



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

History Faculty Publications

History Department

2001

Colonial Modernity in Korea (Book Review)

Thomas D. Curran Ph.D.

Sacred Heart University, currant@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/his_fac



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), and the [East Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Curran, Thomas D. "Colonial Modernity in Korea." (Book Review). *Journal Of Asian History* 35.1 (2001): 112-115.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

promoted the suppression of popular religious expression, ultimately such popular practices as shamanistic rituals filled spiritual and social gaps left unfilled by Confucianism and, as a consequence, continued to coexist as a complement to the elite tradition. On the other hand, elite values penetrated the popular tradition; shaman songs, for example, reveal at least a superficial acceptance of Confucian values, indicating that popular religious practices adapted themselves to Confucian hegemony. After Confucianization had transformed the institutions of the elite, Confucian values filtered to other layers of society.

Catholicism, it seems, proved more resistant to the penetration of Confucian values and it suffered as a consequence. Its challenges to orthodox rituals and social morality were considered a serious threat to state Confucianism and its suppression was quite vigorously pursued. Ironically, however, Don Baker points out, it was not its challenge to orthodoxy so much as to orthopraxy, behavior, that attracted the most serious concern.

As the above summary may suggest, taken as a whole this book is a wonderfully thoughtful collection. Each chapter reveals something important about the interactions between competing ideas, contending elites, or elite and popular culture in Choson Korea. Together they suggest that there was a level of complexity and dynamism in the intellectual and cultural life of the period that conventional scholarship, in a field that is after all still quite young, apparently has not thoroughly explored.

Sacred Heart University

Thomas D. Curran

Shin, Gi-Wook and Michael Robinson (eds.): *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 184. (Cambridge: Harvard University Area Center, 1999), xv + 466 pp., \$ 49.50. ISBN 0-674-14255-1.

This book is a conference volume containing twelve chapters by an international body of scholars who have focused on the reconstruction of modern Korean history following the end of the Cold War. The historiography of modern Korea has been greatly complicated by the post-World War II partition of Korea and the subsequent competition between the two Korean states for control of the historical record. With history being employed to legitimate the nationalist credentials of each of the contending powers, the record was severely distorted, colored to suit the political purposes of the contenders. The end of the Cold War, however, has offered many new opportunities for scholars to reevaluate Korea's modern history, and there has been what Shin and Robinson call a "renaissance" in research on the colonial period in particular. Meanwhile, recent developments in postcolonial/postmodern studies have much to offer by way of a deeper theoretical understanding of the complex origins of modern national identities. The contributors to this volume have capitalized on both developments by launching some initial probes into the mechanisms by which Korean national identity emerged during Korea's time under Japanese rule. If this book is to be followed by similar work, as it surely must, the results are likely to be rewarding indeed.

Of several themes that emerge here two are especially pronounced. The first is that the evolution of Korea's national identity under Japanese occupation was a product not just of resistance or reaction on the part of Koreans to heavy-

handed efforts by the Japanese to establish their political and cultural domination. Rather, there were forces at work within Korean society (e. g., economic changes and the infusion of cultural currents from the West) that either preceded the Japanese annexation or evolved along with colonialism. Sometimes these indigenous or Western forces played roles in forging a new national identity that were as weighty as those of the Japanese. Perhaps even more intriguing is the second theme: that despite the Japanese determination to assimilate Korean culture in pursuit of their dream of a pan-Asian sphere of cultural dominance, their efforts at times generated results quite contrary to their intentions. Especially, while, in some sectors Japanese efforts paid off handsomely, in others they only worked to advance the development of native Korean culture. Therefore, Korea's modern national identity did not necessarily emerge, as Korean nationalist historians have long been wont to maintain, as a consequence of Korean resistance to Japanese encroachment. Some aspects of it did, but others developed in association with Japanese policies, rather than in opposition to them.

The book is divided into two six-chapter parts. The contributors to Part I focus their attention on efforts by the Japanese to assert their supremacy (political, cultural and otherwise) and show that while they did not intend to strengthen Korean culture in some instances they did exactly that. In his own contribution to the collection, for example, Professor Robinson studies the history of Korean radio. He found that during the middle-to-late 1920s Japanese authorities established a radio network, the Kyongsong Broadcast Corporation (KBC), for the purpose of intensifying their control of information and implementing a campaign of cultural assimilation. To a significant degree the KBC did succeed in drawing Korean elites into the Japanese cultural orbit. On the other hand, its effort to reach as many Koreans as possible acted to subvert the Japanese effort by reinforcing elements of Korean culture or making space for the construction of new ones, fostering for example the standardization of the Korean language and the development of native musical forms. Rather than strengthening the cultural hegemony that the Japanese desired, radio provided an arena within which some cultural issues were negotiated between Japanese and Koreans, with neither side being able to stake a dominant position. In his study of telecommunications, Daqing Yang makes a similar case, identifying the paradox that characterized Japan's colonial rule in general: i. e., Japanese power was used to establish and sustain colonial control, but it also opened new channels for the integration of Korean society, economy and culture.

Similarly, in their contribution Drs. Gi-Wook Shin and Do-Hyun Han show that during the late 1920s and early 1930s the colonial state addressed economic and social problems precipitated by the worldwide economic collapse by reorganizing rural life and mobilizing local leadership, especially educated youth. They introduced reforms that noticeably improved rural conditions, and Shin and Han argue that in the case of rural revitalization the evidence runs contrary to interpretations of colonial state-society relations that suggest that such relations were monochromatically oppositional. Rather, they were multi-dimensional, multifaceted, richly textured and at times contradictory.

