Book Review

War Participation by Overseas Koreans

Korean American Pioneer Aviators: The Willows Airmen, by Edward T. Chang and Woo Sung Han. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015. 117 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4985-0264-1.

Project Eagle: The American Christians of North Korea in World War II, by Robert S. Kim. Omaha, Neb.: Potomac Books, 2017. 360 pages. ISBN: 978-1-61234-869-8.

Mark E. CAPRIO

The ambitious contributions of overseas Koreans to their country's liberation movement over the three-plus decades of Japanese colonial rule have received surprisingly little attention in English historiography. Two recent books seek to fill this gap by documenting two projects, the Willows Aviation School in California and the Office of Strategic Service (OSS) Project Eagle near Xian, China.[1] Though minor episodes in the greater context of this long and destructive period, the two efforts demonstrate that despite complications, overseas Koreans remained determined to contribute to their homeland's independence from colonial occupation. Unfortunately, neither project ended in success. Inclement weather caused the Willows Aviation School to close before it could graduate its first pilots and Japan's premature surrender grounded the Koreans trained by Project Eagle to infiltrate territory occupied by the Japanese. These limitations render it impossible to ascertain the impact that either project might have had on this

1. Both projects have received mention elsewhere. The Willows Aviation School is discussed by Mam J. Cha (2010), while information on the OSS and Koreans is found in research by Maochun Yu (1997) and Robert J. Myers (2001).

Mark E. CAPRIO is professor in the College of Intercultural Communication, Rikkyo University. He is the author of *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*. E-mail: caprio@rikkyo.ac.jp

history had either attained its desired goals. The two volumes demonstrate the need for objective attention directed toward this rich, but to date, rather neglected history.

Both efforts recognize the contribution of missionaries during this period, though the religious angle to the two stories is more background than central and often forced into the narrative. Edward T. Chang and Woo Sung Han note the important role that Christianity played in "bringing together the Korean community" in the United States, as well as the support that Christian Koreans offered the independence movement, including the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) housed initially in Shanghai, China (Chang and Han, pp. xvi-xvii). Robert S. Kim acknowledges the influence that Christianity had in "unintentionally help[ing] to create the basis for modern Korean nationalism" (Kim, p. 15). He argues that many Koreans educated in Christian schools, including the first president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), Syngman Rhee, formed an "intelligentsia that sought to defend their Korean identity in the face of Japanese oppression while incorporating into their society the modern Western ideas that they had learned" (Kim, pp. 20–21). While few can argue against the overall effect that Christianity has had on modern Korean social development, greater efforts are needed to create a more direct link between the religion and the nationalists, anticolonial activities, and in particular, the projects upon which the two volumes focus.

The Willows Aviation School and Project Eagle efforts serve as bookends to the long history of Korean opposition to Japanese rule. While the Willows Aviation School founders received inspiration from the 1919 March First Independence Movement, plans for Project Eagle were conceived by the OSS in the closing months of the Asia-Pacific wars. The two projects were similar in their goals, and there were a few Koreans who participated in both efforts. However, the two projects are set apart by stark differences, making it reasonable to render them separately.

Plans for the Willows Aviation School were publicly proposed in late February 1920, with the intention, as articulated in the *Willows Daily Journal* newspaper, of sending "several dozen" Korean-American Willows Airmen

graduates to their own country so that "at the proper time [they] will be on hand to help take their country from the Japanese" (Chang and Han, p. 17). The authors of *Korean American Pioneer Aviators* construct a heroic narrative of the school's brief history, including informative biographical sketches of its students and the supporting central California community in the 1920s. Indeed, the authors' treatment of the lives of California-based Koreans, particularly those connected with the school, is one of the main strengths of the book. The section titled "Rice Farming in Glenn Country" (Chang and Han, ch. 1), for example, offers a rather enlightening discussion on how Korean rice farmers managed to flourish there despite the state's strong anti-Asian sentiment. Additionally, the final chapter, "Unfurled Wings," highlights the patriotic zeal of Willows Aviation School students who continued training even after the untimely closing of their school. Many moved to neighboring schools in Redwood and Sacramento before advancing to serve the independence movement in diverse ways, including enlisting in the US military after the Pearl Harbor attack to directly confront the Japanese enemy in battle.

