Governmentality in Late Colonial Korea?

Henry Em

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, Volume 2, Number 1, May 2013, pp. 183-193 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ach.2013.0003

Governmentality in Late Colonial Korea?

HENRY EM
Yonsei University

Takashi Fujitani. *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (University of California Press, 2011). 520 pp. $65 (cloth).

Jun Uchida. *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2011). 500 pp. $50 (cloth).

In South Korea, more so than in most other postcolonial countries, the issue of sovereignty and the colonial past remains a central feature of politics. Most recently, during a televised presidential debate on December 4, 2012, Lee Jung-hee of the Unified Progressive Party said something that likely had never been said on South Korean television: "Takaki Masao signed an oath of loyalty [to the Emperor of Japan], in his own blood, to become an officer in the Japanese [Imperial] Army. You know who he is. His Korean name is Park Chung Hee." Lee Jung-hee then made the connection between that colonial past and the willingness to sell out the nation's sovereignty in the present. The conservative candidate Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the late President Park Chung Hee who ruled South Korea from 1961 through 1979, and members of Park's Saenuri Party, remain true to their "roots": these "descendants of pro-Japanese collaborators and dictators" (again) sold out South Korea's sovereignty (on November 22, 2011) when they rammed the US-ROK Free Trade Agreement through the National Assembly.

Predictably, those who belong to South Korea's power bloc, and South

Korea's "conservatives" more broadly, respond with outrage when such aspersions are cast in their general direction.[1] Anyone who says that most of South Korea's current political, economic, and bureaucratic elite can attribute their (families') power and wealth to complicity with dictatorships, and ultimately to Japanese colonial rule, has to be a communist and/or a North Korean agent. For their part, conservatives stake their claim to historical legitimacy on South Korea's present-day prosperity and freedom, the result, they say, of their unyielding commitment to capitalist development and the struggle against communism. But, as evidenced by the swift and exhilarated reaction to Lee Jung-hee's pointed criticism, it was clear that many who watched Lee Jung-hee felt a cathartic pleasure: South Korea's power bloc remain politically vulnerable because it does not have deep roots in the anti-colonial nationalist movement; it came to power in the South through U.S. intervention and support starting in 1945 and, until the 1980s, it stayed in power through state violence and military coups.[2]

That is to say, at least two aspects of sovereign power remain central to critical historiography and progressive politics in contemporary South Korea: on the one hand, as an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist project, faithfulness to the struggle for full national sovereignty; on the other hand, as a democratic project, opposition to postcolonial sovereign power that is anchored to an anti-communist *raison d'état*, as articulated through dictatorships, military coups, and state violence against those deemed internal enemies and through alliances with propertied classes in pursuit of high growth (with big profits for the families that control South Korea's huge conglomerates [*chaebŏl*]) and strong control over the lower classes, a pattern that originated in the late colonial period.[3]

Beyond sovereign power, however, Takashi Fujitani's *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* introduces a new problematic in critical historiography on colonial Korea, explaining why the terms "pro-Japanese" and "collaborator" are so insufficient for understanding the choices made by colonial-era soldiers like Park Chung Hee. Rather than positioning sovereignty and sovereign power as the primary focus of a critical study of Japanese colonialism, Fujitani points to a governmentality that emerged in the late 1930s; that is, a form of governing that Michel Foucault (2007) drew attention to, a form of power that constructs the normative and establishes those conditions that oblige new forms of life to come into being.

David Scott referred to this kind of rule as colonial governmentality (1995), offering an analysis of colonial power that goes beyond the question of to what extent, and how, the native population was included or excluded to take up questions like, What did the colonial power take as the target upon which to work, and for what kind of project?

All told, Fujitani considers the politics of this period as the extension of warfare, and points to how Koreans, as colonial subjects, became "targeted as worthy of life, education, health, and even to some degree happiness" (26). So that Koreans might be more fully utilized for regime survival, prosperity, and victory in war—at the very least, to ensure that they would not turn their weapons in the wrong direction, or sabotage efficiency—Koreans became the targets of a political rationality that was, in many respects, kind and nurturing, creating the conditions wherein they "freely chose" what was always already intended for them.

