

Nakajima Atsushi, Writer on the Margin of the Japanese Empire

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1

In this essay, I would like to discuss the short story of Japanese writer Nakajima Atsushi (中島敦, 1909–1942), “Ri Ryo (李陵)”, or “Li Ling” from the postcolonial perspective. Nakajima Atsushi’s “Ri Ryo” is based on Chinese classics such as *Shiki* (史記, *Shiji*) compiled by Shiba Sen (司馬遷, Sima Qian) and *Kanjo* (漢書, *Hanshu*). It is seemingly a historical story, but Nakajima’s experiences in Japanese colonies, I believe, are deeply incorporated in it. As of “Ri Ryo”, the work has never been examined from the viewpoint of the writer’s career in the colonies such as Korea and the South Sea Islands (南洋群島).

Nakajima Atsushi was an author who often depended on Chinese literature for the creation of his own stories. For example, the plot of his representative work “Sangetsuki” (山月記, “A tale of mountains and the Moon”) was derived from Chinese classics “Jinkoden” (人虎伝, “Renhuzhuang”). “Deshi” (弟子, “Disciples”) and “Meijinden” (名人伝, “The life of a master”) came from *Shunjyusashiden* (春秋左氏伝, *Chunqiu-zuoshi-zhuang*) and *Resshi* (列子, *Liezi*) respectively. As is frequently pointed out, Nakajima’s works were colored in his own point of view, although the plots of the stories were almost the same as that of the sources. As a result, the relationship between “Ri Ryo” and Chinese classics has been much talked about, but few people have discussed it in connection with the writer’s experiences in Japanese colonies.

Let me illustrate the intimate relationship between the historical story, “Ri Ryo”, and Nakajima’s contemporary experiences in the colonies. “Ri Ryo” was completed in October 1942, and published in July 1943 after the author’s death. It was written just after he had returned from Palau in Micronesia, which was under Japanese colonial rule. Mr. Murata Hideaki claimed that it was possible, though not certain, that Nakajima Atsushi brought Chinese classics of *Kanjo* to Micronesia and made the biographical notes of the protagonist Ri Ryo as a preparation for creating the story. If it were true, it was during his stay in the South Sea Islands that the idea of “Ri Ryo” was born.

Actually, Nakajima did not live long in the South Sea Islands. He left the port of Yokohama on 28th June in 1941, and sailed for Palau in order to serve as an officer of the Japanese colonial government in Micronesia. The work allotted to him was the compilation of a Japanese language textbook for the islanders. On 4th March in 1942, about 4 months after the outbreak of the Pacific War, he left Palau to go back to Tokyo, where he soon died at the age of 33.

The similarities between his real-life experiences in Micronesia and the historical story “Ri Ryo” are abundant. First of all, in Nakajima’s writings on the South Sea, he repeatedly reported the existence of the natives who had longings for mainland Japan. For example, in the story “Kyochikuto no ie no on’na” (夾竹桃の家の女) or “A woman in a house of sweet-scented oleander,” the island lady was very fond of any men who came from Japan.

Another example is the heroine of the story titled “Mariang” (マリヤン) who was a very intelligent islander. All of her friends were Japanese, and she was proud of having studied in mainland Japan. She sometimes dressed in white western style clothing, wore high-heeled shoes, and put up a western style umbrella.

Moreover, in Nakajima’s letter to his wife dated 11th October 1941, he mentioned a native boy named Shubel who listened attentively to the information about Japan presented by Nakajima Atsushi. His sentences of the letter reporting Shubel remind me of a line of “Ri Ryo”

Strangely enough Tsohsienwang, Ch’anyü’s eldest son, began to show him great favour. It would be

more precise to say great respect, rather than great favour. He was just twenty years old. He was uncouth, but a brave and responsible young man. His admiration for the strong was completely genuine. He first approached Li Ling to ask to be taught how to use a bow on horseback. Apart from shooting from horseback, he rode an unsaddled horse far better than Li Ling. So Ling agreed to teach him only the art of shooting. He became an eager student. When Li Ling spoke of the superhuman skill of his grandfather, Li Kuang, the nomad youth listened to him with kindling eyes.¹

Young prince Tsohsienwang of Kyodo (匈奴), or the Huns, extremely resembled the native island boy Shubel. Both were attracted by the episodes talked of by men who were considered to have come from the "civilized" countries.

2

Nakajima Atsushi used his experiences in the South Seas for the creation of his own story, "Ri Ryo." He understood the rationality of the indigenous lifestyle of the natives. Just after he had arrived at Palau, Nakajima soon realized that in this tropical island it cost too much if one tried to maintain one's Japanese lifestyle. The author complained in his letter to his wife, posted 9th July 1941, that the foods imported from the mainland were exceedingly expensive, whereas tropical fruits were unbelievably cheap. He also reported to her that the watch he brought from Tokyo no longer functioned properly because of the humid climate of the South Sea.

