The Influence of Manchuria Experience on Abe Kōbō`s Post-war Novels

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Abstract:

Abe Kōbō is a prominent Japanese writer with international influence. He is often described as "mukokuseki," meaning stateless or without a national identity. Throughout his career, Abe was involved in various artistic groups such as Yoru-no-kai, Shimomaruko-bunka-syuudan, and Genzai-no-kai, to name but a few. The ideology of his pioneering work also shifted from existentialism to surrealism and communism. As a result, many scholars have attempted to capture consistent themes in the work of such a stateless and ever-changing writer. O'Michon (2010), for example, rationalizes the use of Abe's colonial experience to explain his post-war texts, and Kim Hyun Hee (2009) reveals the issue of 'home' in Abe's literature. And this essay attempts to describe how the colonial experience in Manchuria is at the root of the theme of hometown that runs through Abe's novels.

The hometown influences the customs, perceptions, and history of the native people and shapes the identity of the individual. However, while everyone has a hometown, the opposite phenomenon – "homelessness" – also exists, derived from the serious problems of migration and ethnic minorities generated by imperialism. For Abe, and many others who suffered the migrations and dislocations caused by colonialism in modern history, the model that "hometown" equals the "birthplace" does not apply. From this perspective, Abe Kōbō, who lived in China, which was invaded in World War II, and Japan, which was the aggressor, expresses in his work a special reflection on the question of "hometown" and "homelessness".

Manchuria or Man-chou is an exonym for a historical and geographical region in Northeast China today. It was here that Japan, through a combination of the Kwantung Army and the South Manchurian Railway Company, established the puppet state of Manchukuo. As early as after the Russo-Japanese War, campaigns to attract immigrants to Manchuria were publicized in Japan. Abe Kōbō was one of them. He experienced both advanced urban life and post-war anarchy, and his early memories induced a deeper reflection on his dual identity. This essay examines Abe's writing on the Manchurian experience, including the colonial experience, the return experience, the urban experience, and the post-war experience; and analyses how Abe's colonial experience in Manchuria influenced his view of his "hometown", demonstrating a post-war writer's struggle with his own colonial experience.

Keywords: Abe Kōbō, Manchuria experience, Post-war Literature, Homelessness, Dual Identity

I. The Colony Experience

Originally from Asahikawa, Hokkaido, Abe Kōbō was born in Takinogawa, Tokyo, in 1924. A year later, Abe`s father took his family back to his clinic in the Japanese district of Fengtian (now Shenyang), the largest city in Manchukuo. The experience of living and growing up in the foreign city of Fengtian and the Manchurian experience from early childhood essentially defined the sensibility of Abe Kōbō (Takano, 1994). When Abe reflected on his life as an immigrant, he spoke of "three places: where I was born, where I grew up and where I am originally from I think it's fair to say that in essence, I am a person who has no hometown. Perhaps the hatred of the hometown, which is so deep in my emotions, stems from this

background. Everything that has a fixed value hurts me." (Abe, 1997) In essence, people who do not have a hometown are those who long for it, who realize or seek a place where they should have something to cling to, and therefore "pursue the hometown".

Neither war-torn Manchuria nor imperialist Japan could be considered the hometown of Abe Kōbō. In school, He was indoctrinated with the contradictory doctrine that they were superior Japanese under the concept of "the harmony among five races". However, witnessing the brutal acts of the Japanese against other nationalities in the interior of Fengtian only deepened his antipathy toward nationalism. A generation with a dual identity, like Abe's, spent his childhood outside of Japan, without really feeling that Japan was their hometown. But Abe says that Fengtian is not either, "My father was a peace-loving citizen on a personal level. But the Japanese community as a whole was an armed, invading immigrant. Maybe that's why I don't have the right to call Fengtian my hometown. But there is no other place that I can call my hometown" (Abe, 1997).

In the year and a half after the war in Fengtian, the original national structure of the colony was shattered and the sense of racial superiority as Japanese instantly disintegrated, "I witnessed the complete collapse of the social benchmarks, and as a result, I lost all trust in eternity" (Abe, 1997). The defeat and turmoil of the war, and the unprecedented experience of moving back to Japan from a devastated Manchuria, convinced him of the possibility of the vagaries of the world and the overturning of the established order: "The anarchy of Manchuria, its opposite of anxiety and terror, was the pressing-need reality of a certain dream implanted in my mind. Freedom from my father and the possessions and obligations he represented" (Abe, 1997). It is this particular experience that gives a duality to Abe's Manchurian experience: a sense of confusion about personal belonging, but also exhilaration for freedom after the collapse of the old order, which led to a colonial experience of statelessness that breaks through the limits of the national level. He seems to sense the urgency and possibility of

pursuing an ideal hometown in an anarchic city. The opposing subconsciousness that lies at the root of Abe's literary works, "losing the hometown" and "pursuing the hometown", are both rooted in the fact that he had "no hometown" from the beginning of his life as an immigrant.

