The Power of Literary Visions for Asian Communities: A Japanese Poet’s Meeting with Korean People and Culture Again

Miwa Ota

1 Introduction

Every day in our life, we meet several people. But in most cases we merely meet them but don’t understand each other. In other words, we fail to meet others again and again. In some periods or in some areas of the world, conflict between countries or nations prevents people from meeting and understanding one another. But if we don’t give it up and we live long, we may have another chance to meet. If we fail to meet now, we will be able to meet again later if we are lucky and well prepared. Even if they are dead at that time, we can meet them again through their words left as a text of literature. Today I would like to consider together with you what literary visions can do for improved meeting and understanding between different cultures, especially those surrounded by hatred and misunderstanding because of a colonial past.

1) This paper is a revised version of the Lecture for “Understanding of the Asian Community” Course which was given at Souphanouvong University, Luang Prabang, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, May 15, 2015. A part of the lecture is based on my short essay titled “Ichi Kajin no Shi o Mirai ni tsunageru tame ni” (In order to pass the life and death of a tanka poet on to future generations), published in Mirai, July 2010 (Tokyo: Mirai Tanka Society, 2010).
2 Yoshimi Kondo, the Japanese poet meets Korean people and culture again

Today’s lecture’s subtitle will be as follows: A Japanese Poet’s Meeting with Korean People and Culture Again. The poet is my own mentor, Yoshimi Kondo (1913–2006). His poetry of lyricism and criticism toward post-war Japan and the world had much influence on many Japanese people beyond the poetry world. He was awarded many prizes including the Choku Prize as a memorial to Choku Shaku or Shinobu Orikuchi (1887–1953), Japanese ethnologist, linguist, folklorist, poet, and novelist, the Contemporary Tanka Grand Prize, and the Museum of Contemporary Japanese Poetry Prize. He has been called the locomotive or the leading role in the modernization of tanka after the Second World War (Shino 2). I think he is one of the most important Japanese poets when we examine how the power of literary visions contribute to bringing peace to Japan, Korea, and China in the post-colonial years after the Second World War, and I have just started to study his contribution academically.

In this lecture I would like to talk about how Kondo meets Kore-
an people and culture again after he failed to meet them in the colonial period, although he loved them. I am a poet, too, and his youngest disciple (Ota Miwa no Hon 235). Let us see Figs. 1 and 2. Fig. 1 is a portrait of Kondo in his fifties. Fig. 2 is a photo of him from the exhibition flier for his biggest and his last exhibition before his death, held at the Nihon Gendai Shiika Bungakukan Museum, or the Museum of Contemporary Japanese Poetry, Tanka, and Haiku, in 2006 in Kitakami-shi, Iwate, a northern city on the main island of Japan which was to be hit by the big earthquake in March 2011 (Fig. 2).

3 Yoshimi Kondo and the War

Yoshimi Kondo was a Japanese poet who was born in Masan (馬山), Korea under Japanese rule in 1913.

Because his father worked for the Industrial Bank of Korea, Kondo moved to Tongyeong (統營), Daegu (大邱), Gimcheon (金
Like many other Japanese boys in the colony, when he became twelve years old, he was sent back to Japan for a better higher education (Museum 21, 82). After that, he stayed at his grandmother’s in Hiroshima during the term, and spent his vacations with his family in Korea, so Korea had been a more familiar place to him than Japan. In those years he started to create tanka, a Japanese traditional verse, and joined Araragi, one of the major tanka societies.

