Primitive Selves: Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910–1945

by E. Taylor Atkins
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E. Taylor Atkins' book *Primitive Selves: Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910–1945* dissects the Japanese colonial fascination with Korean culture, examining how the colonial authorities, individual "Koreaphiles," and the Japanese people as a whole treated and understood Korean culture during the years that Japan occupied the Korean peninsula (1910-1945). Books such as this that deal with the colonial experience from both Korean and Japanese angles are particularly valuable for historians of East Asia. Colonial empires were, by their very nature, not limited within the boundaries of nation states, and, as a wealth of literature now argues, colonial influences were far from being one way. Atkins therefore provides an important corrective to simplistic evaluations of Japanese colonialism from both ends of the spectrum, whether apologetics for the "progress" achieved under colonial rule or all-encompassing denunciations of the "distortions" of Japanese scholarship and cultural policies.

Broadly speaking Atkins makes three major arguments in this book. First, he argues persuasively that the Japanese colonial approach to Korean culture cannot be reduced to a simple story of suppression or distortion. Rather, it often reflected genuine interest in and even sympathy for

Korea and Korean culture, although in practice this interest was usually still perfectly compatible with colonial rule and the interests of the Japanese empire. Second, the Japanese understanding of Korea and its culture was closely linked to two ideas that underpinned colonial rule in "Chōsen": the assertion that Koreans and Japanese were of the same "race" and the idea that Korea was stuck at an earlier stage of historical development than Japan. The latter concept Atkins terms the "denial of coevalness," drawing on the work of anthropologist Johannes Fabian. Third, Atkins argues that Japanese interest in Koreana and Japanese Koreaphilia partly reflected Japan's own insecurity about modernity and its nostalgia for a purer, more "primitive" past. Here he deploys a phrase originating from Jordan Sand to describe this anti-modern nostalgia: the "epistemology of loss."

The first chapter provides a well-researched overview of the colonial period as a whole. The author challenges the conventional tripartite periodization of colonial rule into military rule, cultural rule and finally assimilation/militarization, arguing that culture was a crucial part of the Japanese approach from the beginning and remained so until the end. Atkins spends a considerable amount of time examining the meaning of the word "culture" (K. *munhwa*, J. *bunka*) in the term "cultural policy" used by Japanese governors-general to describe the post-March First policy turn. He concludes that the term itself was important for its very vagueness and ability to signify almost anything that was broadly desirable, modern, and progressive.

In the second chapter Atkins deals with the field of ethnography in colonial Korea, and focuses particularly on the "ethnographic gaze" that Japanese scholars applied to Koreans and Koreana. He is at pains to place Japanese ethnography of this period within the global context of colonial ethnography and to emphasize the mimetic nature of the Japanese colonial gaze. Japanese ethnographic photography, for example, "conforms to the conventions of a global iconography of primitive peoples" (p. 83). At the same time, colonial ethnography was driven by two

conflicting needs: to differentiate Koreans as backward and in need of Japanese tutelage, and at the same time to minimize "Korean difference in accordance with the dictates of the ideology of common ancestry (J. *Nissendōsoron*), so as to make the annexation appear as a smooth integration of backward cousins into the Japanese family-state" (p. 53). Atkins argues that not all Japanese ethnographers were motivated simply by their desire to aid the colonial project and neither did they always produce information that was useful for the colonial authorities. However, he concludes that there was much in the ethnographic research that was of utility to the Government-General and for all its apparent obsession with collating empirical data, there were always "subtle 'orientalist' undercurrents" (p. 100).

Chapter three turns its attention to the curation of Korean culture, which the author defines as encompassing "collection, documentation, analysis, and preservation" (p. 105). Again, the premise of the chapter is that Japanese approaches to the cataloging, preservation and display of Korean cultural artifacts were fundamentally contradictory: "the distinguishing feature of cultural policy in colonial Korea was its Janus-faced nature, a selective, situational impulse both to preserve and to suppress indications of Korean difference" (p. 105). At times Japanese archaeology and historiography in colonial Korea focused on the globally well-established colonial practice of establishing a prior claim on Korean territory. In this case one of the most well-known examples was the assertion, based entirely on eighth-century Japanese histories, that ancient Japan had once had a colony in the southern part of the peninsula, the Mimana Nihonfu.

Japanese interventions in the worlds of religion, art, and musicology are also discussed, but it's in the realm of folk crafts and particularly ceramics where the theme of anti-modern nostalgia seems to come most to the fore. Famously the founder of the Japanese *mingei* (folk arts) movement, Yanagi Muneyoshi, was a great advocate of Korean ceramic art and in fact passed this influence on to his British contemporary Ber-

nard Leach. As Atkins argues, "What Yanagi prized most in Korean arts and crafts was their ostensible Zen-like artlessness, that elusive *wabi* quality of which Japanese manufactures now seemed bereft" (p. 124). However, as well as being symptomatic of the "epistemology of loss," Yanagi's approach to Korean folk art has also recently been critiqued as a form of "Oriental Orientalism," although strangely Atkins does not mention this here.[1]

Although this chapter brings out well the inherent contradictions of Japanese colonial cultural policies, this can at times leave the reader feeling rather confused. As Atkins argues, "Much Japanese curatorial activity was motivated by the earnest affective attachments the curators themselves developed for Koreana, rather than by any overarching ideological agenda." But, at the same time, "Koreaphilia by no means implied an anti-colonialist stance" and curation was ultimately a political activity that served the interests of the Government-General (p. 146). Curation was a way of laying claim to Korean cultural heritage and silencing Korean nationalists, a way to portray the colonizer as an enlightened, civilizing force, and a means to promote the idea of a greater racial kinship between the advanced Japanese and their backward Korean cousins. And yet, paradoxically the huge quantity of colonial scholarship (much of it actually carried out with the active participation of Koreans), has served to form an important basis for postcolonial Korean Studies and Korean identity formation in both halves of the peninsula.