Among many historians who work on colonial Korea the principal objection against the emergence of a (colonial) governmentality would likely have to do with the specificity and historicity of colonial power in contradistinction to modern political power per se: the colonial articulation of ethnic (or civilizational) difference/hierarchy, the exploitative nature of Japanese colonial rule and dominance over Koreans, and the undeniably coercive nature of colonial rule. This is especially so because the historical moment when Fujitani finds a governmentality emerging is precisely the moment when, as Fujitani himself points out, Korean men and women were forcibly mobilized to labor under horrific and often dangerous conditions, especially so in the case of "comfort women."

Drawing on Foucault's work on the bio-political state, Fujitani reminds us that in late eighteenth-century Europe the emergence of systematic state programs for public health coincided with the development of mass armies and mass death. From a similar matrix of rationalities, Fujitani argues that this "conjunction of apparent opposites" reaches a climax in World War II. "The wartime instrumentalization of life meant that Japanese and Korean lives could be both nurtured and put up for slaughter in the interests of preserving the core population" (77).

Fujitani goes to great lengths to acknowledge that the brutality and violence of sovereign power, without regard for life or law, remained a fundamental feature of Japanese imperialism. He also goes to great lengths to say

that Japanese colonial rule was racist. At the same time, Fujitani points to *why* it is critically important to understand that official "inclusionary" discourse in the late colonial period—emphasizing the sameness of metropolitan Japanese and Koreans, even acknowledging that "the blood of Koreans flowed within the emperor himself"—was not mere propaganda, especially from 1937 onwards.

In making the argument for governmentality, Fujitani points to a comparability between the historical situation that led to the inclusion of Japanese American soldiers in the U.S. Army and Korean soldiers in the Japanese Imperial Army. He acknowledges, of course, that there were significant differences between the Japanese and American cases (26).[4] In spite of their "singularities," however, Fujitani reveals historical convergences in the Japanese and American wartime regimes, where both states moved to officially disavow racism, and to mobilize all racial and ethnic minority populations for wartime production and fighting as self-reflexive subjects, constituted as such through "rituals of free consent"—such as the submission of blood petitions.

This historical convergence—for Japanese Americans as U.S. citizens, and Koreans as imperial subjects—had to do with a comparable trajectory from exclusionary to inclusive practices, leading to what Etienne Balibar calls "inclusive racism" (1991). The inclusive aspect of inclusive racism had to do, first and foremost, with new representations of equality and admissibility into the "core" community: that is, a disavowal of overt (biological) racism with a more polite form of racism.

Fujitani presents abundant examples of wartime colonial literature and film targeted at both metropolitan Japanese as well as the population in colonial Korea, wherein Koreans (and Chinese) choose, and achieve, subjecthood as imperial citizens. The crucial moments in these texts, in terms of governmentality, have to do with choice: that is to say, a Korean choosing to be loyal to the empire, and making that choice as a free individual (in the manner of Park Chung Hee) as a convinced and self-disciplining self, rather than as a fearful subject.

By paying attention to how Koreans, as colonial subjects, became visible as a population to be cared for, along with attention paid to shifts in both policy and representation of racial and ethnic difference, Fujitani's analyses anticipate not just passive obedience but the possibility of an active and dramatic obedience, and militant support of empire. But how to gauge whether,

and to what extent, a gap existed between colonial authorities who insisted on imperial subjecthood and Koreans who adopted, and became creative with, wartime rhetoric?

In *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945*, Jun Uchida makes a number of the same observations as Fujitani: namely, that in the 1930s Korean ideologues of *naisen ittai* (Japan and Korea in Unity) and their call to become "instinctively Japanese" had a great deal to do with the desire to "escape their colonial status by joining the ruling *minzoku* of a 'new Japan' on its way to global supremacy" (366). For both Japanese settlers and Korean elites, military expansion into Manchuria and China enlarged the "spatial circuits of economic activity," providing greater opportunity for economic and career advancement. After the Kwantung Army's seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and the establishment of Manchukuo in 1932, Uchida discerns a shift as Japanese settlers began to "morph" from brokers of empire "into agents of the colonial state," and Korean nationalists began to move into the colonial institutions they had hitherto boycotted (309, 320).

