The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Kurihara Sadako, 1913-2005

By Richard Minear

Kurihara Sadako, Hiroshima poet, essayist, and activist, died on March 6, 2005.

The most fitting tribute to a poet is to read her poems. One of my many favorites is "Hiroshima and the Emperor's New Clothes," which she composed for the 26th anniversary of August 6th. Her fire, her acerbic sense of humor, her contempt for hypocrisy ("he says what is isn't / and what isn't is," a reference to the government's refusal to admit the presence of American nuclear weapons on Japanese soil), her commitment to remembering Hiroshima, and her opposition to the politicians committed to forgetting Hiroshima: all these shine forth in these lines. Her immediate context is Japan in 1981, when the prime minister was Suzuki Zenko, the "chubby" emperor of the poem; but her words apply equally to other countries and other times, including, of course, the U. S. If we can know "Hiroshima" today, it is in large part because she insisted on telling the world "what day August sixth is."

Hiroshima and the Emperor's New Clothes

Chubby,
glossy face shiny with sweat,
the emperor of the new clothes,
his (nuclear) belly button plain to see,
says he's coming to Hiroshima.
He says he'll pay his respects at the atomic cenotaph.
Can he really stand
belly-button-bare before the monument
that says "the mistake shall not be repeated"?
The emperor of the new clothes,
who says what is isn't
and what isn't is
and turns lies and fraud into state policy,
says he's coming,
bare belly button and all.
In Hiroshima
not only the children
but also the old people, the men, the women
laugh, get angry
at the chubby emperor's
belly-button antics.
In April he pays his respects at the shrine to war,
in August he pays his respects at the atomic cenotaph.
Repeating flat contradictions every day,
in the country across the sea
he says what they want him to say;
here at home, for domestic consumption,
he says what is isn't
and what isn't is.
But Hiroshima will not be fooled.
O, you 200,000 dead!
Come forth, all together,
from the grave, from underground.
Faces swollen with burns,
black and festering,
lips torn,
say faintly, "We stand here in reproach."
Shuffle slowly forward,
both arms shoulder high,
trailing peeled-off skin.
Tell them—
the emperor of the new clothes
and his entire party—
what day August sixth is.

Richard Minear prepared this tribute to Kurihara Sadako for Japan Focus. Minear's translations include Hiroshima: Three Witnesses and Kurihara Sadako, When We Say Hiroshima: Selected Poems. Posted at Japan Focus on March 15, 2005.