure, which was not only due to the suppression by the authorities, but also due to many proletarian writers becoming advocates of Japan-centrism (*nihonshugisha*) through *tenkō* (conversion). Not only the various laws of order, but also the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the general mobilization, among other factors, necessitated a national literature in support of the war. Literary scholar Naitō Yoshitada also sees the ensuing *kokumin bungaku* discourse in the context of the proletarian literary movement's failure. Focusing on the multiple revisions of Hayashi Fusao's novel *Seinen* (Young Men), Naitō analyzes how this novel was transformed in four stages between 1932 and 1938. The novel was previously read as a documentation of a writer's conversion (*tenkō no sho*). Naitō does not only recognize in it the transformation of a writer who was originally a Marxist and proletarian writer and later became a nationalist through *tenkō*. In his view, this transformation also embodies the development and spirit of the times and the change in the *kokumin bungaku* discourse. Hayashi's novel is about two young men from Chōshū (today's Yamaguchi Prefecture) — modeled on Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909) and Inoue Kaoru (1836–1915), who later became important politicians — and secretly went to England at the end of the Edo period to learn Western military techniques to fight against the foreign Western powers. In England, however, they changed their conviction: instead of advocating the necessity of expelling foreigners (the *jōi* group), they converted to those who advocated the opening of the country (the *kaikoku* group). In the first version of the novel, the simultaneity of significant global events and the opening of the country were emphasized by including certain topics: the founding of the International Workingmen's Association in London in 1864 and the two men's desire to work for the world proletarian revolution and fight against imperialism in Japan. In the later versions, traces of Marxism and criticism of fascism were gradually erased, as was the awareness of Japan's embeddedness in simultaneously occurring world events, that is, the broader global context. The expression "all workers and peasants," for example, was changed in the revision process to "working people of Japan" (*Nihon no hataraku minshū*). In this way, the workers who exist with and in the world at the same time were demarcated by Japan's borders. In this process, the emperor also emerged as a "sacred ruler" (*kiyoi tōchisha*). The originally proletarian work, which was intended to envision international cooperation, became national *kokumin bungaku*, the simultaneity between Japanese and world events was erased, and Japan

became the singular focus. What remained in the work was the expression of love for the motherland, the “beauty of nature and the people of Japan.”²⁵

In this nationalist turn and anti-modernist tendency, Naitō highlights a parallel with the development of the *kokumin bungaku* discourse at that time. The writer Murasame Taijirō expressed this change as follows: “The standard of evaluation of Japanese literature was constantly changing, sometimes German, sometimes Russian, sometimes French, in short, Western. It was misunderstood as if it meant progress to follow them [Western tendencies]. The *kokumin bungaku* movement is a movement to correct this mistake. It wants to set the standard on a purely Japanese basis.”²⁶

As in the 1942 debate on “overcoming modernity” (*kindai no chōkoku*), the intention was to overcome the West and “Western modernity” and to place the Japanese nationality at the center. Naitō sees a problem in the fact that even in the proletarian literary movement, the emperor was usually not seen as the origin of oppressive feudalism, but rather as “Japan’s own tradition,” which was not questioned.

Although many intellectuals in Japan during this period were heavily influenced by Europe, the United States, or even the Soviet Union through communism, there was still a strong awareness (and resentment) in Japan under the surface that Japan had been “colonized” by Western ideology and civilization since the Meiji period. This is where the discussion of (Western) modernity, which has been accepted and adopted in Japan without criticism or debate, comes from. In fact, this was the basis for the discourse of overcoming modernity in 1942. This has been an accompanying question and an undertone to discussion in Japan since the beginning of modernization; it arises again and again, depending on the situation at the time, and has never completely disappeared to this day.

3. The Discourse on National Literature as the Basis of National Identity in the Early 1950s

The discourse on national literature in the early 1950s raised many fundamental issues for postwar Japan and its reconstruction. Many writers, literary and cultural critics, and (literary) scholars participated in this discourse. This was the period when the Korean War began (1950), and the San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed (1951) without the participation of the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union. With the entry into force of this treaty (1952), Japan was granted full sovereignty and the U.S. occupation officially ended. At the same time, the controversial Japan-America Security Treaty (*Nichibei anzen hoshō jōyaku*) came into effect. During this period, many basic questions arose for Japan, including how Japan could emerge from occupation as an independent democratic country. In China, the People’s Republic of China was established as a socialist state in 1949, and popular

²⁵ NAITŌ 2014: 70.

