The Tokyo Three: Life and Choices of Tokyo Students Hong Myeong-hui, Choi Nam-seon, and Yi Gwang-su [Donggyeong samjae: donggyeong yuhaksaeng hong myeong-hui, choe nam-seon, yi gwang-su ui salm gwa seontaek]

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I. Introduction

The Tokyo Three is a lucid account of the modern history of Korea. It is related through the experiences of three of Korea's most important early twentieth-century intellectuals, Hong Myeong-hui, Choi Nam-seon, and Yi Gwang-su, who ceaselessly agonized over the fate of the Korean people. They were educated in Tokyo, a "space in which they were exposed not only to modernity, but nationalism" (70). They are thus often referred to as "The Tokyo Three (*Donggyeong samjae*)." While there are many other well-known works delving into the lives of these intellectuals, such as Kim Yun-sik's *Yi Gwang-su and His Era* (*Yi gwang-su wa geu ui sidae*), this book sets itself apart through its focus on all three, exploring their relationships and antagonism with each other. Furthermore, it is no mere biography but a work of intellectual and

cultural history.

The four volumes, organized in chronological order, are respectively titled "Meeting (*mannam*)" "Nation (*minjok*)," "Thought (*inyeom*)," and "Choices (*seontaek*)." Each volume is composed of five to six chapters, all of which accessibly outline the prevailing historical context in relation to discussing the protagonists. Meanwhile, the ample number of footnotes and references, as well as a chronological table entitled "The Tokyo Three and Their Era (*Donggyeong samjae wa geu ui sidae*)," testify to the work's scholarly merit.

This book successfully "interprets the times through the eyes of its representative intellectuals (10)." In particular, it raises several critical issues underexplored in the existing literature. Due to its comprehensive scope and chronological structure, however, it perhaps does not delve into each topic as deeply as one might desire. It is thus worth commenting on and adding a few critical notes with respect to each of the topics presented.

II. Neurasthenia and Drifting

The author uses words such as "suffering (*beonmin*)," "neurasthenia (*singyeongsoeyak*)," and "insomnia (*bulmyeon jeung*)" to describe the mental state of youth in the colonial period (90). As the Japanese Empire absorbed Korea, Hong Myeong-hui gave up his studies in Japan due to "neurasthenia" and returned to Korea. Choi Nam-seon, too, was known to suffer from neurasthenia, and Yi Gwang-su, of "mental fatigue (*jeongsin jeok piro*)." As Itagaki Ryuta reveals in his analysis of the colonial experience in Sangju, North Gyeong-buk province, it was not unusual for doctors to diagnose local intellectual youth suffering from "depression" with "neurasthenia."[1] More generally, Frantz Fanon

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[1] Itagaki Ryuta, *Hanguk geundae ui yeoksa minsokji –gyeongbuk sangju ui singminji gyeongheom–*

determined neurasthenia to be a common mental illness among colonial regimes. One can thus reaffirm this tragic consequence of colonialism in the stories of these three Korean intellectuals, a point that is not overlooked by the discerning eye of the author.

What precisely might have caused intellectuals to suffer such an ailment? Yi Gwang-su compared Korea's colonial fate with that of a "girl in the hands of her step-mother" (100). This analogy invokes the image of Kim Ok-ryeon, the protagonist in Choi Jeong-un's *The Birth of the Korean* (*Hangugin ui Tansaeng*), who was able to go to escape the "fires of hell" in Korea to study in Japan with the help of a Japanese general following the loss of her family in the Sino-Japanese War.[2] Under colonial rule, knowledge and learning were never assured. Thus did Choi Nam-seon bemoan, "Alas, there shall be no one for us to call 'senior' [*seonbae*]" (89), and did Yi Gwang-su lose confidence and grow restless passing his days as a teacher at Osan School (88). This state of affairs, engendering instability in academic reproduction, may be referred to as "colonial academism."[3] This would have been one factor underlying the suffocating and mentally straining environment faced by intellectuals at the time.

One of the book's distinguishing characteristics pertains to its treatment of the link between neurasthenia and drifting. Hong Myeong-hui left Korea in the fall of 1912, stopping off in Shanghai before moving on to Southeast Asia, where he lived between 1914 and 1917 in cities such as Singapore. Around the same time, Choi Nam-seon referred to Yi Gwang-su, who was wandering in and around China, as a "drifting duckweed (*bupyeongcho gateun sinse*)" (103). Designating drifting the

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[Ethnographic History of Modern Korea: Colonial Experience in Sangju, North Gyeong-buk Province], trans. Hong Jong-wook and Yi Dae-hwa (Korea: Hyan, 2015), 395.

[2] Choi Jeong-un, *Hangugin ui Tansaeng* [The Birth of the Korean] (Korea: Miji bukseu, 2013).

[3] Hong Jong-wook, "'Singminji akademijeum' ui geuneul, jisigin ui jeonhyang" [The Shadow of 'Colonial Academism, an Intellectual Turn], *Sai* 11 (2011).

