

# *The Colonial Tales of Nakajima Atsushi*

Written by Nakajima Atsushi

Translated by Robert Tierney

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## Introduction

Nakajima Atsushi (1909-1942) is a major twentieth century Japanese writer who is practically unknown in the English-speaking world. He was born in Tokyo to a family of *kangaku* (Chinese studies) scholars who took an active interest in contemporary China. His paternal uncles worked in Japan's colonial administration of Manchuria while his father taught *kambun* (Chinese literature) in high schools in Japanese-controlled Korea and Manchuria. During his father's posting in Korea, Nakajima spent five years in Keijō (Seoul) and he graduated from the elite Keijō Middle School in 1926. After returning to Japan, Nakajima studied English and Japanese literature at Tokyo Imperial University and he spent much of his subsequent life working as an English teacher in the Yokohama Girls' School. In 1940, he wrote *Light, Wind and Dreams*, a "fictional autobiography" of the writer Robert Louis Stevenson, based on the latter's last years in Samoa, and the work was nominated for the Akutagawa Prize in 1941. Shortly after he finished writing this work, he left for Koror, capital of Japanese-ruled Micronesia, where he worked as an editor of Japanese-language textbooks for the colonial government. After spending about nine months in Micronesia, he returned to Tokyo where he wrote several of his finest works, including a series of stories based on his South Seas experiences. Nakajima died of complications resulting from his chronic asthma in 1942.

Nakajima's reputation as an important writer rests largely on his short stories set in the distant past, particularly ancient China whose literature and history the writer knew well and loved. Almost every Japanese high school student has read his story "Sangetsuki" (translated by Ivan Morris under the title of "Tiger Poet") or the novella *Ri Ryō* (Li Ling) in Japanese national language textbooks; these stories are closely based on works from the Tang period and from the Han period, respectively. Japanese scholars have devoted considerable scholarship to elucidating the themes and sources of these stories set in ancient China. By contrast, most Japanese readers are unfamiliar with Nakajima's colonial-themed works and scholars have neglected to study them.

A child of the Japanese empire, Nakajima lived his entire life during the Japanese imperial period (1895-1945) and he never once traveled beyond the geographical confines of his nation's empire. In addition to his residence in Korea and Micronesia, he spent his school holidays in Manchuria and later traveled to China and to the Bonin Islands. As a writer, too, he created an imaginary world that delimited the imperial space of his time. Kawamura Minato, a scholar of Japanese colonial literature, notes that Nakajima's literary universe "embraces the northern and southern geographical limits of the Japanese empire during the early Showa years." In powerful works set in Korea and Micronesia, Nakajima

paints a compelling picture of Japan's colonial rule and thereby opens an important window onto the way Japanese viewed the colonies Japan ruled. The three stories included in this short collection, which date from different periods of his life, offer a multifaceted and ambivalent representation of life in the colonies.

"Landscape with Patrolman: a Sketch of 1923" (*Junsa no iru fūkei: 1923 nen no hitotsu no suketchi*), ostensibly based on his experiences in Korea, is one of Nakajima's earliest works. It first appeared in 1929 in the *Kōyūkai zasshi*, the literary magazine of the Tokyo First Higher School. Set in Korea, "Landscape with Patrolman" takes a critical look at Japan's assimilation policies during the so-called "Cultural Rule" period of Korea (1920-1932). During this period, the colonial regime eased its earlier draconian policies of repression toward political opponents, relaxed censorship of Korean publications, and sought to co-opt members of Korean society to support Japan's colonial rule. Nakajima tells his story largely through the point of view of a Korean man serving as a low-ranking patrolman (*junsa*) in the colonial police force. Subtitled "A Sketch from 1923," the work daringly alludes to the massacre of thousands of Koreans during the Great Kanto Earthquake, a tragedy that was censored in Korea. Divided into short sections, the work offers a cinematic, fragmentary view of colonial modernity in Korea while it exposes the contradictions of Japan's colonial policies in Korea.

In 1942, after returning to Japan from Micronesia, Nakajima wrote two collections of stories based on his experiences in Palau, *Nantōtan* (Tales of the Southern Islands) and *Kanshō* (Atolls). These collections were published for the first time in November 1942. "Kōfuku" (Happiness) was the first story in *Nantōtan* and "Napoleon" (Napoleon) was the third work in the collection *Kanshō*. "Happiness" is based on an ancient Chinese source rather than a tale from the South Seas. In his reworking of his source, Nakajima sets the story on an unnamed island in Micronesia. In "Happiness," a lowly servant and his harsh taskmaster reverse roles in the nighttime world of dreams, a reversal that eventually overthrows their daytime relationship. The story makes no reference to the Japanese colonization of Micronesia, but it can be read as an allegory on the reversal and overthrow of relationships of oppression generally and of colonialism in particular.

In contrast to "Happiness," "Napoleon" reflects Nakajima's life experiences and the social realities he observed in Micronesia. When he was a bureaucrat in the colonial administration, Nakajima spent much of his time traveling to outlying islands to visit schools. He also became closely acquainted with Hijikata Hisakatsu, a prominent ethnographer and sculptor who resided in Palau from 1929 to 1942. Hijikata later noted that he offered the writer free access to his journals and ethnographic notebooks. Nakajima apparently got the idea for "Napoleon" from reading two completely unrelated passages of Hijikata's journals. The narrator's ironic depiction of the Japanese authorities and his sympathetic treatment of the young Napoleon reflect his disillusionment with Japanese colonial rule of Micronesia.