Imperial Literature and Voices of Others: Ideological Visions of the Multiethnic Japanese Empire

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How did literature participate in producing the imperialist worldview of the multiethnic Japanese empire? Whose voices have been silenced by the imperialist worldview? This paper discusses the functions of Japanophone literature in the (re)production of the ideological visions of the multiethnic Japanese empire during the interwar period (1941-1945). I propose the literary category of “imperial literature” in order to examine Japanophone literature written by Japanese and colonized writers in the Japanese empire together and thereby develop a decolonizing practice of reading. On the one hand, imperial literature makes a certain mode of representation of the multi-ethnic empire understandable by displacing colonial violence and voices of the oppressed people. On the other hand, it also leaves the traces of violence and those of silenced voices of the oppressed, through which we can recognize the mechanisms of colonial domination. By looking at the Japanophone literary works by the Japanese writer and the colonial writer, I demonstrate how these literary works map out the idealized visions of the multiethnic empire and how we as the readers can engage with the silenced voices of colonial others. My talk seeks to pose questions on how to uncover and undo the epistemological structure of the empire, which continues to affect how we perceive the world.

Dr. Mari Ishida received her Ph.D. in 2016 from the University of California, Los Angeles, with a focus on Japanese literary and cultural studies. She taught as an assistant adjunct professor at UCLA from Fall 2016 to Spring 2018. Currently, she is a postdoctoral fellow at the Reischauer Institute of Japanese studies, Harvard University. Her research explores the entangled relationship among Japanophone literature, linguistic imperialism, mechanisms of colonial violence and power, and the process of racialization in the Japanese empire.

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