Table 1. Brief Chronology about Yoshimi Kondo, Yun Isang, and the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>The Japanese Annexation of Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Yoshimi Kondo, the Japanese poet, born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Yun Isang, the Korean composer, born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>The March First Movement witnessed by Kondo</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>The Manchurian Incident. The Gwangju Student Independence Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>The Marco Polo Bridge Incident. The Second Sino-Japanese War</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>The Attack on Pearl Harbor. The Pacific War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>The Atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The End of the World War II: Korea, Taiwan, and other areas regained full autonomy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945–52</td>
<td>Japan occupied by U.S.</td>
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<td>1950–53</td>
<td>The Korean War</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954–75</td>
<td>The Vietnam War</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>The End of the Cold War</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) The Map titled “Yoshimi Kondo’s Footsteps in Korea” in the Exhibition Catalog shows us how many Korean cities and places he was familiar with. The range covers not only South Korea but also North Korea of today (Museum 20).
led by Mokichi Saito (1882–1953). He was influenced more by Kenkichi Nakamura (1889–1934) and Bunmei Tsuchiya (1890–1990) than Mokichi Saito. After graduating from university, he became an architect and worked for Shimizu-gumi (later, Shimizu-kensetsu), one of the major construction companies in Japan. Witnessing liberty and humanism under pressure in several ways in Japanese society and influenced by socialism, he came to hate militarism and the war as well as other intellectuals did. In 1940 just after his marriage he was enrolled in the army, and trained for battle in Safu, Wuchang (武昌沙湖), the part of China occupied by Japan. Injured in duty and diagnosed with TB, he was sent to a hospital while his regiment went to battle where they were totally destroyed at sea. In August 1945, his second home town, Hiroshima was devastated by the atomic bomb dropped by the United States, which was followed by the destruction of Nagasaki and the end of the war.

After the war, he started a modernization movement for tanka with young friends as their leader, which was to be remembered as the movement of Shin Kajin Shudan, or the New Tanka Poets Collective in the history of Japanese poetry. You may not know about tanka, but you may know of haiku. Tanka and haiku are Japanese traditional verses based on their syllabic form: haiku are shorter than tanka and related to ordinary people while tanka are rooted in waka which belong to the court culture. Although haiku and tanka were modernized early in the twentieth century after the modernization of Japan, the blow of defeat in the Second World War caused many Japanese intellectuals to despise Japanese traditional culture for being feudal and backward. But Kondo’s view of tanka was different; he regarded ordinary people’s voices against war in many pieces of tanka from the war period as hope. He never forgot that he heard people’s true voices only in tanka when novelists, poets, and critics, most of whom had been liberalists, paid tribute to militarism and repeated only one word filled with arrogance, in-
toxication, and vanity, and extinguished people’s voices (Kondo, “Tanka Sakusha to shite no Omoi,” 66–67). That is why Kondo tried to revitalize tanka again for peace and democracy after the war.

Kondo wrote two kinds of tanka: As a Romantic follower of western culture, he wrote beautifully lyrical love poems for his wife. For example, this is his most beloved poem: Tachimachi ni Kimi no Sugata o Kiri tozashi aru Gakusho o Ware wa omoiki” (Instantly my lover’s figure is enveloped by a heavy fog / Leaving me alone with some composer’s movement) (Kondo, Soshun Ka, 1948). He also wrote poems of thought about the world and history as a liberal intellectual who wished for peace and democracy in Japan, Asia, and the World. For example, he wrote about a nuclear testing ground as follows: Ningen ga tsukuri dashi Ima Ningen no Mono naranu Shuumatsu no Buki ni shite Anryoku no Tou (With the ultimate weapon and the Doomsday Machine / Completed by mankind but uncontrollable by mankind now, / The tower glimmers dark and green.) (Kondo, Kinen ni, 1985).

All tanka poems in this paper are my own translations. The original poems were written in the verse form, 5-7-5-7-7 syllables, but Kondo’s verse is prosaic especially when it is about people and history, or I should rather say it is intentionally artless and rustic. That is part of why I did not translate them into a verse in English.

4 Yoshimi Kondo and Korea after the Second World War

Specializing in architecture at university, Kondo had had great interest in history and civilization, especially ancient Greece. He liked traveling and had visited Europe, America, and China several times, but never visited Korea until 1998 when he was eighty-five years old. Let us consider the reason by reading his own poems.