²⁶ Quoted in NAITŌ 2014: 71.

nationalist movements were also emerging in other Asian countries. Against this backdrop, the role and significance of national literature in Japan were discussed, always including the question of Japanese identity. The discussion was about the relationship between politics and literature, the further development of Japanese modernization, the responsibility for the war, but also the division between citizens (*minshū*) and writers. And it was also about modernity (*kindai*), but in a political situation that was fundamentally different from the 1940s, the time of the debate on “overcoming modernity.” Although this discourse was criticized and discarded as an ideological campaign after World War II, it was taken up again by an advocate of national literature, the cultural critic and sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910–1977). He addressed national literature in a treatise with the deliberately eponymous title “Overcoming Modernity” (*Kindai no chōkoku*; 1959).

Takeuchi argued that Western culture had been adopted in Japan without any real debate, but also that the criticism of Western modernity by the nationalist writers of the *Nihon rōmanha* had not been taken seriously and had simply been discarded after World War II. According to Takeuchi, Japan had avoided seriously addressing ultranationalism and wartime responsibility and instead immediately introduced postwar democracy. Japanese proletarian literature, which in Takeuchi’s view had emerged from the *Shirakaba* (White Birch) literary movement, had also introduced the category of class, but could not liberate the oppressed. Thus, all the “modernist” tendencies and currents, including the proletarian literary movement, could never properly include the people (*minshū* or *minzoku*). These are the main arguments underlying Takeuchi’s critique of modernism in relation to Japan. According to him, the people always remained “slaves” to a superficial Western modernism because they had never engaged with it by rejecting, resisting, and confronting it. And now, with the new *kokumin bungaku*, the people should finally become the subject of history and Japan an independent country.²⁷

After World War II, many writers who had not been able to speak out openly immediately became active again. Many Marxist writers had abandoned their beliefs through conversion (*tenkō*) in the 1930s under harsh persecution and repression, some of them becoming nationalist supporters of the emperor, and the proletarian literary movement was thus considered a failure. Nevertheless, it continued to be an important foundation or starting point for literary developments after World War II. It consisted of two main groups: writers close to the Communist Party around the journal *Shin Nihon bungaku* (New Japanese Literature), and writers around the journal *Kindai bungaku* (Modern Literature), who were concerned with the restoration of a modern subject. Even within these groups, the writers’ opinions and ideas about the New Japanese Literature were not uniform. But all of them were concerned that the citizens should eventually become subjects themselves, thus overcoming the old imperial and nation-state system. Because of Japan’s

²⁷ TAKEUCHI [1981 (1951)]: 28–37.

growing dependence on the United States, independence and popular sovereignty were discussed as central issues. The *kokumin bungaku* discourse also focused on the people as the subject of national literature. Various Japanese terms were used to refer to the people, such as *minzoku* (people; ethnicity), *shimin* (citizen), *minshū* (mass of people), and *kokumin* (nation; citizenship), each with different connotations and meanings. These difficult-to-define categories for the term “people” were important in establishing new independent subjects, which had not really existed in Japan before 1945 and would now carry the new Japanese society. The *minshū* or *kokumin* were now seen as subjects free from the nationalist state and in solidarity with the peoples of Asia. They were also seen as the bearers of the new *kokumin bungaku*, a topic of intense debate in the early 1950s. The aforementioned Takeuchi Yoshimi played a decisive role in this *kokumin bungaku* discourse. He initiated this discourse in 1952 through an exchange of letters with the writer Itō Sei (1905–1969) entitled “*Atarashiki kokumin bungaku e no michi*” (The Way to the New National Literature). The main point was that the people themselves should now be at the center, and that *kokumin bungaku* literature should take up and express their thoughts and feelings; it should therefore be *minshū hon’i* (people-centered / people at the center).