"trend of the times (*sidaesajo*)," Yi Gwang-su left Korea with the intention to forget it. But the reality was that no matter where he went he inevitably crossed paths with other expatriate Koreans. If it was neurasthenia and aimless drifting afflicting intellectuals, then, it was diaspora afflicting the general people. Nowadays, many young Koreans dream of leaving Korea, bitterly referring to their homeland as "hell Joseon (Korea)." This invokes a strong feeling of déjà vu with respect to the colonial period.

III. Activities in the Homeland

This book reaffirms the significance of those who remained home to engage in political activities and writing amid the colonial period. Upon Hong Myeong-hui and Choi Nam-seon's release from incarceration, which had resulted from their involvement in the March 1st Movement, Yi Gwang-su returned to Korea from Shanghai. He later recalled in his memoirs, which he wrote after liberation, "I thought it convenient to be abroad when engaging in the revolutionary movement of a sovereign nation, but that one had to be home to engage in the independence movement of a colonized nation" (145). Asserting the "legalism" of such action, he advocated for self-rule in Korea. Meanwhile, Choi Nam-seon served on the Korean History Compilation Committee (*Joseonsa pyeonsuhoe*) and as a member of the Jungchuweon, an advisory council to the Government-General, in the late 1930s. As the support of Yi Gwang-su and Choi Nam-seon for Japan increased with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Hong Myeong-hui moved to Changdong, Yangju gun, Gyeonggi province to live close to those who thought as he did, such as Kim Byeong-ro and Jeong In-bo. This was a form of "domestic exile."[4]

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[4] H.S. Hughes, *Pasijeum gwa jisigin: jiseong ui daeidong, 1930~1965 nyeon ui seogu sahoe sasang*

The author borrows the words of Yi Gwang-su to question the significance of these intellectuals' activities in colonial Korea. But he is also quick to condemn the "inexcusable conduct" of Yi Gwang-su with reference to his work for *Maeil Sinbo*, a propaganda organ of the Government-General. Yi Gwang-su's *The Heartless* (Mujeong), serialized in *Maeil Sinbo*, is widely regarded as the first modern Korean novel. If he had by chance not written for *Maeil Sinbo*, then, Korean literary history would undoubtedly have been quite different. Under colonial rule, the modern existed unevenly, and it was often the case that one could experience modernity only by cooperating with the Japanese. Hong Myeong-hui daringly denounced opportunism and led the Singanhoe movement, but even that was not free from criticism regarding "compromise" with colonial realities.[5] Here perhaps one may borrow from Namiki Masahito: The tendency, he argues, to condemn domestic politics and thought while granting legitimacy to the national liberation movement abroad reflects a "refugee conception of history (*mangmyeongja sagwan*)."[6] Even while the differences between Yi Gwang-su's advocacy for self-rule and Hong Myeong-hui's Singanhoe movement are clear, it is also necessary to appreciate the real limitations faced by intellectuals in Korea at the time rather than simply condemning legalism.

[The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought, 1930-1965], trans. Kim Chang-hui (Korea: Hanul, 1983), 27.

[5] Han Sang-gu, "1926~1928 nyeon sahoejuui seryeog ui undongnon gwa singanhoe" [Socialist Movement Discourse and Singanhoe, 1926-1928], *Hangusaron* 32 (December 1994).

[6] Namiki Masahito, "Chōsen ni okeru 'shokuminchi kindai-sei'.'shokuminchi kōkyō-sei'. tainichi kyōryoku—shokuminchi seiji-shi.shakai-shi kenkyū no tame no yobi-teki kōsatsu—['Colonial modernity', 'Colonial publicity', Collaboration with Japan in Korea: Preliminary Consideration for Historical Research of Colonial politics and Society]," *Kokusai kōryū kenkyū* 5, Ferisujogakuindaigaku kokusai kōryū gakubu (May 2003), 2.

IV. The "Nation-level Unit"

The author uses the term "nation-level unit (*minjok danwi*)" several times. Perhaps it is one that originates in *My Confessions* (*Na ui gobaek*), in which Yi Gwang-su wrote of the "retreat from the independence movement in the homeland in an attempt to preserve the nation as a unitary entity" (176). The author describes how, after taking a leading role in the likes of the March 1st Movement, Yi Gwang-su and Choi Nam-seon brooded upon the idea of the nation as a unit before ultimately moving away from it. The "nation-level unit" appears to establish the agency of the "nation (*minjok*)." But it looks as if Yi Gwang-su had from the very start been more concerned with "civilization (munmyeong)" than nation. It also appears that this is why the author's analysis, which considers whether Yi Gwang-su was consumed by the concept of civilization, begins to falter (111, 114). Miyajima Hiroshi critically characterizes this ideological bias, which peripheral intellectuals are disposed to, as "civilizationism" and "nationalism."[7]