The "outlands", or Manchuria, has a dual nature of being in opposition to the so-called hometown in the interior, while at the same time acting as an intermediary for integrating and examining the experience of the hometown. Although Abe spent his childhood in Manchuria, it disappeared with Japan's defeat and he was therefore compelled to return to Japan. This contradiction became the source of Abe's sense of hometown and the driving force behind his lifelong compulsion to return to his hometown. No matter how much Abe Kōbō hid his ties to Fengtian, the place where he was nurtured as a youth, the problems of identity and hometown stemming from his colonial life persisted, forcing him to think deeply about "loss of hometown", "statelessness", "wandering on the borderline", "the sadness of rootlessness" and so on. These pains and struggles of the mind are constantly transformed into Abe's unique internal experience, which is reflected in his literary works, especially in *Beasts Head for Home* (1957).

II. The Return Experience

Abe Kōbō's only full-length novel based on Manchuria, Beasts Headfor Home, is a summary of his life up to the age of 17. It is the story of Kuki Kyūzō, a teenager who loses his family and home in Manchuria and tries to return to Japan. After 1945, Japan relinquished control of its vast colonies throughout Asia. Over 6 million Japanese soldiers and civilians living overseas began to return to the Japanese islands in large numbers; the collapse of various colonial institutions led to new forms of identity and personal belonging for both the colonizer and the colonized. In 1948, the Foreign Affairs Office reported that 4 million Japanese had still not returned to

Japan. Beasts HeadforHomeis against this background of displacement and dislocations.

There is an autobiographical link between the protagonist's experience and the author`s. 1945 saw the end of the war, the entry of Soviet troops into the city, and the death of Abe's doctor father in a typhus pandemic. The family lost their livelihood and shelter and had to move around the city of Fengtian, relying on the 21-year-old Abe to make and sell soft drinks. Kuki Kyūzō also lost his father at an early age, and at the age of sixteen, he lost his only family member, his mother, in the chaos following the defeat of the war. Overwhelmed as an outcast Japanese, Kyūzō was protected by the Soviet officers whom Kyūzō lived with for over two years and then decided to board a train heading south for Japan. But the train he was on was caught up in the civil war and destroyed, forcing Kyūzō and his new friend, Kō Sekitō, to walk south in the wilderness at 20 degrees below zero. Upon arriving in Fengtian, Kyūzō encountered the treachery of Kō and was almost robbed of his belongings. The troubled Kyūzō was rescued by a Chinese teenager and taken to the Japanese, where he managed to board a smuggling boat bound for Japan with the help of smugglers. Finally, like Abe Kōbō who embarked on a repatriation boat in October 1946, Kyūzō began his journey back home.

When Abe`s ship arrived in Japan, there was a sudden cholera outbreak in the hold, so people were stranded in the port for nearly ten days, to the extent that some suffered from mental illness. Kyūzō encountered similar captivity. The enclosed space, which was intended as a refuge to protect people from war and storms, was turned into a place of captivity in the life and works of Abe. And we should not reduce the complex ideas presented in his work to mere empirical events. In *Beasts*, Abe elaborates on the notion of borderlines that delineates the home's space and he questions the fixity of borders. When Kyūzō despaired from his homeland, he thought the borderline between wasteland and home was precarious: "Damn it, it seems that I've just been circling the same place. No matter how far I go, I can't take a single step out of the wasteland. Perhaps Japan

doesn't exist anywhere. With every step I take, the wasteland walks together with me. Japan just flees further away..." (Abe, 2017). By the novel's end, Kō went crazy, while Kyūzō behaved like an enraged dog. They all became beasts without a home. Colonization changes the sense of stability of the hometown for both the colonized and the colonizer as individuals. Kyūzō's experience proves that the so-called hometown is nothing but an illusion, a place that can never be reached.