Both Koreans in California and elsewhere provided the school with financial support. It is clear, however, that the project remained acutely dependent on support from Kim Chong-lim, a Korean who had earned the moniker "rice king" from the financial success he had reaped from farming. Kim came to the United States at the age of 22 penniless but ambitious. Taking advantage of post-First World War opportunity, within a decade he had become a self-made millionaire (Chang and Han, p. 6). Although the authors are unclear as to who founded the school—they note the contribution of KPG Defense Minister Roh Pail-lin as significant in his blessing the project (Chang and Han, pp. 13–14)—it is clear that Kim Chang-lim's generosity was what made its establishment possible. Indeed, it was the torrential rains of October 1920, that washed away the rice crop and thus Kim's capacity to fund the school that caused its ultimate demise just months after the enrollment of the inaugural class. This raises the question of why the authors' focused on the Willows Aviation School when the Koreans who attended enjoyed greater success after transferring to other

neighboring schools.

The Willows Aviation School's overdependence on Kim's generosity highlights a limitation that overseas Korean organizations generally faced, not only in the United States but elsewhere, including the KPG in China as well. The distribution of limited funds often served as a point of contention that caused friction between different groups of Koreans. The generally accepted role as a unifying force that the KPG enjoyed among overseas Koreans underlines the importance of the school gaining its blessing, one that Chang and Han claim it attained when Defense Minister Roh visited California in early 1920. By this time, however, plans for the school had already reached a rather advanced stage (Chang and Han, pp. 14–15). The KPG, on the other hand, had just recently been organized and was desperately reliant on financial support from the California-based Korean community that contributed half the KPG working budget (Chang and Han, pp. 11–12). Was the government-in-exile ever in a position to oppose this plan? The authors hint at a potential source of dissention—the KPG's first president, Syngman Rhee's criticism of other efforts by US-based Koreans to conduct military operations—but they fail to pursue this angle (Chang and Han, p. xxii).

The extent to which local Koreans supported the school also remains an open question. With the chance of Japan's rule in Korea being contested by war negligible, was it logical to pour desperately needed resources into such a project at this time? Indeed, Korea's situation hardly made the short-list of international community concerns, particularly since the "war-to-end-all-wars" had ended nearly two years previous, and Japan sat among the other major powers in the newly formed League of Nations. The authors' citing a speech by one of the school's students, Choi Neung-ik, in a ceremony to commemorate the first anniversary of the March First Movement, subtly suggests that such questions might not have been far from the lips and ears of California-based Koreans.

> I am one of the cadets of the aviation school. Some of you may question the reasons we are learning military skills on the other side of the Pacific

> Ocean. . . . We are not totally dependent upon your support since we are willing to support ourselves. We are going to be responsible for ourselves. (Chang and Han, pp. 29–30)

Korean American Pioneer Aviators provides a remarkable feel-good story that Hollywood producers would surely consider adapting for the screen, had its timing been more appropriate and its ending more successful. Nonetheless, the book does have critical shortcomings in its organization. As suggested above, the authors' presentation would benefit from a more objective consideration of the school's limitations, which would serve to complement their unabashed praise over its ambitions. This comes across in the authors' devoting multiple pages to detailing Woo Sung Han's efforts to lobby the ROK government to recognize Park Hee-sung as worthy of the ROK National Foundation Medal (Chang and Han, pp. 101-104). Park is portrayed as a pilot of remarkable potential, but also of hard luck: the plane he flew in his first attempt to pass his pilot's exam crashed due to mechanical failure (Chang and Han, pp. 81-82). This tragedy, however, occurred in April 1921 at the Redwood school, months after the Willows Aviation School had closed.

It is unclear why the authors chose to feature Park over other seemingly more deserving Korean pilots, such as World War I hero George Lee (Chang and Han, pp. 45-46). The injuries that Park Hee-sung sustained in that first crash prevented him from serving in combat after Japan became engaged in the wars that would eventually bring about Korea's liberation from colonial rule. Other students at the Willows Aviation School, however, participated in World War II combat. Two students, Lee Cho (Charles Lee) and Chong Moon (Charlie Joe), participated in OSS programs that sought to train Koreans in unconventional operations and eventually place them behind Japanese lines (Kim, pp. 87–92). One such operation was Project Eagle, the focus of Robert S. Kim's volume.

Kim begins his volume with a comprehensive review of US-Korean relations, the "genesis" of which began with the 1882 Treaty of Peace and Amity, Commerce, and Navigation (Kim, ch. 1). He is critical of the

US diplomatic role in Korea that soon "degenerated into a farce." The United States, for example, ignored Article I of this treaty that vowed the "preservation of [Korean] independence"[2] when it "stood aside" as Japan strengthened its presence on, and control over, the peninsula (Kim, pp. 6, 11–12). On the other hand, Kim praises the efforts of American missionaries, who he commends for their introducing both religion and education to the Korean people (Kim, pp. 15–19).