For Uchida, analyses of (divergent) group interests and discourses at specific historical junctures explain the shifting political dynamics between the colonial state, Japanese settlers, and Korean elites. To more effectively mobilize Korean labor and resources for the war in Manchuria and China, but also in response to elite Korean demands for equal citizenship, some of the major differences between metropolitan and colonial citizenship were eliminated: Koreans were allowed to volunteer for the Imperial Army (1938), receive metropolitan-level school education (1938), adopt Japanese family names (1940), culminating in general conscription for Korean men (1944) that would have led, in 1946 (if Japan had not lost the war), to the appointment/election of Korean representatives to the Imperial Diet (Uchida 2011, 384).[5]

Uchida points out, however, that while incorporating Japanese settlers and Korean elites into the colonial regime "reduced the costs of governance by displacing them onto local allies who helped to maintain social control and order," profound and persistent anxiety on the part of Japanese settlers toward inclusion of Koreans in the category of "Japanese" constrained the impact and efficacy of colonial corporatism (397).

While imperialism offered Japanese and Koreans "an opportunity to reconstitute their relations on a new frontier of cooperative expansion," direct and deepening exchange between Korean elites and Japanese settler

elites led to increasing assertiveness on the part of Korean elites. That is to say, Japanese settlers saw the policy of *naisen ittai* in zero-sum terms, and it would seem that Koreans did also. In a situation of war mobilization, according to Uchida, Koreans of all social classes began to echo *naisen ittai* advocates, pressing for equal citizenship, making demands that Japanese settlers saw as "incommensurate with their [ethnic] status."[6]

Uchida's attention to individuals and organizations reveals significant differences among Korean advocates of *naisen ittai*: those who wished to preserve Korean cultural uniqueness and some political autonomy within the framework of empire[7] and those who wished to completely merge Koreans into the Japanese ethnos, to become "Japanese superior to Japanese."

From the point of view of Korean national history, the first position is capitulation, while the latter is complete renunciation of national identity. But if we focus on the mode of governance after colonialism—that is, after Japan's surrender in 1945 and Korea's partition and occupation by Soviet and American troops—we can say that what truly persisted and remained consequential in South Korea were the rationalities and techniques of war mobilization and "conversion" developed in the late colonial period.

Whether characterized by governmentality or colonial corporatism, both Fujitani and Uchida's work show that many Koreans not only obeyed but came to perceive imperial norms as their own. Uchida discloses the different (political and cultural) strategies by way of which Koreans interpreted and internalized those norms. Beyond that, and drawing on Franco Moretti's 1987 work, Fujitani suggests that this situation incorporates a critical feature of modern bourgeois culture: simple obedience is not enough; one must fuse external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity, until the external compulsion is no longer distinguishable from one's inner desire (319).

Internalizing external compulsion so that it is no longer distinguishable from one's inner desire was the goal of Kungmin Podo Yŏnmaeng (National Guidance Alliance) organized in 1949 by the Syngman Rhee government to "guide" former communists and communist sympathizers toward complete conversion, using some of the same techniques developed in the late colonial period. Membership was assigned. Soon after the Korean War broke out in the summer of 1950, South Korean police and military rounded up tens of thousands of Podo yŏnmaeng members and massacred them.[8]

As Foucault was careful to note, one mode of governance does not

replace another in a series. That is to say, governmentality does not replace *raison d'état*. Moreover, sovereign power—to kill or to allow to live—persists in the present. But, especially in a situation of civil war like the Korean War, Achille Mbembe is certainly right in suggesting that biopower, with its emphasis on the protection of life, is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (2003, 39–40). After the ceasefire, techniques changed, as did the system of correlations between different mechanisms of control. That is to say, governmentality certainly did not emerge fully formed in the late colonial period, but Fujitani's study, suggesting that governmentality and modern bourgeois culture constituted an important element in war politics of the late colonial period, provides a provocative and compelling way of tracing the genealogy of contemporary South Korean politics.

If Fujitani's analysis is on the mark, we can say that (colonial) governmentality engendered at least two postcolonial legacies in South Korea, in the sense that, as delineated by Michel Foucault (2007), modern political power consists of two historically distinct trajectories: a totalizing and centralizing trajectory that aims for obedience, wherein the *coup d'état* is entirely within the general horizon of *raison d'état*, but also an individualizing and normalizing trajectory that aims to create conditions wherein self-governing subjects, following their "self-interest," do as they ought.