Literary scholar Naitō Yoshitada classifies Takeuchi’s *kokumin bungaku* concept as a dynamic, complementary category to the war responsibility discourse and the politics and literature discourse as a new *kokumin bungaku* concept derived from the political literary discourse that had emerged from the proletarian literary movement. Takeuchi himself insisted on the independence of literature from politics. He rejected the category of politics in the narrow sense, and instead wanted an open “forum” (*ba*) in which all members of the community could participate; to achieve this the narrow space of the authoritarian and exclusive literary circle (*bundan*) had to be dismantled. In this way, he wanted to overcome the division between intellectuals and the people, between writers and readers, and to make possible a literature that was rooted in and emerged from people’s lives. Naitō also refers to this common forum (*kyōtsū no hiroba*) as a “space for creating a ‘national culture’” (*kokumin bunka no sōzō no ba*), without the nationalist connotation.²⁸ Here, *minzoku* meant both the subject of literary expression and the subject as a reader of *kokumin bungaku*, as well as the *kokumin bungaku* forum itself. Naitō comments that although Takeuchi did not succeed in founding the *kokumin bungaku* and dissolving the authoritarian literary circle (*bundan*), his intention and literary practice of opening up the discourse on the *kokumin bungaku* and involving as many people as possible in this discourse was successful, because — Naitō concludes — over a hundred discussants from literature, journalism, and academia contributed to this *kokumin bungaku* discourse, and from this emerged a “polyphony” that

²⁸ NAITŌ 2014: 41.

cut across the various disciplines, just as Takeuchi had envisioned the *kokumin bungaku* discourse.²⁹

While acknowledging the importance and achievements of *kokumin bungaku*, Naitō criticizes Takeuchi for a contradiction: Takeuchi called for the emergence of *kokumin bungaku* as a forum in which all members of society should participate. But, according to Naitō, he showed no interest in people from China, Taiwan, and Korea who had Japanese citizenship before 1945 but were stripped of it after the peace treaty of 1952. Although there was a discussion of this at the time, Takeuchi did not take it into account. This, in Naitō's view, was an internal contradiction in his position. While this is a serious criticism, the reason for Takeuchi's attitude may be related to the essence of *kokumin bungaku* itself. It is by definition a "national" literature that sets boundaries and determines who belongs to the nation and who does not.

The Relationship with China

Before World War II, there was a strong prejudice and negative image of Confucianism in Japan and of a weakened China. This tendency is reflected, for example, in Saigō Nobutsuna's *Literary History of Japanese Antiquity* (*Nihon kodai bungakushi*; 1951). In the early 1950s, however, many leading intellectuals in Japan (including Saigō) were influenced by Marxism and wanted to use the socialist revolution in China as a model for a people-centered, democratic Japanese national literature. Takeuchi was one of these intellectuals. He was himself a Sinologist and a lifelong admirer of the Chinese writer and intellectual Lu Xun (1881–1936). Thus, China and Chinese culture also played an important role in the *kokumin bungaku* discourse of the 1950s. The eminent Sinologist and literary scholar Yoshikawa Kōjirō (1904–1980), who as a young student had first read Confucius' *Lunyu* with prejudice and criticism, was later deeply impressed by the life- and reality-affirming Chinese philosophy. Yoshikawa, who was very popular in Japan because of his easy-to-read writing style, introduced Chinese philosophy and literature to many readers. However, as the literary scholar Sasanuma Toshiaki noted, although Yoshikawa had an appreciation of Chinese literature from a modern Western perspective, he understood it as an "outside," "foreign" literature to be distinguished from Japanese literature, thus confirming the still prevalent understanding of literature as national literature rooted in the respective nation.³⁰

The examples from two important literary scholars discussed here, Takeuchi and Yoshikawa, show how strongly our understanding of literature is shaped by the categories of national literature. It should also be noted that *kokumin bungaku* discourse and protagonists of *kokumin bungaku* such as Takeuchi and Yoshikawa have always existed in a

²⁹ See NAITŌ 2014: 42.

³⁰ See SASANUMA 2010: 28.

transnational and transcultural context, even though they understood literature within nation-centered frameworks. From this, one can conclude that we, as historical subjects, act transnationally and transculturally today, even if we still think in nation-centered frameworks. This could also be said the other way around: Our thinking may often continue to be nationalistic, even after we have begun living transnationally and transculturally. This tendency can also be seen in the important writer and representative of the *kokumin bungaku* discourse of the 1950s, Noma Hiroshi.