Unlike the realism of other post-war writers with military and battlefield memory, Abe's works use the experience of living and repatriating from defeated Manchuria as a medium to consciously and unconsciously transform the eternal "feeling of losing one`s hometown, the experience of wandering in a boundless labyrinth, the loneliness in the city, and the sense of losing oneself, which are all common to human beings living in modern times" into a persistent "spiritual existence"(Kawamura, 1995). For example, Niki Jumpei, who gives up escaping from the dunes and chooses to stay in the desert at the end of *The Woman in theDunes* (1962); *The Box* Man, who ends up with a cardboard box clasped to his head and in a state of uncertainty; and Mole, who is surprised to find that he has become a transparent person after escaping from the ark to the real world in The Sakura Ark, are all spiritual companions of Kyūzō. As Kurihtsubo Yoshiki points out, the movement of these protagonists is the result of the experience of fleeing the war coiled within them, transforming an ego movement into a genetic phenomenon, which is a reflection of the colonists' fatalism.

III. Urban Experience

As Abe Kōbō describes himself, "I did grow up in the colonies, especially during the heyday of so-called Japaneseism, so I formed the habit of seeing Japan relatively from the outside" (Abe & Keene, 1973). Colonial immigrants like Abe who got rid of their dual identities after the fall of Manchuria still did not feel that Japan was their hometown as Japanese. Abe, who had no hometown, sees ano-

ther "loss of hometown" for post-war Japanese from the outside. For about a decade after World War II, Japan experienced a period of rapid economic growth, which led to the transformation of its social structure and the advent of large-scale socialization. As the trend of rural populations leaving their pre-war rural communities for the cities, especially Tokyo, became more pronounced, Kato Masahiro noted that "leaving the village equals entering the capital", and thus the concept of "hometown" was born, and contrast to the city (Kato, 2003). Meanwhile, tens of thousands of “evaporative people” voluntarily left the constraints of the traditional community bonds such as family and workplace. In this sense, the 'disappearance' is closely related to the disintegration of the established social relations and the drive towards the city after the war. Abe wrote several urban novels with the loss of human identity and the alienation of social relations as the main themes, grounding the city on the persistent problems of the hometown. On the one hand, his writing is concerned with Japanese society, while on the other hand, the reality of this country without a hometown allows him to continue to maintain an external perspective and to think about the issue of personal identity.

“Missing Trilogy”, which includes *The Woman in the Dunes, The Face of Another* (1964), and *The Ruined Map: A Novel* (1967), according to Abe's account, have elements of a trilogy in their depiction of human relationships fleeing modern society. “Disappearance” is closely related to the disintegration of traditional social relations brought about by the war and the drive towards the city, and is a choice to abandon all social affiliation against communist forces in Abe's work, and a continuation of Abe's reflection on his own colonial experience. In this trilogy, the term 'disappearance' plays a thematic role not only as a language of fiction but also as a legal concept, as noted by Namigata Tsuyoshi (1998). For example, in the use of the official document at the end of *The Woman in the Dunes* and the Application for Investigation at the beginning of The Ruined Map, the writer is strongly aware of the premise that the word 'disappearance' is a legal term. The legal provisions on disap-

pearance are articles 30 to 32 of the Civil Code, which stipulate that the family court may declare a person missing whose fate has been unknown for more than seven years at the request of the interested parties; this also applies to persons who have been missing for one year due to war, shipwreck or other causes of death. Here there are two types of disappearance: "ordinary disappearance" and "special disappearance", with different periods set for the declaration of disappearance. *Beasts Head for Home* tells the story of Kuki Kyūzō, a missing person of “special disappearance”. Abe's literary world is a universe without a hometown, where it is impossible to find, even with the desire to escape. And *The Woman in the Dunes* is about missing persons of "ordinary disappearance" after the war.

The Woman in the Dunes describes a man who travels from Tokyo to collect insects in the dunes, only to be trapped by villagers. He escapes and fails repeatedly in the world of sand but eventually gives up when he has a chance. Under the nightmarish setting of the city and the semi-desert space, the story shows the tension between individual existence and communal fixity. A supporting character's nickname, Morbius Strip, hints at the protagonist's plight that he cannot find a homeland no matter where he flees. Both of these spatial constructions are closely related to Abe`s Manchurian experience.

Before the end of World War II, The Japanese in Fengtian was exposed to an urban civilization that was 20 to 30 years more advanced than Tokyo. But in the city center, where other ethnic groups lived, municipal construction was backward, and the environment was heavily polluted. When he was a child, Abe enjoyed adventuring outside more than inside the walls built with bayonets by the Kwantung Army. Unlike the Japanese living area, the old city shows a strange baroque labyrinthine charm.At the time, through the illusion of harmonious community, Abe saw the imbalance between the new and old town streets, the dichotomy between modern order and natural chaos.