These are very important facts because the story "Ri Ryo" related the protagonist's ambivalent emotions of being in the Huns (Kyodo), whom Chinese regarded as barbarians. The general, Ri Ryo, was captured by the Huns and came to be a de facto prisoner of war. He was royal within the Chinese civilization, but later on, he gradually became sympathetic towards the life of the Huns. Let me quote the story.

Although the behaviour of the nomads had seemed crude and comical to begin with, Li Ling had gradually come to understand that, given the background of the region's natural terrain, climate and so on, they were neither crude nor unreasonable. Just as one could not endure the northern nomads' winter without the nomad clothing made of thick hides, it was equally impossible to store up enough energy to survive the cold of the region without a meat diet. The custom of not building permanent dwellings stemmed of necessity from their way of life. It would not be right to draw the simple conclusion that the nomads were crude. If one had tried to live as the Chinese did, one would not survive even for one day in the nomads' surroundings.²

Let us remember now that Nakajima Atsushi was always sympathetic towards the colonized natives. In his letter to his wife dated 9th November 1941, he confessed "I love the natives of the islands. I love them much more than skinny Japanese who came to these South Sea Islands." Back in 1934, the author also wrote a story titled "Toragari" (虎狩, "Tiger Hunting"). In this short story, he depicted his good old memories of friendship with his Korean classmate. In "Ri Ryo," the Chinese general was also an understanding person.

He had frequently encountered occasions when the coarse honesty of the nomads' manners struck him as infinitely preferable to Chinese double-dealing under the guise of a noble reputation. Gradually Li Ling inclined to the idea that the Chinese were prejudiced when taking for granted that Chinese manners were correct while those of the nomads were crude. For instance, for no reason at all, he had until then been obsessed with the notion that a man must be given a title as well as a family

name. On reflection he could find no reason why a title was absolutely necessary for any man.³

I would like to remind you again that Nakajima Atsushi was born in the capital of the Japanese Empire, and grew up in its colony. He resided both at the center and at the margin of the Empire. He was born in Tokyo in 1909, and lived in Korea under Japanese colonial rule from 1920 until 1926. He then went back to the capital of the Japanese Empire again to study at Tokyo University. The writer visited Manchuria and China in 1932 and 1936. Then Nakajima Atsushi worked for the government of Japanese Micronesia from 1941 to 1942. As soon as he returned to Tokyo, he passed away in his thirties. Through his short life, he frequently wove in and out of the center and the margin of the Empire.

3

Nakajima Atsushi was neither a born imperialist nor racist. Nakajima, however, could not go native, although he was always extremely sympathetic to the colonized people. He had realized in the South Sea Islands that the islanders were by no means unstained by the civilization. The author's short story "Mariang" well illustrated his complicated feelings towards the natives. When the narrator found books of Japanese translations of English poems and Pierre Loti's novel, "Marriage of Loti" in Mariang's bamboo house, he confessed that he felt the situation was somewhat "pitiful."

There was another episode in which Nakajima Atsushi felt the situation was "pitiful." One day he visited a church built for the islanders. In the church, Nakajima noticed a Japanese woman who prayed reverently during the service held in the native language. In these episodes, the author felt it "pitiful" when he found out the native islanders were being civilized, or found civilized Japanese going native.

Ms. Nakamura Kazue rightly pointed out about Nakajima's works of "Mariang" and "Hikari to kaze to yume" (光と風と夢), "Light, wind and dream", that "Hikari to kaze to yume" was based on Robert Louis Stevenson's (1850-1894)'s experiences in Tahiti. The narrator of the story was Stevenson himself. Nakamura asked, "Why did Nakajima identify himself with a Britisher Stevenson, instead of identifying himself with Mariang or with other native islanders? Wasn't it a complete failure that at that time Japanese writers did not have the slightest desire to identify themselves with the natives of the colonies?"⁴

If I enlarge upon her question, it could be explained like this: As Nakajima Atsushi felt the situation of civilized native islanders like Mariang, as well as those Japanese in Micronesia who sympathized with the natives, was "pitiful", he undoubtedly identified himself with civilized Westerners. But the Japanese who considered themselves to be so civilized were Asians, and they only recently adapted to the modern Western civilization. It was beyond Nakajima's imagination that Japanese as well had been non-Western native islanders living in the Japanese Archipelago.

Actually, Nakajima Atsushi himself was well aware that he was not free from the prejudices of civilization. In his work titled "Mahiru" (真昼, "Midday"), the narrator reflected, "I am not completely liberated from illusions of artificiality, occidentality and modernity." The author was conscious of himself being bound by a kind of Orientalism.

In the following sentences, the narrator of Nakajima's "Mahiru" confessed he himself had the wrong idea: that he saw the shining sea and sky as the native islanders saw them. He concluded that he was just looking at the reproduction of Paul Gauguin's paintings instead of looking at Micronesia itself.

Before Nakajima Atsushi came to Palau, he had completed a novel, "Hikari to kaze to yume," in which the protagonist was Robert Louis Stevenson. Through the process of writing the work, he was influenced by a kind of Orientalism. It was also true that the author himself was certainly aware of his biased viewpoint. But Nakajima could not produce brand-new discourse on the South Seas. His works are highly esteemed because he was

free from a monolithic totalitarian way of thinking. On the other hand, he did not go so far as to identify himself with the native islanders.