Noma Hiroshi's *Shinkū chitai* (Vacuum Zone) as a Work of National Literature

Noma Hiroshi (1915–1991) was involved in the socialist movement and joined the Communist Party of Japan (CPJ) after 1945. However, he was expelled from the party for admiring Stalin, in a brief moment of his life. After 1946, he became an active writer and in 1952 published his monumental novel *Shinkū chitai* (Vacuum Zone), in which he recounts his experiences as a soldier during the war. It describes military life as a “vacuum zone” in which humanity is suffocated. The novel became a bestseller at the time and was widely reviewed and discussed as one of the most representative novels of national literature. The literary critic Tezuka Tomio, for example, commented that there was no other work in postwar literature that so sharply criticized the old imperial system without mentioning the emperor.³¹ The author himself understood the novel primarily as a national literature aimed at liberating the Japanese nation and people in the situation of de facto occupation by the U.S. military, which continued even after the San Francisco Peace Treaty. In this sense, he understood his (national) literature as “resistance literature” (*rejisutansu bungaku, teikō bungaku*) against American “oppression” and as “liberation” of the Japanese nation. With his novel about the inhuman military life in World War II, he wanted to set a sign of resistance against the American (occupying) power and awaken a common national spirit. However, there is a logical contradiction in Noma’s intention. Through the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, Japan, despite officially gaining sovereignty, continued to be forced into a kind of occupation that can still be seen in Okinawa today in both concrete and symbolic forms. But what forced the people into a “vacuum” in which humanity is suffocated and people are turned into robot-like soldiers was nationalism itself, not the American occupying power, which in this sense was a liberator. At the heart of this nationalism was the imperial system, which Noma denounced. How can a nationalist resistance movement against the American military “liberate” the nation through nationalism?

Noma Hiroshi himself studied French literature and intended to write a “total novel” (*zentai shōsetsu*) in the sense of Jean Paul Sartre’s “roman totale,” in which the author

³¹ TEZUKA 1952, quoted in NAITŌ 2015: 35.

focuses on society in its entirety, grasps the human subject as a social, psychological, and biological whole, and informed by this understanding, creates a work of national literature. He was not only politically but also socially committed, working throughout his life on the discriminated *burakumin*.³² In his novel, too, the life of the inhumane soldier is not portrayed as a specific national problem but as a universal human issue.

Yet in attempting to create a *national literature*, one is always confronted with the insurmountable limits of the nation itself. It is true that Noma addressed Japanese society as a whole and created a monumental work of national literature. But why should this work be considered national literature when it has long since transcended national boundaries to become a part of the corpus of world literature?

Takeuchi criticized the people of Japan for failing to come to terms with Western modernity and instead simply appropriating it. However, he did not ask why the concept of nation was and is unquestioningly made the foundation for modernity. He criticized the authors of the *Shirakaba-ha* because, according to him, they wanted to establish individual subjects but did not consider that these subjects had to be anchored in the nation. For Takeuchi, the existence of a subject requires a national foundation. But this idea that the nation should be the basis of the subject should at least be critically questioned.

In the aforementioned debate on “overcoming modernity,” wartime Japanese intellectuals discussed how to “overcome” Western modernity, imagining the nation and national tradition (associated with the emperor) as the “subject.” These intellectuals were correct in that Japan had indeed lacked an intense engagement with modernity. If such a critical engagement had taken place, however, these intellectuals would have realized how much they themselves had been influenced by Western modernity. The nation and national tradition were the basis of (Western) modernity in the first phase of the Japanese modernization process. Western modernity was therefore already present in them, so to speak. Their failure to engage critically with this influence, which resulted in their understanding of the nation as something absolute that stands above and outside of it, may have been their blind spot. The discourse of overcoming modernity has not yet been overcome in Japan and has not yet been addressed critically enough in society.

4. Discourses on Japanese National Literature Outside Japan

Japan, as a colonial power, was a multi-ethnic state before 1945, including Korea, Taiwan, and other territories. Under the San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan not only lost the colonized and annexed territories; the people from these territories who were living in Japan and had

³² *Burakumin*, literally: Villagers who, during the Edo period (1603–1868), were discriminated against as outsiders by the estate system and forced to live only in certain villages and areas. This discrimination continued even after their official emancipation in 1871.

previously held Japanese citizenship were deprived of it. With the entry into force of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952, Okinawa was separated from Japan and occupied by the United States (United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands) until 1972 (although the American military bases remain to this day). As we have seen, the literary scholar Naitō held Takeuchi in high regard for his engagement with the subject of *kokumin bungaku*, but criticized him for paying too little attention in the *kokumin bungaku* discourse to the situation of Koreans, Chinese, and others colonized by Japan after 1945. There were also discussions of *kokumin bungaku* in Korea and Okinawa, although they emerged somewhat later. These are important to consider in an analysis of Japanese *kokumin bungaku* discourses because of the crucial insights they offer into reflections on the nation and the “national subject.” I therefore consider *kokumin bungaku* discourses in Korea and Okinawa in my analysis, and briefly discuss them in the following.

