

UC Berkeley

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review

Title

Sundered Voices, Streets of Privilege: Lived-in Intricacies of the Japanese Colonial Empire in Korea and Manchuria

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/78r1c2kj>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(17)

Author

Kim, Kyu Hyun

Publication Date

2015-12-01

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Sundered Voices, Streets of Privilege: Lived-in Intricacies of the Japanese Colonial Empire in Korea and Manchuria

Kyu Hyun Kim, University of California, Davis

Nayoung Aimee Kwon. *Intimate Empire: Collaboration and Colonial Modernity in Korea and Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. 296 pp. \$90 (cloth), \$25 (paper).

Emer O'Dwyer. *Significant Soil: Settler Colonialism and Japan's Urban Empire in Manchuria*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. 528 pp. \$60 (cloth).

In the last decade, English-language studies of Japanese colonialism seem to have turned a new leaf. The book-length studies under review here, Nayoung Aimee Kwon's achingly perceptive *Intimate Empire* and Emer O'Dwyer's prodigiously researched *Significant Soil*, are two fine examples of the new types of scholarship tackling the problem of Japanese colonial empire. Kwon and O'Dwyer not only chart and navigate new territories in their respective scholarly subfields—late colonial Korean literature and Japanese colonial experiences in Northeast China—but also showcase new levels of sophisticated and thoughtful engagement with Korean- and Japanese-language historiography.

In her original and provocative book, Kwon directly confronts what she characterizes as the “unspeakable desire” that the colonized Koreans, specifically the educated literary elite, felt toward the colonizers, and the modernity that the latter brought with them, despite their vociferous claim to the contrary, during and after the colonial period. She delves into the full meaning of *ch'in'il* 親日 (J: *shin-nichi*)—literally to be “intimate” with “Japan” or with things/people/ideas “Japanese”—beyond its calcified contemporary usage as synonymous with “collaboration” or even “treason (against the Korean *minjok*, the ill-defined *ethnos* of the Korean

people).” She defines “intimacy” as “an unstable play of affects informed by desire, longing and affection—all of which coexisted with the better-known violence and coercion undergirding empire” (8). The colonized Koreans, despite their insistent and aggressive disavowal of this “intimacy” in the post-liberation (1945) period, in reality responded complexly to the dynamics of differentiation and identification, which in themselves also remained unstable and fluid during the colonial period. This was true even during the wartime mobilization period of the 1930s and 1940s, when the ideology and discourse of *naisen ittai* 内鮮一体 (“Japan and Korea as one”) propelled many literary figures to “commit” themselves to the production of Japanese-language works promoting “collaboration” with the Japanese war efforts.

With the consummate skill of a forensic medical analyst who also happens to be a first-class ratiocinating detective, Kwon interrogates what she characterizes as a “conundrum of representation” among the colonized Koreans that parallels the “crisis of representation” associated with the generalized experience of modernity. She focuses on the “deeply self-conscious sense of alienation” (13) that the Korean colonized writers suffered, from having to constantly, vexingly, and painfully represent themselves through translation into the language of the empire, and then by having to grapple with their representations of Koreanness as a “timeless” quality that stood outside history yet could only be certified as “authentic” through the recognition of the colonizers. The colonized writers were given few alternatives to express their subjectivity except by taking upon themselves the task of constructing “authentic” Korean selves, yet they were seldom allowed to describe the violent instability and contradictions that colonial modernity wrought on their identities. Worse, the insistence on a “pure” ethnic/national identity by the postcolonial regimes has whitewashed this state of affairs, keeping contemporary Koreans willfully blind to this agonizing experience of “intimacy” with the empire.