The following poems are included in the same collection of his poetry titled Meiun, or Destiny, which was published after he visited Korea more than fifty years after the war. I will read it in
Japanese, and then read the English translation. The first line is Japanese written in alphabetic script, and the second line is Japanese in the way we usually write it. As you can see, a piece of tanka is very short. It is a poem of one line. I will try to imitate Kondo’s voice from my memory when I read Japanese\(^3\).

Kondo’s poem (1)
Haisen Chikaku Kirai no Umi o watari kaeru futatabi ikazu ikite narazari shi
敗戦近く機雷の海を渡り帰る再び行かず行きてならざりし\(^4\)
*(Complete Works 245)*
Since the closing days of the war,
Sailing home across the sea of mines,
I have never visited the land,
The land I thought I must not visit again.

Kondo’s poem (2)
Yasuyasu to ikite narazu to kimeshi yori Kokoro ni hisashi tsui no Keiren
やすやすと行きてならずと決めしよりこころに久しぶりの係恋
*(Complete Works 245)*
Since my determination about the land
Never to feel free to visit it again
I kept it to myself, my secret longing for the land.

As these poems show, Kondo was determined not to visit the land,

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\(^3\) Kondo’s reading voice of his own poem can be heard at the following website.
Doho-sha. *Nikusei de kiku Tanka* (Listening to Tanka read by the author).
“Kondo Yoshimi.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCgUbek06mU> 8 September 2015.

\(^4\) This poem is about Kondo’s journey from Pusan to Shimonoseki by Kanpu Ferryboat in October, 1943. The boat was torpedoed and sunk by a US submarine on its way back to Pusan.
Korea. It was the land he loved much more than his native land, but the land where he witnessed its people treated badly in the colonial system under the Japan Empire. In addition, he felt sorry that the land regained independence, but was separated into North Korea and South Korea even since the end of the Cold War. In these poems he revealed his secret love for the land for the first time after the war. It took such a long time until he could do it.

After a long unrequited love for the land during the post-colonial days, what did he see and experience in Korea at last? The next poem tells us about a part of his sentiment.

Kondo’s poem (3)
Sono Nochi o fushi tomo kiku mono o Seoul no Ichiyono Ichiya
Warera “Shi” no ari te
その夜を臥したまうも聞くものをソウルの一夜吾ら「詩」のありて
(Complete Works 256)
My respectable Korean friend seems to fall ill
After our happy reunion.
Alas for the memory of the night in Seoul
When we shared “Poetry.”

In this poem, the sad news of his poet friend’s illness is contrasted with the memory of their happy reunion in Seoul. As for me, of a younger generation, the colonial past is only a historical fact which I learned about in school, but for Yoshimi Kondo it was a real and sad experience which caused his complex feelings about Korea. It is a relief for us to see that poetry has brought reconciliation between the past and the present, between different nations and countries. That was how Kondo met Korean people and culture again many long years after he failed to meet them.
Yoshimi Kondo failed to meet Yun Isang, the Korean composer in 1992

While I have not examined closely the reason why Kondo decided to visit Korea again at this period, one thing I can tell you is that probably his other experience of meeting Korean people and culture again motivated this visit. It was six years before this visit. On November 9 and 13, 1992 he attended a concert and a lecture by a Korean composer in Tokyo, Japan. The composer was Yun Isang (1917–95), the world-famous composer who was abducted in Berlin by the South Korean Secret Service, condemned for espionage and threatened with life imprisonment, and finally released after a world-wide petition from musicians and others, and then obtained German citizenship (Fenikkus Kikaku 288–289) (Fig. 3).

