Reflections of a Bureaucrat Who Worked for Imperial Japan and the Republic of Korea

[Nihon teikoku to Daikan Minkoku ni tsukaeta kanryō no kaisō]

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(Tokyo: Sōshisha, 2011)

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Over the past two decades the collaboration issue has shared center stage with other delicate issues as South Koreans have attempted to come to terms with the less attractive aspects of their twentieth century history. From the late 1980s both private and governmental organizations have worked independently to identify the Koreans who had collaborated with Japan's colonial administration. Im Mun-hwan (任文垣), in a memoir originally written in 1975, reflects on the life of one such candidate. Though unnecessarily tedious in details, Im offers an informative window into the life of one Korean who participated in Korea's colonial and post-liberation administrations. He tells his story in the third person using his childhood nickname, Bawideok (바위덕, virtues of a rock), tracing his narrative from Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 to the fall of the Syngman Rhee administration in 1960.

Im Mun-hwan (1907-1993) was born in South Chungcheong Province as the son of the village head, or *chonjang* (村長). At the age of sixteen, he crossed over to Japan to continue his education, arriving just days before the Great Kantō earthquake. This disaster perhaps influenced his decision to stay in western Japan rather than travel to Tokyo as he had

originally planned. His decision may also have been influenced by news of the slaughter of over 7,000 Koreans in Japan due to groundless rumors that they had polluted the water wells. Though he received financial support from his family, he was forced to accept a number of part-time jobs that included rickshaw puller, milk deliverer, and toilet cleaner to support his living and education expenses. Once he gained admission to the Dōshisha junior high school, he benefited from the school's financial assistance that greatly reduced his financial burden. Rather than take the easy route by continuing in that school's system, Im sought and gained admissions to the pinnacle of Japanese education, Tokyo University's law department. After graduating, he sat for Japan's high-level civil servant exams (J. *Kōtō bunkan shiken*) and secured a ranking of seventeenth out of over 70 exam takers. His success earned him a position in the Japanese colonial office in his ethnic homeland. Japan's defeat came suddenly to Im, causing him to reflect on his activities over the ten years he served as an employee in the Japanese bureaucratic system. Would, he feared, Korea's patriots condemn him as a "dog who wagged its tail for the Japanese and lived a life in luxury" (p. 283)?

Im returned to public duties in 1948 when he was recruited by the new South Korean government to join the team assembled to draft South Korea's first constitution. Here he locked horns with Rhee over the limitations on presidential power as advised by the drafting committee. The soon-to-be-inaugurated president demanded a far greater range of powers. While Rhee was apparently able to bully some committee members into compliance, Im remembers that he refused to bend. His stubbornness would later come to haunt him. Soon after, he was investigated as a potential pro-Japanese collaborator under the new National Traitor Act. Ironically, he was able to avoid arrest due to Japanese colonial-era discrimination that had prevented his promotion to a rank stipulated by the Act as traitorous. As we shall see below, his colonial-era activities also helped him secure positions in future Rhee cabinets.

Im's descriptions of life in war-torn South Korea are among the more interesting parts of his narrative. His name apparently listed by the communist forces for internment, he moved frequently around the city to avoid detection. Finally a Mr. L, whom Im had saved from arrest during the years of Japanese rule, appeared to request that he turn himself in. Im initially agreed to do so, but escaped to Busan instead. He returned to Seoul in September 1951 only to find his house looted due (he believes) to its belonging to a "pro-Japanese traitor of the people" (親日民族反逆者) (p. 358).

This conclusion underlines a feeling that Im emphasizes throughout his book: the apparent shame he felt from a "soiled resume" (汚れた履歴書) cluttered with positions he held under the Japanese colonial government (p. 283). In 1951 he initially refused, for example, an appointment as Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, and then refused to partake in the introduction ceremony before the national assembly, due to this "dark cloud" that hovered over him (pp. 375-76). Yet, as mentioned above, he was also able to argue himself out of arrest as a pro-Japanese collaborator due to his not attaining either of the two benchmarks established as traitorous by the National Traitor Act: promotion to the rank of third grade high level bureaucrat (高等官三等) or recipient of the Order of Merit sixth rank (勲六等) (p. 315).