Kwon divides her book into ten short chapters, some of which are brief enough to be considered extended thought pieces rather than full-fledged analytic essays. In my view, *Intimate Empire*’s core sections are chapters 3 through 5, which contain the author’s critical analysis of the specifically Korean colonial conditions and the particular type of modern subjectivity that such conditions entailed, mainly through readings of Kim Sa-ryang (1914–1950). Kim’s novel *Into the Light* (1940) was a candidate for the Akutagawa Prize and is regarded by many as the foundational *zainichi* (Korean-Japanese) novel. Kwon explores the anxieties, assumptions, and

perceptions found not only in Kim's writings—*Into the Light* as well as many ancillary and “supplementary” texts, such as letters to his mother (claimed by Kim himself to have been “translated” from Japanese into Korean) and exchanges with the Taiwanese writer Long Ying-zong (1911–1999)—but also in the characterizations of Kim's works in the Japanese-language discourse, such as the Akutagawa Prize judges' opinions. Kwon applies to her analysis the theoretical notion of a “minor writer” from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's discussion of Franz Kafka (44), but at the same time modifies and critiques their theory, yielding persuasive interpretations of Kim's texts, contextually sensitive and rich in their implications.

Kwon sympathetically delineates the progression of Kim's career as he struggled with the problems of self-representation and articulation of modern subjectivity, irreducible to an essentialized form of ethnic identity. These anxieties ultimately led to the scenes of psychological abjection and painful (and useless) efforts at negation of self in Kim's work, as in his protagonist Genryū/Hyōllong's repeated claim that “he is not a *yobo* [a derogatory term reserved for Koreans by the Japanese colonial settlers] in the final scene of *The Pegasus* (1940) (90–94). Likewise, Minami/Kim, a protagonist of *Into the Light*, endures a remarkable schizophrenic episode, a literal bifurcation of his subject into self/other, wherein he is driven nearly to madness through recognition of the impossibility of maintaining a “pure” national/ethnic identity. Further, the novel, through its revelations about an allegedly Japanese character, posits that the “contamination” of identities works both ways, destabilizing “the myth of a selfsame, stable I of the colonizer” (75). Thus, Kwon displaces Kim Sa-ryang from the position of a “true nationalist writer” who “defended” the Korean “spirit” against the onslaught of Japanese hegemonic discourse, reconfiguring him instead as a genuinely *hybrid* being—that is, a “minor writer” writing in a major language, fighting against, and yet succumbing to, the desire to claim the territory reserved for an “authentic representation” of Koreanness in the literary works he wrote for Japanese readers. And this horrifying desire, Kwon points out, was behind Kim's painful disclosure to Long Ying-zong that his much-praised *Into the Light* was “written for the Japanese reader,” yet since Kim himself “[knows] this [fact] all too well, it frightens [him]” (61).

Compared to the tightly constructed and magisterially argued chapters on Kim Sa-ryang, chapters 6 to 9 of *Intimate Empire*, while not lacking in fresh insights and stimulating analyses, are a bit loosely aligned. Chapter 6 offers a discussion of Chang Hyōk-chu's (1905–1998)

translation of *The Story of Ch'unhyang* and its adaptation into a Japanese stage production in 1938, a subject previously taken up by Suh Serk-bae's *Treacherous Translation* (2013). Suh emphasized the fundamental inequality of the relationship between the colonized and the colonizers in what is assumed to be an apolitical act of "cultural translation." Kwon, expanding the scope of investigation, explores the performative aspects of representing "Korean culture" from the viewpoint of Japanese producers, as well as how Korean critics of the *Ch'unhyang* play ended up essentializing Korean culture in the very manner of prioritizing racial/civilizational hierarchies—that is, "perpetuating the same logic of the colonizer in their critique of that colonizer" (127). Chapter 7 focuses on "roundtable discussions (*zadankai*)," a particular form of discursive exchange that is a staple of Japanese literary and cultural magazines, deploying Richard Aczel's theory of "overhearing multiple voices" to expose the substantive failure of transcolonial collaborations.

Chapters 8 and 9 more ambitiously integrate the "Manchurian experience" of a select group of Korean writers into an overall discussion of their works, culminating in a thoroughgoing critique of the way Kang Kyōng-ae (1906–1944)'s short stories including "Salt" (1934), "Changsan Cape" (1936), and "Opium" (1937), have been valorized as exemplary works of leftist realism. Kwon argues that such contemporary Korean interpretations of "Changsan Cape," for instance, remain willfully blind to the original historical context in which the story was possibly accepted by Japanese readers as presenting the "authentic" reality of various ethnic groups within the empire—Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese—coming together to constitute the imperial "whole," as the slogan of *naisen ittai* called for (190–191).