After Park Geun-hye's victory on December 19, 2012, the conservative press wasted no time in attributing the defeat of the main opposition candidate, Moon Jae-in, to the Unified Progressive Party candidate's statements: Lee Jung-hee's "coarse" and "deformed" (*ssagaji opnŭn*) speech during the Presidential debates, they argued, galvanized and unified the conservative forces. In spite of high voter turnout, older voters, most crucially those in their 50's (the generation that had brought about the democratic transition in 1987), had given Park Geun-hye a clear victory.

Undoubtedly, both the political system created after the democratic transition in 1987 (*'87-nyon ch'eje*) and the neoliberal system adopted after the 1997 Asian financial crisis (*'97-nyon ch'eje*) transformed South Korean politics in crucial ways.[9] At the same time, the President-elect Park Geun-hye's call for "100% unity (*t'onghap*)" calls to mind the corporatist strategies of the past, as well as Atul Kohli's explanation of Park Chung Hee's governing strategy: "While there were important discontinuities following WW II, when the

dust settled, South Korea under Park Chung-Hee fell back into the grooves of colonial origins and traveled along them, well into the 1980s" (1994, 1269).

Regardless of the President-elect's gesture toward corporatist strategies (even calling for "economic democracy"), it is clear that neoliberal policies—especially for trade agreements and laws that regulate the labor market—will define her approach to governance. The juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory modes of governing (the conjunction of apparent opposites) appears almost as a necessary condition for both late colonial Korea as well as for contemporary "war politics" in South Korea. While national community is emphasized, the extraction of profit is made to appear as a series of relations of exchange rather than profit extracted through domination; the people, as workers and producers, become "free" in their precariousness that takes a purely "economic" form.

What has not changed is that, from its origins, South Korea was premised on the exclusion of leftist political movements and organizations. South Korea's sovereignty is supposed to extend over the entire peninsula, and the North Korean government is (still) an "anti-state organization." From 1945 onwards, revolutionary forces threatening society were to be violently and completely exorcized by a counter-revolutionary dictatorship. South Korean sovereignty began (in 1948) with this exclusion, this ban. The population was brought into the new political order under conditions that exposed one to the unconditional capacity to be pushed outside of the political and human community, to be killed, or at the very least imprisoned, if one supported or sympathized with communists or North Korea.

In the 1950s, for example, stigmatization or "guilt by association" sometimes involved a visible separation from the community. For example, when Cho Pong-am, twice Presidential candidate and leader of the Progressive Party in the 1950s, was arrested and charged with being a North Korean spy in 1958, following the Chosŏn dynasty practice of *cordon sanitaire*, his house was cordoned off with a rope (*kŭmtchul*).[10] That is to say, the logic here was not a simple one of "us" and "them." Anyone may be found to be a communist, and in that sense the figure of the communist dwells permanently in the polity, and the unending task of eradicating the communist remains the origin and legitimization of the South Korean state. This is the sense in which Kim Dong-choon refers to South Korean politics as war politics.[11]

The problem, then, becomes not just the reemergence of certain patterns

but the preservation of a relation of forces: more specifically, the preservation, maintenance, or development of a dynamic of forces (Foucault 2007, 296). In this regard, Uchida's work, with its careful attention to organizations and the shifting dynamic between the colonial state and various organizations, is especially valuable and instructive.

At perhaps a more "fundamental" level, Fujitani's work points to modern cultural forms that interpellate self-disciplining subjects and an emerging mode of governance in the late colonial period that operates on a personal and affective level: the population as the target of political rationalities that cultivate and nurture, creating the conditions wherein individuals freely choose what was always already intended for them, so that obedience becomes the price one willingly pays, not only because those choices *promise* a better life, but because external compulsion and inner desire are supposed to form a unity.