In The Thought of the Desert, Abe mentions the connection between the desert and his early experiences in Manchuria: "Both

the desert itself and the things in it often exude an ineffable charm. This feeling can also be described as a longing for something that is not available in Japan, but I spent most of my childhood in semi-deserted Manchuria (now Northeast China)...the dust is suffocating, the unerasable sand seeps in through dry eyelids, and behind that irritable mood lies not only discomfort but also a joyful longing" (Abe, 1970) Abe's view of the desert is also influenced by some extent by Hanada Kiyoderu. In *Two Worlds,* Hanada notes that "when it comes to the desert, only happy poets think of death, destruction, and nothingness", and that for children playing with the sand, there is a "sense of creating a world". They both admire the destructiveness and creativity rooted in the fluidity of sand and its constant movement. In *The Woman in the Dunes*, it is through the fluid quicksand that Abe opposed the social life fixed by order. To escape his family and workplace, Niki leaves one enclosed space only to fall into another. The inhabitants of the dunes united to prevent the protagonist from fleeing the dunes and forcing him to participate in the collective work of removing the quicksand under the motto "Love Your Home". Finally, he recognizes that the city and the dune village are all communities fixed by order from which escape and captivity are as entwined as the imagery of the Morbius Strip.

Abe refers to the protagonist in *The Woman in the Dunes* As a man who escapes," while in *The Ruined Map,* that`s "a man who pursues." It depicts the phenomenon of disappearance in the contemporary urban city through the unnamed detective "I." I become a detective work to escape from a professional and married life without uniqueness, which constitutes a correspondence between "I" and the missing man Nemuro. At this level, becoming a detective is already a "disappearance." As people associated with Nemuro appear and disappear, I feel that "disappearance" is a common choice. Eventually, I complete my second "disappearance" into the city, a world I had chosen of my own free will.

The novel presents a picture of a stable and depressing residential area, suggesting it is confinement for people. The missing

people in the story abandon the settled room of the residential area and flee to the mobile space of the city, that is, to leave fixed values and community that are essential connotations of the concept of hometown. The protagonist of *The Woman in the Dunes Gives* up the city, while the protagonist of *The Ruined Map* wanders around the city. Their liberation from the city or into the city points to the departure from the civilized order to a space opposite a hometown.

Abe's questioning of belonging and fixity is closely linked to his Manchuria experience. The urban routine of the anarchic period in Fengtian led him to challenge the necessity and legitimacy of community power to maintain order. After Japan's defeat in 1945, Fengtian was in a state of so-called anarchy, that is, a state without police. But the end of Japanese colonial rule did not affect the normal functioning of the city. The ineffectiveness of the institutions of power and the hypocrisy of the spirit of solidarity and nationalism presented by the everyday scenes led Abe to profoundly question the principles of community and thus to reflect on the existence of the state.

In both *The Woman in the Dunes* and *The Ruined Map,* there are presumptions from the relevant authorities, such as "judgments of disappearance," "the Application for Investigation," and "Reporter." However, those official documents have nothing to do with the protagonists of these novels, and those identified by society as missing or dead continue to survive. So post-war citizens Niki Jumpei and the unknown detective, along with Kuki Kyūzō, raise a common question: whether the communities like states can determine the existence and home of individuals.

IV. Conclusion

The sandy environment in *The Woman in the Dunes* relates to Abe's early experiences in the desert, and the motto 'Love Your Home' points to an illusion of community. The disappeared who abandon their legal identity conferred by the order in The Ruined Mapshare a similar moveable character with the quicksand. After

realizing the Morbius Strip of "losing the hometown" and "pursuing the hometown," Niki Jumpei liberates himself from the city while the detective into the city. They both see the city as a non-hometown. Abe's preoccupation with mobility is partly due to the influence of the desert and anarchy in Manchuria. He spent 17 years in Manchuria in his early years and returned to Japan after World War II, which provided a unique colonial experience for his writing. The experience of living far from Japan and the demise of Manchuria led Abe to notice the absence of the hometown and to interpret the "hometown" as a concept of "Everything that has a fixed value". An aversion to fixed values, an insurmountable sense of belonging, and a deep disgust for the war combine to form Abe's unique colonial experience, which enabled him to capture keenly the changes in social relations in postwar Japan that were foreign to him as a returnee and deepened his questioning of the ambiguous homeland and the traditional collectivism. Those are central themes throughout his novels. This colonial experience of being thrown out of the community and questioning the collective is further carried over into his work while mapping the radical changes of post-war modernity. This is one of the main reasons why he is called a state-less writer. He has always thought and written about everyday life in Japan in Japanese, but the influence of his life in Manchuria has led him to perceive the alienated society of the 'outlands' in the 1950s and the urbanized Japan of the 1960s in a cross-cultural cosmopolitan sense, reflecting on the fact that there was no home-town as a space of stability for humanity during the 20th century.

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