In the end, it is somewhat disappointing that, compared to Kim Sa-ryang, Chang Hyōk-chu, who initially seems to take the position of Kim's dark counterpart, a "yin" to Kim's "yang" in Kwon's configuration of the "minor writers" in late colonial Korea— does not receive the same level of scrutiny. I doubt this is because Kwon believes that Chang's caliber was below that of Kim, although that may well be her final assessment. I also wish that she paid more attention to the recent Japanese- and English-language historical studies on Japanese colonialism, especially those dealing with the "imperial subjectification" (*kōminka*) phase of the late 1930s and 1940s, as the conditions of the continental war and aspiration toward total mobilization of the society had a significant impact on the articulation and conceptualization of identities among the colonized population.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting the extent to which Kwon's interrogations move away from mainstream "postmodern" and "postcolonial" theories. Instead, she proves that a study of Korean colonial experience can serve as a meaningful intervention into the general practice of colonial and postcolonial studies in North American academia. Drawing on Deleuze, Guattari, Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, and Frederic Jameson, among others, but also maintaining an audaciously critical stance toward the *limitations* of the way they arrive at generalizations based on the Euro-American colonization of various Asian/African cultures, Kwon cautions us—meaning those who study the encounters between Japanese colonizers and other Asian colonized—not to “reproduce the same old dynamics” of reading the minor texts only as a national allegory, a politicized statement about the writer's group (ethnic, national, religious, etc.) identities. She reserves the strongest words for the type of postcolonial criticism that essentially reproduces the colonial gaze in the name of valorizing heroic resistance:

The imposition of a postcolonial binary further [undermines] the agency and subjectivity of the colonized by reducing them to cartoonish mythical and propaganda figures (heroes and villains)... rhetorically committing the same violence of repeating the colonial logic of reducing the colonized to a place of objectified and dehumanized Otherness. (199–200)

It is difficult for me to agree with her more.

Stylistically, *Intimate Empire* is very much an intellectual conversation, with the author unspooling her intricate analyses of the texts under investigation, along with plentiful visual data (plates illustrating the original handwritten letters sent by Kim to Long, rare photographs of the Japanese actors playing familiar characters from *The Story of Ch'unhyang*, and so on), while interjecting moments of theoretical reflection that implicitly and not so implicitly interrogate the positionality of academics specializing in colonial Korean literature, beginning with Kwon herself. *Significant Soil*, which derives its evocative title from a T. S. Eliot poem, is a markedly different species: dauntingly bulky, with 365 pages of text minus appendices and endnotes, plus 16 pages of glossary and index. It comes out of the recognizable mold of the Harvard histories of Japanese empire by Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka (2003), Jeff Bayliss (2013), and Jun Uchida (2014), among others, firmly grounded in archival sources and threaded by a steadily progressing temporal narrative teeming with a striking variety of personages. Sometimes the sheer amount of

information, decoded and presented from extensive statistical data, journalistic accounts, bureaucratic records, biographies, propagandistic materials, and firsthand recollections, threatens to become overwhelming for the reader.

O'Dwyer's study draws on two important historiographical threads in Japanese- and English-language scholarship that are, to borrow an expression from the SNS world, "trending" now in East Asian history: urban history, or the history of cities, and the systematic history of empire (what Japanese scholars would identify as *teikokushi*). As a study of a major colonial city, *Significant Soil* focuses on Dairen (today's Dalian), designated by the colonial Japanese as the "Paris of the Far East." The city's Japanese residents, whose sense of entitlement and superiority (vividly captured in postwar memoirs such as Kuramoto Kazuko's *Manchurian Legacy* [1999]) helped define its special characteristics (and perceptions of the city as such), sometimes clashed and chafed against the metropole's and the military expansionist's notions of the Japanese empire. Like Jun Uchida's pathbreaking study of Japanese settlers on the Korean peninsula, O'Dwyer's work injects into the narrative of Dairen's growth and prosperity the actions and ideas of the settlers themselves. Her book also deals extensively with the intra-company politics of the Manchurian Railway Company (Mantetsu), whose employees constituted the bulk of the city's Japanese residents. By 1942, Mantetsu boasted an astonishing 296,213 employees, only 11 percent of whom were Chinese. In the latter part of the book, O'Dwyer examines how complex tugs-of-war and jockeying for power developed and unfolded among the increasingly authoritarian Kwantung Army, the increasingly status-quo-preferring Tokyo government (itself sometimes split along the lines of party and bureaucracy affiliation), the Mantetsu employees, and Dairen's civilian elite.

