

Conboy did not mention, however, is that there now exists different factions within JI that repudiate the idea of an Islamic super state, preferring to "Islamize" Indonesia first in order to tilt the balance of the entire region. According to Ms. Jones, this has led to the creation of "bombing" and "nonbombing" wings of the movement.

Mr. Conboy's work also contains another shortcoming: Despite the schools and camps created by JI in the region, there is no sense of the actual number of students or recruits that passed through their ranks. Yet, words like "exponential growth" are used.

Still, if one ignores the methodological oversight, the case can be made that Mr. Conboy has made a significant contribution to the understanding of JI, especially its activities up to the most recent Bali bombings in October 2005. *The Second Front*, for instance, provides details on the networks and exchanges fostered by JI with other militant groups, and the military training it received in Afghanistan and Mindanao. In this sense, Mr. Conboy's work could be read in tandem with the ICG's investigative reports, some of which were used to corroborate his own accounts.

However, *The Second Front* also retains a stealthy characteristic throughout its 17 chapters. Although Mr. Conboy used nearly 274 footnotes to produce the numerous accounts on JI, the very richness of the narrative suggests the need for more. Many stories could not have been known without Mr. Conboy either being present at the scene, or receiving detailed notes on the interrogations conducted by the Indonesian intelligence.

But if Mr. Conboy relied primarily on the latter, he was not candid with how he obtained such information, except to affirm in his preface that he used some intelligence sources who must remain anonymous. Hence, readers unfamiliar with Mr. Conboy, who has also authored

a book on the Indonesian intelligence apparatus, are left wondering about the authenticity of the accounts; or rather how he sourced the information from his contacts. Still, based on the careful narrative, one could give Mr. Conboy the benefit of the doubt.

In all, there are many fascinating accounts that one can take away from the book, given the shadowy nature of JI. And although Azahari Husin, the leading Malaysian bombing expert in JI, was recently killed in a police operation in Jakarta, Noordin Mohammed Top, the other key Malaysian operative, is still at large. JI, while greatly weakened by a series of operations against it, remains a potent threat in Indonesia and elsewhere by virtue of the willingness of some of its members to resort to suicide bombing.

CONTRADICTIONS

by Yang Gui-ja

Cornell East Asia Series, 190 pages,
\$45.50/\$23.50

Reviewed by MISHI SARAN

FOR ANYONE WITH an interest in Korean life, this newly translated bestseller is a delight. The reader gets an intimate look at what might go on behind one of the doors in a Seoul neighborhood, instead of another heaving tale of brothers separated during the Korean War.

Author Yang Gui-ja, born in 1955, is one of South Korea's foremost novelists and boasts a raft of literary prizes. With the creation of main character Jin-jin, Ms. Yang threw off the burden of having to tackle Korea's great political issues, like

∞ Ms. Saran, a former REVIEW books editor, is a Seoul-based writer.

Think of a South Korean Bridget Jones, but add a dark streak, a cool distance and emotional complexity.

democracy and postwar trauma, and settled down to telling the personal story of a young Korean woman.

Translators Stephen Epstein and Kim Mi-young were among the millions of readers in South Korea who found themselves enthralled with the novel when it first came out in 1998 under its Korean title *Mosun*. The duo received a grant from the Korea Literature Translation Institute to undertake the translation.

As they point out in the introduction to the book—South Korea reads. Even with a population of about 45 million people, a beloved writer's novel can sell a million copies. "Many people carried *Mosun* around on the subway, you would see its distinctive white cover everywhere," Mr. Epstein said at the autumn launch of the English-language *Contradictions* in Seoul. "We were asked if we wouldn't translate something more political, or socially conscious. We thought about it and we said 'no.'"

So the translators tried to capture the voice of an irreverent 25-year-old Korean woman in English. "In Korean, you need to find a way to pull things apart, break up a sentence that runs for several lines of Korean text," Mr. Epstein said.

It worked. The tale is ordinary and yet utterly engaging. Even while suspecting some cheap emotional trickery, one reaches for the tissues, flipping the pages to keep up with the story.

Jin-jin is a laconic young woman who must choose between the two men in her life, cope with her father's absence, and coexist with a gangster-wannabe brother and a dissatisfied, dowdy mother. Here is her wry self-introduction:

I could add several other items about myself. For example, I'm neither tall nor

short, neither repulsive nor stunning, I've read a variety of books, and I know something about this and that.

