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Andre Schmid

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# The Microhistory of Anti-Japanese Speech Acts

ANDRE SCHMID

*University of Toronto*

Jung Byung Wook, *Puron yŏlchŏn: Mich'in saenggaggi paetsok esŏ naonda* [The biographies of rebellious people in colonial Korea]. Seoul: Yŏksa pip'yŏngsa, 2013. ISBN: 9788976965431.

The wartime colonial period has, in recent years, become the subject of ever broader and deeper research efforts. In this fascinating volume, Jung Byung Wook adds to our understanding with a series of short microhistories that seeks to recreate a sense of the political dangers that characterized these tumultuous years. He accomplishes this by choosing four moments—each given a chapter—that eventually led to criminal cases, tried in the Seoul regional court. Jung, who once worked for the National History Compilation Committee editing and collating criminal court proceedings, uses his familiarity with these records to give readers glimpses into the social, economic, and intellectual lives of a select number of people who have otherwise been lost to historical memory.

Three of Jung's case studies focus on individuals, each of whom committed an anti-Japanese speech act that ran afoul of various laws designed to enforce obedience. Kim Yŏngbae—the subject of the second case study—wondered aloud to a friend, when walking down the street in the summer of 1938, what the consequences would be if China were to push Japan out of the peninsula. An anonymous letter reported the conversation, leading to a monthlong investigation and, ultimately, a ten-month sentence for Kim. Three years later the courts gave a harsher sentence to Kang Sanggyu, whom

they labeled an “unsavory student thirsting for Korean independence.” The cause of his two-year sentence? He had visited his high school teacher to discuss the prospects for his further education, but when his teacher sneered at him and insisted that he speak Japanese within his own home, Kang lost his temper. On the way home, he threw the fruit that he had brought as a present for his teacher into the sewer.

Jung’s third case of anti-Japanese speech acts centered in one Seoul high school. In 1940, a number of students were caught sneaking back into their alma mater to write on a blackboard:

Along with nurturing Japanese spirit  
We must nurture Korean spirit  
Japan will fall  
Korea will be independent

An investigation revealed that, as early as 1938, one of the students’ teachers had taught that the story of Empress Jingu conquering Korea was little more than a lie, since Korea at the time, he explained, had been far more advanced than Japan. For this pedagogical misdeed, the teacher received a two-year sentence.

While the court records of these cases are now available in the published collections of the National History Compilation Committee, Jung goes well beyond these records, turning to a wide assortment of contemporary sources to flesh out the context of these transgressions. As he asks for the case of the fruit-throwing Kang Sanggyu, where did a high school student get the confidence to take such actions? In the course of tracing the context for Kang’s and others’ actions, Jung offers a tour through the myriad late colonial social settings inhabited by his protagonists. We come across fistfights at schools, the reading lists of students, personal ruminations on how to deal with the name-change policy, the problems faced by colonial administrative units in ruling traditional village structures in rural areas, night schools for farmers, conversations from police interrogations, the start-up of a horse-racing track to name just a few—all used by the author as context to show that these were not sudden, compulsive acts but reflected a deeper sense of individual grievance that was framed nationally and arose out of the conditions of living under colonial rule.

The final case study shifts away from tracing the microhistory of individuals to examine one of the controversial events of the 1930s, the anti-Chinese riots of 1931, in which over one hundred Chinese were killed after news of the Manbosan Incident spread to the peninsula. Jung frames this chapter within a scholarly body of literature investigating the origins of the violence. Most previous scholarship has either emphasized the effects of nationalism on the formulation of anti-Chinese sentiment or focused on how the colonial government manipulated information to incite violence. Jung instead looks to the changing urban context of Seoul, a rapidly growing city where worker unrest and poverty were manifesting themselves in new suburban neighborhoods. Here Jung turns to a more traditional socioeconomic analysis than in his other chapters, arguing that the violence must be seen as a result of internal class tensions between imported Chinese labor and poorer Koreans, heightened by the effects of the depression. Tracking this argument across social and physical space, where neighbor turned on neighbor, he explores the repercussions of Seoul's growth as people were pushed off former agricultural lands, leaving them with no means of livelihood. News of the killings of Koreans in Manbosan was, in Jung's words, like "throwing oil on fire." As one source depressingly put it, "In China, Koreans are being harmed by Chinese; in Korea, we must make Chinese feel pain" (164–165). It is the prehistory that attracts Jung's historical gaze as he looks for the deeper socioeconomic causes of ethnic strife.

It is difficult not to wish that Jung's book were available in English, especially for use in the classroom. In their richness of detail and descriptions of everyday life, these episodes offer something of a riposte to recent tendencies, especially strong in English-language studies, to vacate the study of nationalism in favor of the ambiguities and gray zones of colonial life, an approach that focuses on the noncoercive exertion of power that was so necessary for the maintenance of colonial rule. Jung's work does not let us forget that behind these strategies stood the police, ready to throw anyone in jail for the slightest offense. Indeed, it is the very mundanity of Jung's choice of offenses that is so telling. His case studies are not about nationalist movements or intellectuals' proindependence essays, but moments involving unorganized, ordinary people who, because of their actions, drew the scrutiny of the state's repressive apparatus.

Yet what is truly remarkable about these cases is not so much the extent

of state power as evidenced by the development of a network capable of bringing casual street conversations to police attention, but that the colonial state *cared* so much. Jung's microhistories reveal the deep paranoia of the colonial state. That high school students would scrawl such messages on a school blackboard is not surprising; that the colonial state would launch a full-out investigation resulting in harsh sentences for seemingly trivial acts *is* surprising. And this can only be explained by recognizing that our historical understanding of a confident colonial state, ruling by the 1940s with little concern about oppositional forces, has missed out on this underlying and seemingly deep-seated insecurity. Such paranoia led to investigations of the everyday that created a paper trail, enabling Jung to pursue his historical inquiry. Surely in the comparative history of colonial rule this degree of paranoia and insecurity was unrivaled. Such is the power of this type of microhistory that it can raise questions about the very nature of colonial rule.

At the outset of his work, Jung writes that history is much like foreign travel and that his work is intended as a type of guidebook. Indeed, he takes us on a fascinating journey, beyond the usual beaten path, showing us new insights into a land we thought we already knew.

ANDRE SCHMID is associate professor of East Asian studies at the University of Toronto.