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At the height of totalitarianism and militarism in Japan, Nakajima Atsushi tried to keep his own cultural relativism. His cultural relativism was, however, constantly threatened by patriotism. We can also find this contradiction even in the historical story, "Ri Ryo." "Just one year before Li Ling surrendered to the nomads, a brigadier general, Su Wu of Han, had been detained in their land." Ri Ryo's inferiority complex about So Bu reflected Nakajima's complicated emotions towards Japan's nationalism. In the story, So Bu was a nationalist to the core, whereas Ri Ryo had the sense of relativism. While Ri Ryo was cooperative to the nomads, So Bu refused to submit to them. At the end of the story, So Bu returned to the Chinese Empire while Ri Ryo decided to stay among the nomads.

When he bade farewell to Su Wu, Li Ling gave a banquet for his friend. He had many things to say which would explain his intentions when he surrendered to the nomads. Various details would show that, before he could carry out his intentions, his entire family had been eliminated in China and he had therefore lost all reason for returning to China. But if he were to spell out the details, they would be interpreted as trivial complaints. He would not let drop one word about them. When the feasting was at its height, he could not help standing up, dancing and reciting what follows:

I have crossed many *li* on foot and many deserts also.
I was made an officer by the Emperor and fought
Fiercely against the nomads.
I was hemmed in on all sides.
Swords were broken and we need arrows.
Warriors died, their names fell into dust.
My aged mother has already perished,
I want to reply my country's favour.
Alas, I do not know which country.

While he was singing, his voice trembled and tears coursed down his cheeks. He could not control himself and blamed himself for being effeminate. Su Wu returned to China for the first time in nineteen years.⁵

In this passage, Ri Ryo's cultural relativism was easily threatened by So Bu's patriotism. So Bu returned to the Empire with great honor whereas Ri Ryo had no choice but to decide to go native. Both characters of this story were alter egos of Nakajima Atsushi himself. Ri Ryo was not necessarily resolved to go native. On the other hand, he could not follow the unilateral values of the Chinese Empire.

During the author's stay in Micronesia, Nakajima Atsushi often witnessed Japanese schoolteachers imposing militaristic formalism upon native islanders. In his diary he wrote, "I was shocked by cruel treatment of pupils by Japanese headmasters and teachers." He also reported that teachers gave an order even when they commanded students to take off their hats. Nakajima Atsushi seemed to hate the meaningless formalism of Japanese militarism.

This formalism was the subject of Nakajima's work, "Deshi." It was a story of Confucius and his disciple

Shiro (子路) (also spelled Tzulu or Zilu). It was, of course, a historical story, but as it was written after he had returned from Micronesia, Nakajima's experiences in the South Sea Islands were reflected in it. The protagonist Shiro was simple and innocent. At first, he was completely antipathetic towards the formalism of Confucianism. But at last, Shiro accepted his master's lesson and died in a gentlemanly manner:

Tzulu crossed his sword violently with the two opponents. However, the veteran swordsman that Tzulu used to be could not struggle against his own age. Fatigue gradually accumulated in his body. Tzulu had difficulty in breathing. Seeing the chances were against Tzulu, the crowd showed at last which side they were going to stand by. They jeered at Tzulu. Numerous stones and sticks were thrown at him. The point of one opponent's halberd grazed Tzulu's cheek. Strings which tied his high hat to his head were cut and it was about to fall off. The moment he was going to support his hat, the other opponent cut Tzulu on the shoulder with his sword. Blood gushed out. Tzulu fell. Also his hat fell. Falling down, he reached out his hand, picked his hat up, put it on properly and tied the strings quickly. Under the opponents' swords, Tzulu, whose face was bathed with blood, screamed with all the power that was left of his life, "Look! A gentleman dies putting his hat right!"⁶

Considering Nakajima's ill feelings towards the militaristic formalism in Micronesia, this heroic conclusion of the story seems a little bit sarcastic toward the Japanese colonial government. When Nakajima Atsushi went to Micronesia, he tried to escape from the modern civilization. He tried to go native. It was true that the writer was sympathetic towards the innocent native islanders. However, Nakajima was unable to go native. He finally went back to the center of the Empire. The author's stories "Ri Ryo" and "Deshi", both of which was completed after he had returned from the colony, well illustrated his ambivalent emotions. At the end of his short life, Nakajima unconsciously tried to identify himself with the Japanese Empire, although he had once tried to escape from its unitary value judgment.

Notes

1. Atsushi Nakajima, *Chinese Stories* (Trans. by Yoshitsugu KOSUMI and Michael NEIBURG, Tokyo: Senjo Publishing Co., LTD., 1990), p.148.
2. *Ibid.*, p.156.
3. *Ibid.*, p.157.
4. Kazue Nakamura, "Comment" *Ritsumeikan Studies in Language and Culture* Vol.14, no.1 (2002), p.78.
5. Atsushi Nakajima, *Chinese Stories*, pp.170-171.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.103-104.