O'Dwyer constructs a multilayered picture of the Dairen residents taking full advantage of their unique jurisdictional identity and Mantetsu-derived economic prosperity to carve out a sphere of "self-government" that characterized them as both representative of the Japanese empire and distinct from any other region of said empire. She charts the way the Japanese elite of Dairen—such colorful figures as City Council leader Ishimoto Kantarō (1868–1933), an opium merchant by trade, and Hobo Takashi (1883–1960), Mantetsu's first Education Department chief and promoter of the "adjusting to the native lands" educational philosophy—invoked the notions of constitutionalism, democratic representation, and right to self-governance, important discursive and ideological legacies of the so-called "Taishō democracy," to promote and protect

their interests. She criticizes the view that the actions of the Dairen elite and Mantetsu employees were exclusively motivated by economic reasons, and rightfully points to the innovative and progressive aspects of Dairen and the Kwantung leasehold in relation to the metropole (for instance, in 1924 Dairen was ahead of the mainland in introducing all-male suffrage for the City Council election).

The narrative in the later chapters, as we move from the 1920s to the 1930s, gradually assumes darker hues, as rising Chinese nationalism and the expanding power of the Kwantung Army combined to weaken the power of the City Council and force Mantetsu to follow the war-oriented mobilization objectives of the military. Yet O'Dwyer abundantly illustrates that the process of bending the Dairen residents and the Mantetsu employees to the military's will was never an easy one. The Mantetsu Employee Association (MEA) and Manchurian Youth League, for example, while not exactly opposed to the Kwantung Army's expansionist policies, continued to critique and challenge the latter's efforts to "subordinate" Dairen to their plans for the domination of Northeast China. Specifically, the Dairen elite and the Mantetsu employees resented the Kwantung Army's plan to shift the center of gravity in Manchuria to Shinkyō (today's Changchun), set up within the puppet state of Manchukuo. For example, in 1933 the MEA made a public declaration in *Kyōwa* magazine that stated: "Mantetsu is the foundation of Manchuria's development. Accordingly, any modification can be effected only after consultation with the *kokumin* [the citizens of the nation] in the full light of day. Any reckless wanton actions would be a mistake of the highest order" (323). Here, the civilian elite and Mantetsu rank and file are clearly designated as representing the voices of the imperial *kokumin*, whereas the forces that created Manchukuo are not. The protest against the military's "Shinkyō-centrism" culminated in the mass resignation of 15,000 staff members of the Kwantung Government-General and 5,000 police officers on October 18 and 19, 1934.

In the final analysis, these voices of dissent or critique were not able to change the direction of Japan's continental policies (the mass resignations were all retracted by the end of October). Between 1934 and 1935, the Kwantung Army managed to disempower many of the civilian institutions for self-governance in the Kwantung leasehold and broke down Mantetsu's employee concentration in Dairen, all the while perhaps conceding that its economic prosperity and special legal status were to be maintained. Still, as O'Dwyer observes, "[even the] Kwantung Army... found that the total suppression of civilian opinion in matters of the leasehold and

[Railway] Zone governance was impossible” (352). In other words, the “total” empire in Manchuria was in fact less than total, and never came close to being “totalitarian.”