***Kokumin bungaku* Discourse in Korea**

A literary journal called *Kokumin bungaku* was published in annexed Korea between 1941 and 1945. After 1945, this was considered a “dark period” in Korean (literary) history, and the magazine *Kokumin bungaku* was dismissed as corrupt or was simply ignored in literary history. During this “dark period,” following the motto of *naisen ittaika* (unification of Japan and Korea), the policy of colonial Japanification of Korea had intensified, and Koreans had been forced to use the Japanese language. Considering the circumstances under which *Kokumin bungaku* was published, the post-1945 reaction to the magazine was justified because it was one of the few literary journals allowed in Korea at that time, and the language was limited to Japanese in all but the first few issues. Korean writers were forced by the colonial language policy to write in Japanese or to give up writing if they wanted to write in Korean, and they risked imprisonment if they resisted and produced anti-Japanese writings. Under these conditions, it is understandable that *Kokumin bungaku* was generally regarded as a propagandistic, opportunistic journal offering no outlet for oppositional Korean voices. Since the 1990s, however, some scholars have taken a closer look at the journal and attempted a rereading of individual texts.

Against the contested backdrop of occupied Korea, the editors of *Kokumin bungaku* considered how to develop Korean literature in connection with Japanese national literature despite the adverse conditions. The concept of New Regionalism (*shin-chihō shugi*) was developed as a strategy to make Korean literature possible in this difficult context, as shown by literary scholars Nam and Matsushita (2016). Korean writers thus tried to find a way out, without succumbing to the view that Korean literature would disappear or contributing to the unification policy of eradicating Korean literature by incorporating it into Japanese literature. New Regionalism regarded Korean literature as a regional literature, like other regional literatures in Japan. The editors of the magazine tried to argue that Korean

literature should not assimilate to Japanese literature but should also not assert its independence to the extent that it would be interpreted as rebellion. Instead, it should add new elements and thus contribute to Japanese national literature. Why this strategy was called New Regionalism was explained by the editors as follows. It was to represent a new national consciousness of the regional population and become a cultural and literary movement that would lead away from metropolitan centrism to create new centers in the regions.³³ According to this way of thinking, Tōkyō was just one of many regions, equal to others. Korean literature could therefore go its own way as a regional literature without having to completely adapt to Japanese national literature. From the standpoint of this independent New Regionalism, Korean authors criticized Japanese authors living in Korea if they wrote works in Korea that could have been written in Tōkyō, saying that such authors were not part of Korean literature.³⁴ Authors such as Tanaka Hidemitsu were regarded, from this viewpoint, merely as “guest worker literati.” Literary scholar Kawamura Minato recognizes in these critiques a “small resistance” on the part of Korean authors.³⁵

However, Nam and Matsushita note that the independent approach taken by some Korean editors was not consistent in the Korean literary community as a whole. As a result, *Kokumin bungaku* never went beyond a transitional phase (*katoki*).³⁶

Korean literary scholar Yun Tae-sok develops a different theoretical approach to the interpretation of Korean *kokumin bungaku*, following Homi Bhabha’s mimicry theory. Although the Korean *kokumin bungaku* movement sought to establish a national subject based on the Japanese model, Yun recognizes a cultural difference from the Japanese model in the sense that a different kind of subject emerged in Korea. He distinguishes three kinds of subjects in the *kokumin bungaku* movement in colonized Korea: 1. a subject formed through writing in Korean (substantialist position, that is, a position in which the national literature and the national language were regarded as one. This view regards the Korean language as the national language necessary for the Korean *kokumin bungaku*), 2. a subject formed through assimilation to Japanese (while recognizing Korean as a regional language alongside Japanese), and 3. a subject formed through denial of the superiority of a particular national language. The second and third positions are instructive here. In the second position, Yun sees an unconscious self-colonization of Koreans who recognize the superiority of the Japanese national language as a modern language and use Japanese. The term self-colonization was used by literary scholar Komori Yōichi (2001), following Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry and difference, to criticize the Japanese modernization process as an unconscious adaptation to Western powers. Yun recognizes in the difference that arises in

³³ Nam and Matsushita elaborate on the strategy of New Regionalism in their article (NAM/MATSUSHITA 2016: 124).