The following poems by Kondo, included in his tanka collection titled Kikyu, or Aspiration, were written about the concert of Yun Isang at the Tokyo Geijutsu Gekijo, or the Tokyo Art Theater, Ikebukuro, Tokyo on November 13 and his lecture at the Keio Plaza Hotel, Shinjuku, Tokyo on November 16, 1992. I attended both the concert and the lecture, too.
Kondo’s poem (4)
Isshun no Nihongo no yue Iki nomu o Yun’isans Tokyo ni manekarete kite
一瞬の日本語のゆえ息呑むを尹伊桑東京に招かれてきて
(Complete Works 54)
Shocked by his clear and instantaneous Japanese out of his mouth
I listened to the lecture of Yun Isang
When he was invited to Tokyo.

That evening, sitting next to Kondo, I was also shocked by the old Korean composer’s fluent Japanese after his long stay in exile in Germany. I wanted to tell the old composer, “Stop it, please,” because it reminded us of our shared sad history, for both Koreans and the Japanese. In the colonial period we forced Korean people to learn and use the Japanese language, and we even forced them to change their Korean names into Japanese names. His Japanese was a sad heritage of that colonial past. I can imagine how shocking it was for Kondo, who saw Japan’s cruel control over Korean people with his own eyes. At the same time, he may have found a similar complex feeling to himself in the Korean composer toward the colonial past. Yun hated the Japanese Empire and its tyranny over his people, but he loved Japanese people. Actually among his disciples there were many Japanese composers, including Takehito Shimazu (1949–) and Toshio Hosokawa (1955–). Therefore, his speaking Japanese was a kind of salute to Japanese musicians and music lovers who gathered in the evening for him.

The next poem deals with different experiences among the Japanese and the Koreans after the Second World War.

Kondo’s poem (5)
Futatsu no Senso o heshi to shi Dan ni kiku Kotoba Hitotsu o Chosen Senso to okure kizuku made
二つの戦争経験しとし壇に聞くことも一つを朝鮮戦争と後れ気付くまで

*Complete Works 54*

“After two wars we experienced.”

I let it be told on the stage;

It took minutes before I found

One of them was the Korean War.

For many people in the world, the two wars of the 20th century are the two World Wars, but for the Korean people they are the Second World War and the Korean War. That was what he discovered. Let us see it in the chronology again (Table 1.). As a liberal intellectual, Kondo understood how much the Korean War bolstered the Japanese economy, and felt sorry for Koreans. But this poem shows us more than that. He was shocked to find that he had not shared the same point of view of modern history as the Korean people. After all, he was one of the Japanese who enjoyed peace at the sacrifice of other Asian people. In other words, he had sympathized with Korean people but did not understand them completely. That is what he found at the lecture: the impossibility of understanding beyond one’s own experience or one’s identification. But he did not stop trying to understand them, and continued his contemplation on human beings by creating poems.

The next poem is about his impression of Yun Isang’s music which is an exquisite mixture of Western music and traditional Korean music.

Kondo’s poem (6)

Uchi toyomu Dagakki o mote tsuguru mono o. Ware niwa Chosen no Kioku no Itami

打ちとむ打楽器をもて告ぐものを吾には朝鮮の記憶の痛み

*Complete Works 54*

My heart feels a twinge of pain

For remembrance of Korea under our rule,
While the Korean drums reverberate
To tell us something in his music.

Yun Isang was three years younger than Kondo. They lived for almost the same period of time differently because of the difference in their nationality and ethnicity under the rule of Japan over Korea. After surviving the war, each of them expressed their thoughts about human beings and civilization in different forms of art, literature and music. Physically, both of them were big and tall for an Asian male: they had high caliber. In other words, they are giants physically and mentally. For example, Suh Kyong-syk, a Korean essay writer with permanent residence in Japan expressed it as “How big and lofty this person rises!” when he met Yun Isang for the first time at the Kusatsu International Academy of Music in August, 1984 (Suh 124). On the other hand, Azumi Tai, a tanka poet wrote that Kondo was bigger and heavier than any other tanka poet, and remembered Kondo’s own words that a tanka poet must become big (Tai 14).