Soon-won Park focuses on the development of a modern workforce. Rejecting conventional arguments to the effect that economic development under Japanese

control produced an enclave-style modern sector that had little long-term effect on the Korean economy or society, he argues that Japanese-directed development restructured the Korean labor market. There was a huge shift in employment from agriculture to non-agricultural sectors, large regional migration, urbanization, and an improvement in workforce quality. While the impact was spread unevenly across diverse regions and social groups, it was profound, and it was not unrelated to the development of Korea's post-colonial economy. Park's study suggests that the conventional view of Korean labor as a passive victim of Japanese exploitation cannot be sustained, and that economic developments during the colonial period served to bridge the gap between 19th century pre-modern Korea and its late 20th century successor.

Part II examines the colonial impact on specific forms of identity, such as gender and class, and shows that the process of identity formation was fraught with tensions and contradictions. In his study of the writings of Korea's first modern novelist, Yi Kwangsu, for example, Michael D. Shin shows that Yi's writings reflect a search for origins, what the author calls "interiority" or the inner meaning of things, awareness of one's true self. This quest for self-discovery is seen as a metaphor for the emergence of a Korean national community. Like the Korean people, the journey that Yi's characters undertake was often frustrated by what Shin calls "landscape," i.e. conditions created by Japanese repression. Typically lonely young men, when Yi's protagonists eventually find what they are looking for, it is usually the realization of what they share with other Koreans, i.e., a unique Korean identity. Thus, Yi renders literary treatment to the emergence of a nationalist vision within the context of a repressive colonial system. Japanese rule was a catalyst facilitating a voyage of national self-discovery that found expression in the works of this well-known writer. Again, here we have the edifice of Japanese colonialism acting as a stimulus to the evolution of modern Korean culture.

Kyeong-Hee Choi's essay approaches the problems that Koreans faced in their quest for a modern identity by analyzing Part I of "Mother's Trilogy," an autobiographical narrative written from 1980 to 1991 by one of South Korea's best known contemporary writers, Pak Wanso. In this piece Pak's mother's struggle to open for her daughter a path toward modernity is thwarted by colonial policies that threaten her family's economic future, force the family to retreat from the city back to their old home in the countryside, and deprive the young girl of a modern education. Rather than advance the cause of modernization, conceived as the liberation of women from stereotypical female roles, the colonial enterprise only served to force the agent of modernization herself, Pak's mother, back into the traditional place from which she was so anxious to see her daughter escape. Rather than open a path toward modernity, colonialism reinforced patterns of behavior characteristic of pre-modern times.

Considering the impact of colonialism from the point of view of the peasantry, Clark Sorensen argues that it fostered the emergence of genuine peasant identity, i.e., greater acknowledgement of the peasants as both a distinct social class and the locus of Korean national essence. Again, the colonial experience was a stimulant, but it did not necessarily lead to consequences that are consistent with conventional descriptions of Korean modernity. As Korea's loss of sovereignty

deprived the nation of a source of its national identity, its effect was felt most strongly by urbanites. With their cities held hostage to an intrusive foreign power bent on assimilating and transforming Korean culture, modernization was equated with foreignness and the only place left for people to look for a pristine Korean way of life was the countryside. Therefore, Korean peasant life came to be equated with Koreanness, and peasant culture came to be appreciated in a new way: such cultural artifacts as rural rituals and crafts were celebrated as landmarks of Korean identity. Rural culture, since it survived the colonial onslaught relatively intact, was honored as the last manifestation of a genuine Korean national spirit, the last true "repository of Korean civilization."

In counterpoint to Sorensen's piece, Joong-Seop Kim finds that internal developments that were at work in Korea long before the colonial era also shaped Korean modernity. Next to colonialism, the most powerful and enduring force for change was Western culture and ideology, and these penetrated some segments of Korean society before the colonial era. In particular, this study focuses on the fate of the Paekchong, a hereditary class of outcasts who were exposed to egalitarian ideas from both native (Tonghak) and foreign (Christian) sources before the arrival of Japanese power. Under such influences, and aided by economic forces that liberated them from constraints upon their social freedom, they began to resist social discrimination. Revealing, however, the complex ways by which indigenous developments and colonial forces interacted, Sorensen adds that Paekchong activists were inspired and prompted into intensified activity by the anti-colonial March First Movement's demonstration of the potential for mass mobilization.

As the above summaries make apparent, each of the pieces in this volume attempt to come to grips with the complexity of Korea's early 20th century struggle to find its place in a rapidly changing world. The "nationalist paradigm" by which conventional historians since World War II have attempted to define Korean modernity is not considered satisfying, for it is too politically charged and narrowly focused to take into account the kaleidoscopic nature of the forces that were present in Korea under Japanese rule. This anthology is inspired, rather, by postmodernist scholarship that suggests that during the pre-colonial period there were alternative forms of political community some of which might lead to modernity and some of which might not. Seeking to escape what Prasenjit Duara calls "the repressive connection between history and the nation," i. e. the assumption that ultimately history can reveal but one path, that which leads to the nation-state, these scholars have opened the way for an appreciation of a wider range of political communities. They have in common openness to the possibility that change might produce a variety of potentially contradictory effects. Some of its features may strengthen cultural patterns not normally associated with modernity, while some may lead to precisely the sorts of developments that earlier versions of modernization theory might predict. When viewed in these ways, one begins to sense just how complex the process of modernization in colonial or semi-colonial countries can be.

Sacred Heart University

Thomas D. Curran