³⁴ NAM/MATSUSHITA 2016: 127–128.

³⁵ KAWAMURA 1986: 80.

³⁶ NAM/MATSUSHITA 2016: 125.

the colonial mimicry process between the “colonial ruler” and the “colonized,” according to Homi Bhabha’s theory, an approach to Korea’s own subject formation.

Takahashi Azusa, a literary scholar who discusses Yun’s interpretive approach, states that Yun analyzes the literary genre of *Manshū kaitaku shōsetsu* (“urbanization of Manchuria” novels) that emerged in Korea to explain this theme of difference.³⁷ Many Koreans, especially Korean peasants who were portrayed as “good Japanese peasants,” were employed by the Japanese colonial power in Manchuria. In this literary genre, the cultural differences between Koreans and Manchurians were perceived in terms of a juxtaposition of civilization (Koreans) against barbarism (Manchurians). Yun sees in this not only the subject formation of self-colonized Koreans, but also the potential for criticism of Japan as a colonial power and of self-colonized Korea. He analyzed this in an example of Manchu literature, the Korean novel *Daeryuk* (The Continent; 1940)³⁸ by Han Sōrya. A pair of lovers, the Japanese man Ōyama and the Manchurian woman Marie, are described as changing and developing in the free Manchurian space, liberated from clichéd images of Japanese and Manchurian people.

In this novel, in the Manchurian hybrid space, new possibilities could emerge in which new images of people and the world could be created, free from the binary colonial discourse of colonizer and colonized.³⁹ This could be an approach to a transcultural opening to a new Korean literature that goes beyond Japanese and beyond Korean national literature.

***Kokumin bungaku* Discourse in Post-1945 Okinawa**

In Okinawa, which was occupied by the United States after 1952, students at Ryūkyū University founded the literary journal *Ryūdai bungaku* in 1953. Beginning in 1953, the U.S. military enacted a law for the expansion of military bases, allowing confiscation of the land of Okinawan residents. Members of the literary circle around *Ryūdai bungaku* discussed the confiscation of land on Ieshima Island in the eighth issue of the journal in various forms — in reports, poems, and short *tanka* poems. As a result, this issue was confiscated. In the ninth issue, some members reported from the *zadankai* discussion forum on the “tradition and lore of folk culture in Okinawa.” Under occupation policy, rapprochement with Japan was strictly taboo, but Ryūkyūan folk culture (*minzoku bunka*) as a movement independent of Japan was encouraged early on. Members of the *Ryūdai bungaku* therefore used the term

³⁷ In the following, I borrow from the analyses of Takahashi and Yun Tae-sok (TAKAHASHI 2013).

³⁸ HAN, Sōrya: *Daeryuk* (The Continent), published in 1940 in the journal *Keijō Nippō*, cf. TAKAHASHI 2013: 273.

³⁹ Manchukuo was a puppet state created under Japanese imperialism with the motto of “harmony among the five races,” and it faced very difficult political problems. The literature on Manchuria and its reputation were therefore very complex and diverse, and of course it was not a utopian world like the one in this work. See KAWAMURA 1998.

Ryūkyū minzoku (Ryūkyūan people) not to indicate separation from Japan, but in the sense of Ryūkyū as a region of Japan. The folk culture (*minzoku bunka*) of Ryūkyū was embraced by many people in Okinawa, but many regarded Ryūkyū as a region of Japan and the literary movement in Ryūkyū as part of Japanese national literature. According to Gabe Satoshi, they were strongly influenced by the Japanese *kokumin bungaku* movement. A writer who is representative of the *Ryūdai bungaku*, Shinkawa Akira, wrote that the task of creating a *kokumin bungaku* was to develop a strong movement that, linked to the life struggle of the nation, would open up literature to the nation and use it to liberate the nation.⁴⁰ In his view, the “Okinawan homeland literature” should become an element of Japanese national literature and a driving force of this movement.

