

*Alles nur Theater? Gender und Ethnizität bei der japankoreanischen Autorin Yū Miri.* By Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt. Munich: Iudicium, 2008. 473 pages. Hardcover €39.60.

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“Nothing but playacting?” This is one possible English translation of the title of Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt’s monograph (based on her doctoral dissertation submitted to Trier University). The subtitle, which could be translated “Gender, Ethnicity, and the Japanese-Korean Author Yū Miri,” underlines two points: First of all, following the example of the first German-language study on the subject,<sup>1</sup> Iwata-Weickgenannt uses the term “Japanese-Korean” (*japankoreanisch*) and not, for instance, the designation *zainichi* adopted in Japanese and some Anglo-American research. Iwata-Weickgenannt thus situates her study within the German tradition of research on the Korean minority and its literature, scholarship that has received little attention outside of Germany. Secondly, and more importantly, the book is *not* about gender and ethnicity *in the works of Yū Miri*. Instead, Iwata-Weickgenannt points to a subtle interconnection between literature and life: “Not only [Yū’s] literature, but she herself is considered, in the final analysis, a ‘work’” (p. 423; translations from German by the reviewer).

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Königsberg, *Literatur der koreanischen Minderheit in Japan: Assimilation und Identitätsfindung* (Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, 1995).

This phenomenon in itself is nothing new in Japanese literature, as Irmela Hijjiya-Kirschnerit has pointed out;<sup>2</sup> Iwata-Weickgenannt, however, enlarges on the concept of literature as life by bringing in the dimensions of theater, the media, and performance. Such an approach is justified not only by Yū's own beginnings as an actress and a playwright and by her later exploitation of media such as TV and blogs, but also by the postmodernist cultural climate in general, with its intermedial penetration of all aspects of life. Under such circumstances, identity is no longer a stable, essentialist category: it must instead be constantly enacted and reenacted, and it threatens to implode without the gaze of the onlooker. Iwata-Weickgenannt thus describes Yū's large-scale novel *Hachigatsu no hate* (At the End of August) as follows: "The novel can be read as an investigation about the nature of identity. The result is a completely different, kaleidoscopic conception of identity as multiply fractured, as an unavoidably heterogeneous conglomeration that has been brought together by force" (p. 430). Indeed, there would seem to be only one unchanging and constant factor in Yū's works, as Iwata-Weickgenannt points out—indeed it is almost the quintessence of her study: Yū's consistent refusal to allow herself to be reduced to any one single, simple identity (p. 431).

To reach this conclusion, disarmingly simple as it may appear, Iwata-Weickgenannt carefully collects her arguments over the course of more than four hundred pages. In the first roughly fifty pages, she states the theme of her study, namely, the investigation of the concept of identity and difference. For this purpose, she explains, she intends to address the forms of social discourse that influence how Yū's figures see themselves, specifically concentrating on gender, class, and ethnicity (p. 15); a few pages later, she mentions "performative elements," thus pointing to another significant concept for her study. Iwata-Weickgenannt then introduces further important elements of her analysis, such as speech-act theory and deconstructivist and post-structuralist theory, before rounding out her introduction with a brief biography of Yū and a discussion of research on the literature of the Korean minority in Europe, North America, and Japan.

After this introduction, Iwata-Weickgenannt chooses in part 1, "Contextualization," to present the relevant theoretical background that she will need to discuss the works themselves in part 2, "Text Analysis." The topics that must be discussed in order to draw valid conclusions from Yū's complex and involved works are themselves complex and involved. They encompass the discourse on motherhood and the family in modern Japan, the history of the Korean minority in Japan, the literature of the Korean minority in Japan (including the relatively new phenomenon of female *zainichi* authors), and autobiographical writing. These topics are all crucial to an understanding not only of Yū's life and works, but also of the artwork that constitutes Yū herself, and Iwata-Weickgenannt's discussion of them is admirable: concise, to the point, based on current theoretical positions, and underlined with vivid examples. After a theoretical and historical presentation of the issue of autobiographical literature, for example, Iwata-Weickgenannt presents details of a court case in which a woman who felt Yū had depicted her in the fictional work *Ishi ni oyogu sakana* (A Fish Swimming in Stone) sued Yū to prevent publication of the work. Any one of the themes taken up in "Contextualization" could have been the topic of multiple studies in its own right,

<sup>2</sup> Irmela Hijjiya-Kirschnerit, *Rituals of Self-Revelation: Shishōsetsu as Literary Genre and Socio-cultural Phenomenon* (Harvard University Asia Center, 1996).

and Iwata-Weickgenannt should be commended for avoiding extraneous material. Conversely, in some places one would have welcomed somewhat more detail. An interesting comparison of the literature of the Korean minority in Japan and the literature of migrant workers in Germany is largely relegated to a footnote (p. 144), for instance, and the discussion of *zainichi* writings as postcolonialist literature could also have been developed at greater length, especially as Iwata-Weickgenannt considers her study a contribution to the discourse on postcolonialist literature as a whole (p. 145, note 181). On the other hand, Iwata-Weickgenannt is careful to steer clear of pseudopsychological interpretations, such as the question raised by one researcher whether Yū's figures show symptoms of borderline personality disorder (p. 254, note 273).