Unfortunately Kondo and Yun never met each other. Before the concert and the lecture, my friend, Hideo Sakai, a professor of German literature and a tanka poet, the one who asked us to attend both events, did his best to arrange a meeting, to have a small talk backstage if possible, between two giant artists who were very much interested in Asian Communities and the peace of the world, but failed. Probably, it was because Yun’s schedule was tight, and Yun was a world-famous composer while Kondo was a local poet.

5) It may be possible to say that Yun Isang was not only a man of music but also a man of letters. He was eloquent when he talked about himself, music, and the world, as he showed us at the lecture in Tokyo as well as in the following interview. Rinser, Luise / Yun, Isang, Kizutsuita ryu, trans. Naruhiko Itoh, Tokyo: Mirai-sha Publishers, 1981. Rinser, Luise / Yun, Isang, Der verwundete Drache. Dialog über Leben und Werk des Komponisten Isang Yun, Frankfurt: S. Fischer 1977.
As Kondo’s disciples and as academics, my friend and I were very disappointed and even feel depressed, but Kondo did not mention anything. He was a stoic and rarely showed his feelings. His diary only describes it as “Went to the concert and the lecture of Yun Isang with Mr and Mrs Miwa Ota” (Kondo, *Nikki* 1992). The memory of that evening was only shared by Kondo’s disciples who attended with us, and was not recorded in the brief chronology of Kondo in the Exhibition Catalog published in 2006, nor in *Iwanami Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Tanka Poetry*. Kondo’s poems about Isang Yun have only been briefly mentioned in the book of Kondo’s poem about music by Aiko Kisaragi, and are left to be reexamined.

6 Why don’t we dream of making them meet again?

After Kondo died on June 21, 2006, I wondered what Kondo and Yun would have said about Asian Communities backstage if they could have met in 1992, and began to dream of giving them another chance to meet even though they are no longer alive, and that is what poets and critics should do, sharing with other people through the power of vision. Why don’t we dream of giving them/us another chance? I use the word “dream,” but it is not a mere dream, because as William Morris, a Victorian poet, designer, environmentalist, and socialist, put it, “if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream” (Morris 228).

That kind of literary vision must have a strong power to develop mutual understanding in Asia. This is why I put the word “Vision” in my lecture’s title. By reading Kondo’s poems could we dream and have a vision for Asian Communities? Could we understand the mixed and complicated feelings of people on both sides of the Empire during the colonial period and share their earnest wish for peace under the shadow of the colonial past?
7  Magic Words: Keep Open-minded.

At the end of today’s lecture, please excuse me for telling you about my personal experiences meeting other people in Asia, and I would like to leave you with magic words for you to prepare good meetings in your future, “Keep open-minded.” They are the words given me by a Malaysian gentleman called John who happened to meet me at Kuala Lumpur Airport more than twenty years ago.

He came to the airport to see his friend off and talked to me. When he found that I had to wait over three hours for my plane, he had a talk with me about Japan, Malaysia, and other countries just to entertain me. I was a graduate student on my way back to Japan from Britain. Actually, I was not open-minded enough at that time, and felt uneasy with his Malaysian English. But his enthusiasm and kindness impressed me very much. Many years later, the more experience I have acquired as a teacher, academic, poet, and mother to two sons, the more increasingly important John’s words have become for me, and I still keep them as my motto.

8  My own experience of meeting other people again

In August, 2014, when I visited the Catholic University of Korea with the students for my course titled Advanced Communication, the importance of this motto came back to me again. As you may know, the relationship between Korea and Japan is not good now because of political confrontations between the two governments about the past and the present. If you search for Korea on the Internet in Japanese, you can easily get to several hostile comments about Korea and Korean people. Bravely enough, my students wanted to see the Korean people with their own eyes although some of their parents were afraid it was not the best time for Japanese students to visit Korea. In the end, my students were rewarded by Korean people’s warm welcome and friendship. If you are interested in what the program was like, please read my report on Chuo Online (Ota, “Japan-Korea joint course for a hopeful future”) and
reports by students and me in *Kusa no Midori*, the university magazine for students’ families (Nishizawa et al 37–43). As a poet I expressed my impression in twenty-pieces of tanka titled “Dream of Green Jade.” This is one of them which warns students against prejudice and encourages open-mindedness toward different cultures.