In occupied Okinawa, there was a very strong desire among writers for Okinawa to be a Japanese region and for its literature to belong to Japanese *kokumin bungaku*. But because of the occupation situation, a new consciousness gradually arose that took Okinawan literature in a different direction. Okinawa’s situation came to be seen as that of “colonial rule under the guise of democracy,” and Okinawa’s history was seen as the history of colonial oppression. A political consciousness gradually emerged among the Ryūkyūan/Okinawan people (*minzoku*) of their own independence, and this led to solidarity with other regions in Asia and Africa that were in a similar colonial situation. In April 1955, the Asian-African Conference was held in Bandung, Indonesia, with the participation of 29 countries, many of which were still under European colonial rule. These countries wanted the conference to express their mutual solidarity, peaceful coexistence, and anti-colonialist stance. Many members of the Okinawan literary circle, who also saw themselves as representing an anti-colonialist movement, expressed solidarity with this heightened ethnic consciousness of people in Asian and African (formerly colonized) countries. At the same time, Ikezawa Satoshi, for example, emphasized the importance of creating an Okinawan folk tradition and establishing a creative literary subject on this basis.⁴¹ The members of the literary circle saw the possibility of using Okinawa’s colonial situation and the construction of a Ryūkyūan folk culture as the basis of their struggle and of showing solidarity with colonized people in Asia and Africa. This solidarity with other colonized peoples could also be seen as a way out of the nationalized *kokumin bungaku* movement, beyond the limited focus on Okinawan folk literature and folk culture.

The early 1950s were marked by the Korean War, seen widely across the region as an imperialist proxy war. U.S. military bases on Okinawa that were of strategic importance for the war played an important role in this view. The members of *Ryūdai bungaku* developed a heightened awareness of their unintentional direct and indirect support of the Korean War

⁴⁰ Gabe Satoshi quotes Shinkawa’s statements from his book *Nihon no gendai bungakushi* (1954) (GABE 2009: 209).

⁴¹ In his article, Gabe summarizes various statements in the discussion forum (*zadankai*) and texts by members such as Ikezawa and Shinkawa (GABE 2009: 213).

through their own lives on Okinawa, making them, in a sense, complicit in the war. In their literary texts, they explored the difficult situation of being forced to participate in the war as residents of Okinawa and sought ways to show their solidarity with the Koreans.

Ryūdai bungaku documents the emergence of a new consciousness among its members, who did not allow themselves to be confined to a national consciousness by the complex political situation in Okinawa. Instead, they created an opening through their solidarity with similarly colonized Asian and especially Korean populations, breaking the boundaries of national literature.

5. Contemporary Transcultural Views

The Korean and Okinawan examples show that the concept of national literature is an inadequate framework for fully describing literary reality. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as purely national literature. Literature, like culture itself, has never existed in isolation within national boundaries, but always in exchange, confrontation, and communication with other literatures and writers. Regional literatures can only be described and understood as part of a transcultural literary history. National literatures, like everything that has been created with the concept of nation, are artificial entities that have become obsolete in our globalized era. Today, one can only write a transcultural literary history of a given region, documenting the communication, exchange, and engagement with other literatures, without which a national literature cannot be properly understood.

The development of the national literary movement in Korea and Okinawa, in particular, makes it clear that the writers of these regions first sought integration into the Japanese nation, but then gradually realized that the framework of the Japanese nation could not encompass their reality and consciousness, which extended beyond national borders and the boundaries of national literature.

National literature, like the concept of nation, has a historical justification and meaning. But, as I have tried to show, it is a construct that is imposed on literature from the outside as a framework, and it seldom corresponds to literary reality. Although it has had its legitimacy in certain historical periods, anyone who tries to write the history of a national literature will encounter too many contradictions and limitations to be able to present a coherent national literary history. Literature has never existed as an isolated entity belonging to a single nation or people but has been in communication and exchange from the very beginning. This is what Goethe envisioned with his category of world literature — if only as an ideal. Today, we no longer need to establish the existence of a Japanese national literature. Some universities and journals still refer to the discipline of Japanese literature as *kokubungaku*, but *nihongo bungaku* (Japanese-language literature), which is now commonly used to refer to Japanese literature written by non-Japanese, has long become the established term in the general discourse. This is an attempt to avoid emphasizing the

nationality of authors in Japanese literature. However, this may mean excluding other languages such as Chinese, Korean, etc. from Japanese literature. Therefore, it is a very difficult and still unresolved task to find an appropriate term for Japanese literature.

We should try to present the transcultural literary history of different regions instead of limiting it to *national* literature, and show the exchange of ideas that writers had and the different cultural contexts from which literatures have emerged. Individual literary histories of certain regions and countries are interesting today only as parts of transcultural world literature.

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