In the second part of the book, Iwata-Weickgenannt devotes herself to analyses of Yū's works in the broadest sense (including, for instance, the television broadcast of Yū's first shrine visit with her newborn, which can itself be considered a performative work). In this part of her study, Iwata-Weickgenannt shows not only considerable talent for literary interpretation, but also substantial resistance to "standard" interpretations. A central aspect of her argument, for example, rests on the issue of names—the meaning of naming as such and the implications of the Japanese colonial policy of erasing Korean names. Significant in this context is her interpretation of the scene in *Mizube no yurikago* (Cradle by the Waterside), where Yū decides to take her Korean name:

. . . in my function as assistant for shutting off the lights in the theater, I used my real name, "Yū Miri," for the first time. I reacted when someone called me "Yanagi" [the Japanese pronunciation of the character used to write the last name "Yū"], and I jumped just the same if I was called "Yū." Finally, Mr. Higashi [the head of the theater troupe] called me over: "It's not good to have two names. Decide on one of them. Who are you, 'Yanagi' or 'Yū?'" Mr. Higashi asked me sharply without a trace of levity. I pressed my lips together, thought the matter over briefly, and answered: "I choose 'Yū.'" From that day on I called myself "Yū Miri" and have done so down to the present. (p. 229)

One would ordinarily assume that the choice of the original Korean pronunciation represents a step toward the affirmation and rediscovery of one's Koreanness and accordingly of one's "real self." Iwata-Weickgenannt makes, however, a completely different reading of the situation: Yanagi Miri leaves (in a form of symbolic rebirth) the dark corner of the stage and takes a new name that, for her, is not associated with the unhappy past of her childhood and adolescence. She thus becomes a sort of blank page, to be filled with words and literature. Iwata-Weickgenannt concludes: "The 'I' which is designated by the *honmyō* (that is to say, by the 'real,' 'actual' name) turns out not to exist, hidden under layers, such that it need only be set free. It is instead called into being by creative practices such as writing. The concept of identity propagated in *Mizube no yurikago* is thus deeply antiessentialist" (p. 232). Similarly, she points to a "central aspect" (p. 235) of the work *Kazoku shinema* (Family Movie) that has been overlooked by Japanese critics (and by naïve readers of the story such as this reviewer). She notes that *Kazoku shinema*, which appears autobiographical and thus would seem to deal with a Japanese-Korean family, is carefully situated in a sort of ethnic limbo. The family name, for instance ("Hayashi" in Japanese, "Im" in Korean),

is written with a Chinese character and never explicitly associated with either a Japanese or a Korean pronunciation. When Japanese critics accordingly complain of a “lack of explanation to the readers,” they have fallen prey, according to Iwata-Weickgenannt, to at least two misconceptions: first of all, that a Japanese-Korean must of necessity write about Japanese-Koreans, and second of all, that a Japanese family would never behave the way that Yū’s characters do.

Iwata-Weickgenannt is at the height of her interpretative powers when dealing, at the end of part 2, with the epic novel *Hachigatsu no hate*, in which “Yū Miri” undergoes a transformation into a shaman and relives the painful era of Japanese colonialization. Of special interest is Iwata-Weickgenannt’s careful analysis of the episode of the “comfort woman” Eiko/Namiko, who regains her identity and wholeness by calling out the Korean name she was given at birth (here yet another example of the importance of the name, which was stressed both in part 1 and in the passage in part 2 quoted above from *Mizube no yurikago*), only to then dive into the sea from the boat carrying her back to Korea and drown. For this scene as well, Iwata-Weickgenannt offers an unusual and poignant interpretation. As the boat carrying the Koreans back to their homeland approaches land and the refugees cheer, a ray of sun illuminates that stretch of the sea to the aft of the boat where Namiko has disappeared. In Iwata-Weickgenannt’s reading:

The very detailed description of daily life in “Paradise” [the name of the army brothel where Namiko was held captive], as well as the total construction of the novel as a “shamanistic invocation” of the unheard complaints of those who died in misery, make it impossible, I feel, to claim that the author is recommending submerging the past. On the contrary, it seems more suitable to interpret the melodramatic, if not out-and-out mawkish, death scene as an example of narratorial irony, especially when contrasted with the preceding, terribly realistic passages. (p. 418)

The appendix to the book contains a wealth of information: a brief year-by-year biography of Yū Miri, a complete bibliography of her works, and a list of writers belonging to the Korean minority in Japan. Given the abundance of material to be found in the book, this reviewer would have appreciated an index as well. In conclusion, I would like to express my admiration for this monograph and the hope that it will be translated into English so as to be available to a wider audience.