Miwa Ota’s poem

Tomokaku mo kite mite goran webusaito no pikapika hikaru go ni damasarezu
ともかくも来て見てごらんウェブサイトのびかびか光る語に騙されず
Come and Look, dear students,
Before you worry about it.
Never be deceived by flickering words
About neighboring countries on a website.

I gave this poem to Korean professors as a souvenir and they were very pleased with it. In addition, I wrote a short essay with this poem for a Japanese newspaper about our experience in Korea, and this poem was read and appreciated by many people in Japan (Ota, “Kankoku to Nihon o tsunagu”). Thus, my students and I nearly failed to meet Korean people because we were surrounded by misunderstanding and anxiety in post-colonial Asia, but could meet them again successfully.

9 Laos and I

Now I am in my early fifties, and understand what John, the Malaysian gentleman expected of me, a young student. So, now as one of your elders, I would like to tell you to keep open-minded, and always be prepared to meet and understand other people from different cultures. Thanks to another happy meeting with a Korean professor by accident, I came here to give you this lecture. I never
imagined I should visit Laos. My knowledge about your country is very little. First of all, Laos is known as a peaceful Buddhist country. It is a country which had been closed to foreigners just as Japan had done 400 years ago. On TV I have seen a Laotian forestry worker work with an elephant in the forest. I know a Japanese fair trade company that sells coffee from Laos. And most recently I read in a Japanese newspaper an interesting article about how a Japanese herbal medicine company named Tsumura built a farm for growing herbs like cinnamon in Laos in the middle of rubber and coffee plantations (Yamanaka). I also read that they built a high school for the village. That is all I know about Laos, and I would like to bring back what I see and hear on this journey to my friends and students in Japan. Will you tell me directly about your country that cannot be learned on the Internet, please?

10 The Small Lamp of the Poor Old Woman

I am an academic and a poet. Compared with politicians, economists, and scientists, the things teachers and poets can do are very small. We cannot change the world as easily and instantly as they may do. What could teachers and poets do for Asian Communities? We should remember that small things don’t always mean trivial and useless things. As you are good Buddhists, you may know the story about the poor old woman’s small lamp for Buddha to go back home from the palace of King Ajatasatru or King Ajase (Nakamura 853). That has been my favorite Buddhist story since I read it when I was six years old. From the scientist’s point of view, the story is total nonsense because everyone knows the lamp with little bad oil will extinguish sooner than the lamp full of good oil. For me, it seems that the story reveals people’s earnest wish that goodness will perform a miracle. We know very well that goodness does not pay in this world of consumer economy, but we should not forget that still we want to believe in goodness. As a poet and professor of literature, I brought a small lamp here, Luang Pra-
bang, Laos, and I hope leave it with you, young students here and other areas of Asia for peace and cooperation. Thank you very much⁶).

**Works Cited**


Ota, Miwa. “IchI Kajin no Shi o Mirai ni tsunageru tame ni” (In order to pass the life

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⁶) After this lecture and journey, I published an essay “Laos—’Kotoba no Chikara’ kanjita Tabi” (Laos—a Journey of Experiencing the Power of Words) which focuses on the story of the Small Lamp of the Poor Old Woman and a student’s hospitality of a glass of cold water for me at a café where he worked part-time, in *Seikyo Shimbun*, July 1, 2015.
Ota, Miwa. “Kankoku to Nihon o tsunagu” (Connecting Korea to Japan), *Asahi Shimbun*, October 6, 2014.
Ota, Miwa. “Laos—‘Kotoba no Chikara’ kanjita Tabi” (Laos—a Journey of Experiencing the Power of Words), *Seikyo Shimbun*, July 1, 2015