Even though O’Dwyer’s narrative is peppered with interesting anecdotes and asides about Dairen’s Chinese presence, including the fates of Guo Xuechun, a notable member of the City Council exiled to Harbin in 1921 (153–165), and Fu Liyu, a former Mantetsu employee arrested for sedition (229–230), there seems to be a relative paucity of attention paid to the Chinese side of the story. Jun Uchida’s study is also firmly focused on the Japanese settlers, but she incorporates a great number of Korean voices into her narrative as active agents. In O’Dwyer’s narrative, the Chinese are largely secondary characters, more background figures than participants. Knowing Mantetsu’s awe-inspiring appetite for information gathering, research, and cataloguing, I wonder if we could have had more information and insight about the Chinese residents, even if O’Dwyer had used only Japanese-language sources. I also feel that some rather convoluted sections regarding the Mantetsu employees and their relationship to the metropolitan state could have been disentangled and clarified if more involved discussions of the notion of “reform” (*kakushin* 革新) that allowed a significant group of Japanese bureaucrats, professionals, and intellectuals to hold socioeconomically progressive views, and at the same time become substantively anti-democratic, were provided.

Moreover, it appears that the views of the Mantetsu employees and Dairen elite (whose membership greatly overlapped until 1935) could often be contradictory, if not outright self-serving. O’Dwyer persuasively demonstrates that welfare liberalism, participatory politics, enfranchisement of the people, and other legacies of Taishō democracy were critical for the identities of these two groups as Japan’s “imperial *kokumin*,” yet at the same time they rejected Prime Minister Hara Kei’s (1856–1921) notion of *naichi enchō shugi* (integration of the metropole and colonies via extension of the Japanese constitutional government into the colonies) and party politics (or more precisely, party-mandated policies and appointments that could undermine their privileged positions). The fact that the Kwantung Army could gain control of the leasehold politics fairly quickly, by the end of 1934 in O’Dwyer’s own estimation, is telling in this regard. Her study seems more effective in indicating the distance between the Kwantung leasehold and Manchukuo, and thus dismantling the monolithic conception of “Manchuria under Japanese control,” rather than confirming the strength and persistence of the notions of

democratic representation among the Japanese colonizers that could have been decoupled from their “privileged” positions and used as a genuine bulwark against the “reform” impulses of the military and the war mobilization regime: on the book’s scale, in other words, more pebbles seem to be piled on the side of “localism” than on the side of “democracy.”

This brief review cannot really do justice to the exhaustive amount of research O’Dwyer has performed, nor can it fully describe all the nuggets of fascinating information and insight she has excavated. *Significant Soil* is not a book that can be finished in one sitting, but it will reward any serious student of the Japanese empire or history of Northeast China in the early twentieth century with multiple returns. And Kwon’s tome, in my view, is nothing less than one of the culminating points in the evolution of the studies of colonial-period Korean literature. For someone like myself, who has been frustrated with the inability or unwillingness of Korean studies scholars to follow the paths first illuminated by Kim Yun-sik in *Yi Kwang-su wa kũ ũi sidae* (Yi Kwang-su and his times, 1986), *Intimate Empire* is a stunning achievement that tells us, “This is only the beginning: here be more treasures for those who venture to dig.” Indeed, both Kwon’s and O’Dwyer’s books vibrate with exciting notes of discovery and reconceptualization, inviting talented and ambitious scholars out there to mount challenges to their bold conclusions and new formulations.

Kyu Hyun Kim is associate professor of Japanese and Korean history at the University of California, Davis.

References

- Bayliss, Jeff. 2013. *On the Margins of Empire: Buraku and Korean Identity in Prewar and Wartime Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center Publication.
- Kazuko, Kuramoto. 1999. *Manchurian Legacy: Memoirs of a Japanese Colonist*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Kim Yun-sik. 1986. *Yi Kwang-su wa kũ ũi sidae* [Yi Kwang-su and his times]. 3 vols. Seoul: Hangilsa.
- Matsusaka, Yoshihisa Tak. 2003. *The Making of Japanese Manchuria, 1904–1932*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center Publication.
- Suh, Serk-bae. 2013. *Treacherous Translation: Culture, Nationalism and Colonialism in Korea and Japan from the 1910s to the 1960s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Uchida, Jun. 2014. *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center Publication.