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Searching for New Perspectives on Contemporary History of Korea: Rethinking Decolonization, Military Occupations, and the Ideas for a Democratic Korea

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Conference Proceeding

Decolonization as a "Nonevent"?: The Liberation of Korea and Its Impact on Japan

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Where did the "empire" go in the history of postwar Japan? How can we overcome the historiographical "amnesia of empire"? In Japanese history, the aftermath of World War II is primarily a story about the US (Allied) occupation of Japan and US–Japan(ese) relations. The Japanese empire lost its colonies instantly as a result of defeat in World War II. Thus, scholars have argued that, unlike France, which eventually had to relinquish French Algeria after a drawn-out colonial war, decolonization had no significant impact on Japan and its imperial past fell into immediate oblivion. Yet, such narratives of "instant decolonization" overlook the critical aftereffects of imperial demise that could still be felt in early postwar Japan, whether through the presence of large numbers of Korean and Taiwanese imperial subjects or the return of over 6.6 million overseas Japanese from former colonies and occupied territories. This paper challenges the dominant narrative of instant decolonization by illuminating the critical aftereffects of imperial demise brought by the "liberation" of over two million Korean imperial subjects in Japan and the return of 700,000 Japanese colonial settlers from Korea. Moreover, drawing on my discoveries from the Gordon W. Prange Collection at the University of

Maryland, the paper sheds new light on firsthand accounts of Japanese repatriates from Korea and examines how they experienced and remembered colonial liberation in Korea.

Japan's defeat in the war sparked the massive return to Japan of some 3.5 million overseas Japanese civilians (and some 3.2 million military personnel), including colonial settlers from Korea (700,000) and Manchuria (1.2 million). Most of the Japanese settlers repatriated between late 1945 and 1947, and their firsthand accounts of colonial experience and forced repatriation immediately appeared in the Japanese print media. My preliminary research on the archives of the Gordon W. Prange Collection at the University of Maryland has resulted in a new discovery about these writings. The Prange Collection is the "most comprehensive archive in the world of Japanese print publications issued during the early years of the occupation of Japan, 1945–1949" and includes 102,800 books, pamphlets, and magazine and newspaper titles.[1] All publications in US-occupied Japan were subject to the occupation's censorship, and Gordon W. Prange, who worked for General Douglas MacArthur, brought these censored publications back to the University of Maryland where he taught after his return from Japan. Currently, all the newspapers and magazines from the Prange Collection are available on microfilm, and the online catalogs and search engines allow researchers to search and locate newspaper and magazine articles. By using these search engines, I was able to identify 1,794 magazine articles whose titles include the keyword "repatriation" (*hikiage*), 1,271 with the keyword "Korea" (*Chōsen*), and 429 with "Manchuria" (*Manshū*). Among these, some titles are easily identifiable as autobiographical essays and memoirs written by repatriates from Korea and Manchuria. For example, such titles include: "I miss Korea" (published in April 1946); "To My Students in Korea" (November 1946); "Repatriating from Manchuria" (November 1947); "On My Exodus from Korea" (March 1948); "My Life in Korea for Thir-

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[1] Gordon W. Prange Collection home page. https://www.lib.umd.edu/collections/special/japan/holdings

ty Years" (June 1948); and "My Last Day in Manchuria" (August 1949). Through my preliminary research, I have found and collected over fifty essays written by Japanese repatriates from Korea.

My analysis of these repatriate writings shows a common narrative of nostalgia, suffering, and colonial betrayal; a sense of nostalgia is also commonly found in the narratives of European colonial settlers.[2] In Japanese repatriate writings, nostalgia is often expressed as the memory of Korea's beautiful rural landscape, women's white *hanbok* (plain traditional clothing), food, and certain smells. In their memory of colonial liberation, the narrative of suffering and victimization is a key and common feature. The repatriate memory of exodus from the inverted colonial world resonates with what historian James Orr has called a Japanese "victim mythology"; that is, the idea that ordinary Japanese people were misled by their militarist leaders and victimized by war catastrophes.[3] The repatriate writings present the memory of empire in a sanitized form by erasing the traces of Japanese colonialism. Moreover, Koreans rarely appear as individuals with their own names and personalities—they simply dissolve into a nostalgic landscape or merge into the spectacle of vengeful crowds who are ready to punish the Japanese. Such narratives of nostalgia and victimization can easily be subsumed under a victim mythology, sanitizing the memory of empire and rendering the imperialist context invisible.

But is there any possibility that the colonial experience could be remembered and told in a different way that could unsettle victim consciousness and "imperial amnesia"? Could repatriate memory have opened up a new dialogue for postcolonial reconciliation? There is one text that shows such a possibility—to my dismay, I could only find one

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2 Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2002); Andrea L. Smith, ed., Europe's Invisible Migrants (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003); Amy L. Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

3 James J. Orr, *The Victim as Hero: Ideologies of Peace and National Identity in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

among the over fifty repatriate writings I researched. A short autobiographical essay written by a Japanese man named Hayami Shigeo, titled "My Memories of Korea" and published in a leftist journal in July 1949, vividly depicts what the injustice of colonialism looks like in everyday life. Hayami argues:

> I learned many lessons during my eight-year-long life in Korea. Among those many lessons, what I learned and what convinced me the most was that colonial rule must surely be the most intolerable form of national humiliation and suppression. We can easily understand this when we think about the ill feelings that Koreans in Japan held toward the Japanese and also the boundless joy of liberation that they have expressed in the wake of Japan's defeat, which [the Japanese] have considered as an excess.

Hayami's essay also shows how his colonial memory was profoundly informed by his present reality and political view of the US occupation of Japan as quasi-colonial subjugation. In his recollection, Japanese-colonized Korea apparently overlaps with the reality of US-occupied Japan. I will analyze Hayami's essay as a critical historical text that compels us to consider the possibilities and limits of Japanese leftist discourse on interethnic solidarity and postcolonial reconciliation at the time.

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