If one accepts Miyajima's categorization, then Yi Gwang-su tended toward "civilizationism." Writing that "Darwin's theory of evolution is fit to replace the Bible" (107), Yi Gwang-su deferred to the superiority of Western and Japanese civilization, going as far as to embrace fascism. But respect for power is inevitably accompanied by a sense of inferiority. Yi Gwang-su once declared that "he made Koreans the strongest and most glorious people in the world" (117), but "upon encountering a 'true Westerner [he] withered" (95), and he came to lament his fate to be born a Korean. On the other hand, Choi Nam-seon could be seen to have a propensity for "nationalism." Yun Chi-ho described Choe Nam-seon's fixation with uncovering the origins of Korean culture as a "cancerous

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[7] Miyajima Hiroshi, "Sai' o jikaku shita mono no kunō -Chōsen shisō-shi no saikentō-" [Suffering of those who Realized the "Between": A Re-examination of Korean Intellectual History], *Gengo bunka* 15, no. 1, Doshisha University Language and Culture Education Research Center (2012): 21.

degeneration," which was precisely the kind of criticism one espousing civilizationism would levy against one espousing nationalism.

However, Choi Nam-seon's nation did not consist of the people as they were—it was something abstract and malleable. Thus was he able to eventually support the assimilation of Korea into the Japanese Empire under the banner of "one Shinto to unite the East." Neither did Yi Gwang-su look upon the people as a substantive entity. Thus did his mistrust of the people reveal itself in his 1922 treatise, *National Remodeling* (*Minjok gaejoron*). Furthermore, "civilizationism" and "nationalism" lacked any content by which to criticize colonialism. Referring to the Korean nation, Yi Gwang-su stated that it was, "As a population, one of the great nations of the world" (133), and he urged them "not to be like the wild tribesman of Taiwan but to have courage" (120). In addition, one can even detect a form of colonial sensibility in Choi Nam-seon's claim that the Buyeo people had crossed the sea from Korea to found a unified state in Japan (157). As long as one embraced "civilizationism" or "nationalism," it was difficult to draw upon any ethical principles to criticize colonialism not characterized by "survival of the fittest."

Miyajima has pointed out the importance of a "third position," representing neither "civilizationism" nor "nationalism" but the "persistence in peripheral positions." In that case, perhaps it is possible to detect such a position in Hong Myeong-hui's criticism pertaining to Yi Gwang-su and Choi Nam-seon, a point considered in the final section.

V. Family Background and Attitude toward Modernity

Each of these three came from very different backgrounds: Yi Gwang-su grew up under conditions so harsh he would adopt an "orphan consciousness"; Choi Nam-seon had roots in the Jungin class, and his upbringing was so modern that he observed the solar New Year holiday; and Hong Myeong-hui came from an old and distinguished Yangban

family. What made it possible for them to meet and socialize with each other was the time and space in which they lived, known as modernity. This may be the most important point presented in this book, but it is certainly one fully reflected in its title. However, as the author himself points out, the paths of these three were often at variance. Although he enviously referred to Hong Myeong-hui as a "child of an illustrious house" (58), Yi Gwang-su's preoccupation with modern civilization precluded any reasoning criticism in this regard. Meanwhile, Choi Nam-seon became absorbed in a fictional tradition isolated from reality, thus avoiding modernity.

In that case, inheriting a great family name from his father, who committed suicide in opposition to the annexation of Korea, what kind of modernity might Hong Myeong-hui have experienced? Even while suffering from the neurasthenia afflicting many other colonial intellectuals, Hong Myeong-hui actively imbibed Western knowledge and culture and was exposed to new perspectives in his travels around China and Southeast Asia. Upon returning to Korea, he threw himself into the Singanhoe movement after participating in the March 1st Movement, eventually serving two prison sentences as a result. Finally, in the 1930s, he devoted himself to research about Korea. Thus, though this was the Hong Myeong-hui that would recommend the poetry of Byron and the novels of Natsume Sōseki to Yi Gwang su (59), it was also the very same Hong Myeong-hui that never forgot Korea.

Hong Myeong-hui wrote *Im Kkokjong*, colonial Korea's representative historical novel. Regarding this work, he recollected, "No matter the event or character, whether as description or atmosphere, I did not borrow one shred from another, but endeavored to present Korea in its purity." However, he also revealed that this was all "thanks to the new imagery" of Russian literature (188). Kajimura Hideki, who has focused on the resistance of the Japanese and Korean peoples, affirms the importance of "properly digesting the most benevolent aspects of 'modernity,' thus dispelling any inferiority complexes held within the

mind" in order to achieve liberation from imperialism.[8] Hideki's words invoke the thought of Hong Myeong-hui, who proudly stood upon the firm ground of tradition while actively absorbing the fruits of Western civilization, thus developing a critical view of modernity.

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[8] Kajimura Hideki, "Chōsen kara mita meijiishin" [The Meiji Restoration as Seen from Korea], in *Kajimura hideki chosaku-shū dai 1-kan Chōsen-shi to nihonjin* [Kajimura Hideki, vol. 1: Korean History and the Japanese] (Japan: Akashi shoten, 1992 [March 1980]), 147.