And ... the fact that I don't have anything more to add is a sad story. I can't help feeling desperate that my life is so dull.... My life is so lacking in dimension, so shallow, that you couldn't plant a single mustard seed in it. Is it worth living like this?

Think of a South Korean Bridget Jones, but add a dark streak, a certain cool distance, considerable emotional complexity and family tragedy. Ms. Yang gives her characters sharp edges, mannerisms, hobbies and obsessions lively enough to jump off the pages, but just as the reader frowns at the dawning hint of caricature, she reins them in.

Take Na Yeong-gyo, one of Jin-jin's suitors. A planner, he leaves nothing to chance on their dates, not even which route the pair will take home. It drives Jin-jin to distraction, or worse, boredom. "Things would have been much more interesting if seeing a movie was only a possibility. Or, even if we were going to see the movie, it would have been much more exciting if the rest of the day was a blank slate," Jin-jin says.

And so the author draws Jin-jin's universe in minute detail, the agony of her decision, the weather on a drive by the sea with the second suitor Kim Jang-u, a dreamy photographer with a weakness for the petaled beauty of mountain flowers.

Rivulets of problems flank Jin-jin's central dilemma. Her father, in everybody's view, is a social failure, a destructive drunk who lurches farther and farther from home and finally is a booming chasm in Jin-jin's life. But she is unable to hate him, for she has glimpsed some of his demons and recognizes them.

Jin-jin's mother struggles to make a living, selling goods in a market. There are touching details, like her unfortunate perm or a struggle to learn Japanese to cater to an imagined flood of Japanese tourists. Or her way of turning to "how to" books to solve other issues. In aching contrast, Jin-jin's aunt, her mother's twin sister, is a glowing, well-groomed woman with two accomplished children.

But nothing is as it seems, as we learn in the shocking resolution of all loose ends. Some may find the ending a touch melodramatic, but for the most part the surge of Jin-jin's story sweeps away all reservations. Perhaps this is a trait of literature in a small, sea-surrounded country with extreme weather. People live heightened lives, their heartstrings tuned a few pitches tighter.

Amidst the general gratitude for a good story, residents of Korea will recognize with pleasure certain flavors: the description of a particular restaurant in Seoul, a *soju*-drinking bout, the changing seasons, a trip to a mountain temple.

Fiction writers say finding a voice is the key to a successful protagonist and therefore a good book. One could argue that finding the right atmosphere is equally important and Ms. Yang has managed to make her book a perfect, clouded day. She says in an afterward: "These days I find myself thinking again about how the writer's spirit can strip away the rags of daily life and help assuage a sense of loss."

And sometimes a writer's work, like a tennis player's stroke, can hit a spot so sweet it reverberates regardless of geography or language. Jin-jin lingers, her vulnerability barely disguised under her arch tone. In her refusal to flinch from describing even the most demeaning, hurtful moments, she finds a touching heroism. Mr. Epstein put it well: "Jin-jin may be fictional, but she became a friend."

**REVIVING JAPAN'S ECONOMY:
PROBLEMS AND PRESCRIPTIONS**

*Edited by Takatoshi Ito, Hugh Patrick
and David E. Weinstein
MIT Press, 425 pages, \$40*

Reviewed by WILLIAM MACNAMARA

IT IS POSSIBLE that some of the 16 contributors to this volume—which was rather unfortunately published in August, on the eve of a declared revival of the Japanese economy—have lately joined the chorus of the bullish. Being economists, however, they more likely have remained cautious about Japan's prospects for a sustained economic revival. While noting that the economic reforms that have accumulated since 2001 have been a step in the right direction, most of the authors focus on problems with the Japanese economy that are deep and entangled enough to defy quick fixes and outlast any single reformist government's tenure. This volume defies the conventional wisdom by offering another perspective: Macroeconomic growth is a force that might mitigate, but will not solve, the deeper structural flaws in Japan's economy.

Instead of seeming overtaken by recent history, these essays when read today can often convey a revealing degree of remove from the landmark events of September, when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi won an endorsement of his postal privatization scheme and seemed to usher in a climate of reformist euphoria and economic resurgence. A case in point is the analysis by Takero Doi, an associate professor of economics at Keio University, of the Postal Savings System that the Japanese Diet recently voted to dismantle and privatize.

Mr. MacNamara is a recent graduate of Princeton University and a Princeton in Asia fellow at the REVIEW.