Im also is not shy about voicing his views, however suspect, on the "resumes" of other Koreans regarding their collaboration. He writes that Kim Seong-su (김성수), who recommended him for a position on the constitution drafting committee, had a clean and patriotic resume that perhaps was second to Song Jin-u (송진우) who was "the cleanest of anyone" (p. 305). Both Kim and Song refused all Japanese pressure to collaborate. On the other hand, Kim's brother Yeon-su (연수), was so different from his brother that they appeared unrelated. In contrast to Seong-su who used his fortune to promote Korean media (*Donga ilbo*) and education (Korea University), Yeon-su was a big name pro-Japanese collaborator (親日の巨頭) who selfishly sought only to increase his

estate. It was only through his brother's protection that he was able to escape prosecution (p. 436).

A second recurring theme in Im's narrative is the discrimination he felt throughout his career, first by the Japanese as a Korean who had entered their country and their ranks, and then by post-liberation Koreans who viewed him as a pro-Japanese traitor. He felt the Japanese negative gaze upon him as he entered Japan in 1923 as (in his mind) a Japanese national. One Japanese law officer informed him that "it didn't matter how good a Japanese school you entered, you are after all still a Korean." This awakened Im to the limitations of Japan's assimilation policy (p. 146). He again felt this discrimination upon entering the Japanese colonial bureaucracy as he worked aside Japanese of the same rank who received a higher monthly salary (￥130 to his ￥75). These colleagues also were promoted at a much faster pace. The post-March First Movement reform measure enacted in 1920 that stipulated equal pay for equal work evidently did not extend to the stipends that Japanese received for crossing over to the colonies to work (pp. 211-13). Indeed, most professions followed a similar practice of ensuring that Japanese were compensated at a higher rate than Koreans for similar work.

As mentioned above, at least in President Rhee's eyes, Im's pro-Japanese background was considered a plus to the newly formed South Korean state. This Rhee explained to Im after confronting his minister over his missing the national assembly session where he was to be introduced. At this time the president admitted that while in exile he was staunchly anti-Japanese, as was his reputation. However, since liberation, "I have shed this individualistic attitude. Now, when I think of Japan and Russia, what concerns me is the future of our country. Russia is communist, and it will eventually lose to democracy," he predicted. "Until this time we have to concern ourselves with this (communist) problem." Japan, however, was different. "It is close to the United States. Let's prosper together with this democracy." Rhee saw the importance of Im and other pro-Japanese Koreans coming when the time came for

Korea to confront Japan. Then those who "know Japan well" will be indispensible to the protection of the homeland (pp. 375-76).

Im's narrative also contributes to the ongoing discussion over whether annexation indeed brought Koreans Japanese nationality. Im writes that he was born a Korean but at the age of three he "became a Japanese" (日本人となった) (p. 14). In fact, he calculated that over his lifetime his nationality changed a total of six times, including multiple times over the course of the Korean War as control of Seoul changed hands during the war. His arguments share those with many contemporary writers who argue that Koreans in Japan "lost" their Japanese nationality after the United States occupied Japan from late August 1945, when they were denied the right to vote in the 1946 elections, or when the United States and Japan drafted Alien Registration legislation in 1948 and 1952. One might question whether nationality is this flexible. What Im demonstrates throughout this book is that even if the Korean people gained legal Japanese status during this period (and I harbor doubts over whether they did) they surely were not recognized socially as Japanese by the colonizing people.

Despite organizational problems, Im's *Nihon teikoku to Daikan Minkoku ni tsukaeta kanryō no kaisō* offers an informative account of one person's experiences that transcended an extremely turbulent period in Korean history. His descriptions of life in Japan's education system and the Japanese and South Korean bureaucracies augment our understanding of these institutions from a rather unique angle, and particularly the transition that Koreans experienced as their country overcame two occupations to gain their liberation. The inclusion of such details as salaries and land prices in both Japan and Korea will be of particular use to those interested in understanding the social situation that confronted Korea over the first half of the twentieth century.