In chapter four the focus moves to the reception of Korean culture in Japanese popular culture, and music in particular. In line with his stated aim of bringing out the ways in which both colony and metropole were transformed by the colonial experience, Atkins examines the impact of Korean folk songs, dance, and the "iconography of Korean *kisaeng*"

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[1] See Yuko Kikuchi. (2004). *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.

(p. 149) on imperial Japanese culture. This is a trend that the author provocatively calls the "First K-Wave." Much of this chapter is concerned with a subject that is clearly close to the author's heart – the folk song *Arirang* and its myriad versions. The song itself was a key site of cultural conflict where "nationalist" *Arirangs* battled propagandistic colonial *Arirangs,* but it also had a "parallel life as a mass cultural commodity shared by colony and metropole" and was performed and recorded repeatedly by many of Japan's most well-known pop singers. Atkins goes as far as to claim that this was "arguably the most familiar piece of popular music in the Japanese empire" (p. 151). The popularity of Korean folk songs in imperial Japan is once again linked to anti-modern nostalgia, which was expressed in the Japanese versions of these songs as "romanticized notions of a primeval Korean idyll, frequently feminized as chaste, unspoiled, and unworldly" (p. 165).

Other parts of this chapter deal with the popularity of Korean dancer Choe Seung-hui as well as the iconography of the Korean *gisaeng* or courtesan-entertainer and its place in the imperial Japanese imagination. In Atkins' view *gisaeng* in particular formed "part of a conventional imperial strategy to rhetorically and symbolically *feminize* – and thereby emasculate – the colonial subject" (p. 183), thus once again showing that elements that might appear unique to the Japanese colonial experience were actually local forms of global imperialist practice.

In his epilogue Atkins discusses the afterlife of colonial cultural policy in the form of the Republic of Korea's Cultural Properties Administration, which, while defining itself in the strongest possible way against the "cultural violence of the colonial period," nonetheless derived much of its centralized state control approach directly from the policies of the Japanese Government-General (p. 194). He contrasts this with a rather different postcolonial appropriation of "traditional" culture in South Korea: the *minjung* (popular masses) movement that played such an important role in the workers' and democracy struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. As Atkins notes, "The respective visions of the official CPA

and the dissident *minjung* movement could not have been more at odds with regard to 'cultural preservation': the former envisioned a museological stasis determined by experts, the latter a subversive vibrancy and populist outrage living in the streets and villages where the *minjung* dwelled" (p. 195).

This is an enjoyable and fascinating book that provides a real insight into an aspect of Japanese colonialism in Korea that has so far been given little attention in English-language literature. It does however have some shortcomings. Like much academic work in the postcolonial vein, *Primitive Selves* at times seems to lack a clear thread of argument or an overarching set of principles that could draw together the various different arguments. The author's criticism of the overly simplistic Korean nationalist historiography on the colonial period seems perfectly valid and easily demonstrated with the wealth of evidence he brings to bear. Likewise, he is unflinching in describing Japanese colonialism as a brutal system that brought much physical and emotional suffering to Korean people. But a two-sided critique of colonialism and nationalism may not be sufficient for us to fully understand the role of culture in twentieth century colonialism. What is not broached here are the deeper foundations upon which both colonial and nationalist approaches to culture rest: modern capitalist society with its ideological apparatus based on notions of progress, competition, and race, and the suppression of class consciousness through ideas of national or ethnic unity. To put it another way, there is no discussion here of how a specifically *bourgeois* approach to culture shapes and constrains what is possible in the way human culture is produced, consumed, and preserved, and how this approach might cut across both nationalism and colonialism, being as they are two forms of capitalist political regime.

Now for the positives. The book will no doubt be of use to students of the colonial period as well as to those wishing to understand modern Japan. It is a great merit of this book that it approaches the subject from a largely Japanese angle and brings much that is new to the usually Korea-

focused historiography of this subject. At the same time, the reader never gets the impression that the author is dabbling in a field where he has limited knowledge – the reading underpinning this work is impressive. A further merit is that the author never loses sight of the global dimension of colonialism and makes broad comparisons between Japanese and various other twentieth century colonialisms, emphasizing the global ethnographic gaze and the "mimetic" nature of Japanese colonial practices.

Overall the author treads a careful line between a trenchant critique of Japanese imperialism and a recognition of the complex motives of individuals involved in the imperial project, notwithstanding the constraints of colonial and authoritarian political structures. Despite the reservations expressed above, this makes the book not only an enlightening read but also a robust piece of academic research.