With truly impressive archival work and rigorous conceptualization, these two books by Fujitani and Uchida provide compelling narratives and analyses of Japanese colonialism in Korea. They are also suggestive of how historians of contemporary Korean history might conceptualize the discursive and material ways by which the United States, starting in 1945, disavowed any association with colonialism by embracing the rhetoric of freedom and the struggle against totalitarianism as a way of suppressing and displacing the historical and political significance of Korea's anti-colonial movements that were led by the left. It is also clear that critical race theory must have an integral place in Korean/East Asian Studies, even as we examine governmentality as a modern and global form of governance.

HENRY EM teaches Korean history at Underwood International College of Yonsei University.

NOTES

1. Paik Nak-chung makes the point that those who improperly gained power and wealth in the context of colonial rule, national partition, and dictatorship, should not be referred to simply as "conservatives." See the December 17, 2012, PRESSian interview with Paik Nak-chung, Yun Yo-jun, and An Kyong-hwan. Here, when I refer to "conservatives," I am referring to a much broader group,

but the historical backdrop (from the colonial period to the 1980s) should also be kept in mind. As for "power bloc," I employ that term here somewhat loosely, as an enduring alignment of elites/social groups that have, for the most part, monopolized power in South Korea since 1948.

2. See Kim, Dong-Choon (2004 and 2010).
3. Regarding this class alliance, see Kohli (1994).
4. For example, having naturalized race as a fixed category, "white" imperialists could not highlight racial affinity and therefore had to rely more strictly on humanistic universalism.
5. Seven Koreans were to be appointed to the House of Peers, and twenty-three were to be elected to the House of Representatives. This granting of limited suffrage was agreed to in the early months of 1945 after lengthy negotiations between the colonial government, the Chosen Army, and the metropolitan government.
6. The call to end discrimination against Koreans focused on suffrage and equal education, and on abolishing the system of overseas allowance (which would result in equal pay), eliminating restrictions on Korean travel to Japan, and removing the ban on the transfer of family registers (which would provide Koreans the possibility of truly becoming "Japanese").
7. Kim Sa-ryang ([1939] 2010) seems suggestive of this kind of prescription.
8. See Hanley, Charles J. and Jae-Soon Chang. "U.S. Allowed Korean Massacre in 1950." The Associated Press (February 11, 2009).
9. See Kim C. (2009), Kim, C. (2010), and Son (2009).
10. Cho Pong-am called for peaceful reunification with North Korea, which at the time was considered a communist agenda. In 2007, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that the subversion charge against Cho Pong-am was fabricated by the Syngman Rhee government to "get rid of Rhee's strongest rival in the Presidential elections." In January, 2011, South Korea's Supreme Court cleared the charges against Cho Pong-am.
11. Conversation between Kim Dong-choon, Christine Hong, and Henry Em. June 23, 2012, at Sungkonghoe University.

REFERENCES

Balibar, Etienne and Immanuel Wallerstein. 1991. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities.* London: Verso.

Foucault, Michel. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977–1978,* edited by Michel Senellart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fujitani, Takashi. 2011. *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Kim Chong-yop. 2009. *'87-nyon ch'ejeron*. Seoul: Changjak kwa pip'yongsa.
———.2010. "87-nyon Ch'ejeron ui kwanjom eso pon sahoech'eje nonjaeng." *Minju sahoe wa chongch'aek yon'gu,* 17.
Kim, Dong-Choon. 2004. "Forgotten War, Forgotten Massacres: The Korean War (1950–1953) as Licensed Mass Killings." *Journal of Genocide Research,* 6 (4): 523–544.
———.2010. "The Long Road to Truth and Reconciliation." Critical Asian Studies 42 (4): 525–552.
Kim Sa-ryang. (1939) 2010. "Into the Light." In *Into the Light: An Anthology of Literature by Koreans in Japan,* edited by Melissa L. Wender. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
Kohli, Atul. 1994. "Where Do High Growth Political Economies Come From? The Japanese Lineage of Korea's 'Developmental State.'" *World Development* 22 (9):1269–1293.
Mbembe, Achille. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15 (1): 39–40.
Moretti, Franco. 1987. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture.* London: Verso.
Scott, David. 1995. "Colonial Governmentality." *Social Text* 43: 191–220.
Son Ho-ch'ol. 2009. "Han'guk ch'eje nonjaeng ul tasi saenggak handa." *Han'guk kwa kugje chongch'i* 25 (2): 31–59.
Uchida, Jun. 2011. *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.