

ChLA Conference Paper Abstract

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The Ironic Empathy of Children's Writing in Imperial Japan

As the Japanese empire expanded into Korea, Taiwan, and other parts of Asia in the early twentieth century, emphasis on language education and the proliferation of children's publications across the empire encouraged children to participate in publishing culture as both readers and writers. At the turn of the century, educational reformers started a movement to teach children to write about their daily lives, *seikatsu tsuzurikata undō*, which was integrated into the imperial education system. Such movements gave children the means to express their experiences through writing and acquire their own textual presence through submissions to magazines and inclusion in collections of children's compositions. This paper examines how such texts, by virtue of being written by children, were able to accentuate the ideologies of adults who guided their writing, especially under the strong political context of imperialism. For example, compositions from Korean schools are filled with empathetic statements towards soldiers, the Japanese empire, or even the emperor, expressing ideas about empathy not necessarily felt by the children but rather prescribed by imperial ideology. Meanwhile, Japanese proletarian children's magazines provided a second ideologically charged site for children's writing that, even as socialism was severely suppressed by the imperial state, often conveyed empathy towards proletarian children living elsewhere in the empire. In both cases, the blatant presence of adult ideology behind the voice of the child adds a shade of irony to the prescribed empathy; the child, not as an individual but as a "child," becomes the agent of irony.