Like Chang and Han, Kim offers extensive attention to Korean-American relations. He entertains as subplot the lives of Koreans and Americans who potentially played supporting roles in Project Eagle, including KPG President Kim Gu (Kim, ch. 2) and two Americans raised by the missionary family patriarchs Clarence Weems and George McCune (Kim, ch. 3). While Kim Gu would eventually introduce Korean participants to the OSS leadership, the sons of Weems and McCune, both involved with the OSS, contributed both their linguistic and social knowledge on Korea to the US government during its war with Japan. McCune's son, also named George, would rise to wield the most important impact on the US's wartime Korean policy after he secured appointments to the OSS and later the State Department. It is not clear whether either of these men directly influenced the origins of Project Eagle although McCune was surely in an appropriate position to do so.

Kim devotes Part II to OSS efforts to enlist Korean participation in the war against Japan. While US reports readily acknowledged the high level of anti-Japanese sentiment harbored by Koreans, the military was reluctant to provide material support to those fighting the Japanese in Manchuria and China. The OSS, under William "Wild Bill" Donovan, was different. Donovan was noted for his creative engagement with any human asset that potentially could contribute to the long-term goal: ending the war in victory. Kim paraphrases Donovan's assessment of Korean potential as follows:

2. This is a rather generous interpretation of the controversial article that states: "If other Powers deal unjustly or oppressively with either Government, the other will exert their good offices . . . to bring about an amicable arrangement. . . . "

"their presence throughout the important centers of the empires of Japan in Korea, China, and Japan itself made them able to operate where Caucasians or Chinese could not" (Kim, p. 92). Specifically, Donovan held that Korean ability to blend in as Japanese enabled them to conduct the activities the war effort required to undermine the enemy and organize underground anti-Japanese resistance groups (Kim, p. 103). The US National Archives and Record Administration in College Park, Maryland, maintains a rich cache of documents on World War II era US policy toward overseas Koreans, including the Project Eagle experiment, of which the author made extensive use.

Project Eagle, initiated in mid-May 1945, sought initially to deploy a contingent of 45 Koreans, chosen from a pool of 120 recruits from the Korean Restoration Army (Gwangbok), to the Korean peninsula at various locations. Many of the participants, university student recruits who deserted the Japanese army, were thus fluent in Japanese but not necessarily capable in English. Kim presents biographies of the important American and Korean participants and details the arduous training program in which they were engaged (Kim, ch. 5). He also notes that the problems that Project Eagle encountered were rooted in communication. The trainees were all capable in Korean and the trainers in English and even Japanese, but few, if any, were gifted in both. This particular problem was resolved when Horace Underwood II, also born in a missionary family in Korea, arrived at the training camp in July 1945 to be followed later by other Korean-English bilingual Korean Americans. The training thus continued despite the inconveniences only to be confronted by a most insurmountable barrier: Japan's surrender less than three months after the training commenced.

A small number of Project Eagle participants did engage in one final mission when 4 Koreans accompanied 22 Americans to Seoul days after the Japanese surrender to confirm the condition of Allied Prisoners of War (POWs) that the Japanese military had held in Korea-based camps. After an aborted attempt to fly into Seoul on August 15, an effort halted by rumors of *kamikaze* activity, Operation Eagle succeeded in delivering the American-Korean crew to what was then the Yeouido airfield (Kim mistakes this for

the present Gimpo airport site [Kim, p. 152]). *Project Eagle* provides an adequate account of this tense encounter that ended in failure—the Japanese refused to allow the visitors access to the POWs—but not before a bizarre twist, as Americans joined Japanese in a sing-a-thon encouraged by the food and beer provided by their hosts (Kim, pp. 147–163). Kim's account of this odd encounter would have benefited greatly had he accessed Korean-language accounts that detail the experiences of two Korean participants: Kim Jun-yeop and Yi Beom-seok.[3]

Similar to the ambition of the Willows Aviation School, the efforts of Project Eagle also ended prematurely before Koreans had the chance to influence the course of the war and by extension the future of their homeland. After Japan's surrender in August 1945, the trainees were mysteriously kept in China, to be joined by the four Operation Eagle participants who were returned to the training area following this failed mission to Seoul. In another operation, Korean POWs liberated from the Camp McCoy prison facility in Wisconsin to participate in other OSS wartime operations were re-arrested after the war for possessing the false passports that the spy organization had provided them to facilitate their participation in wartime missions (Kim, p. 187).

These two volumes introduce a significant number of Koreans whose loyalty would most probably have led them to assist the United States military government in Korea (USAMGIK) that entered Seoul in early September 1945 to commence occupation duties. At worst they would have represented a worthy substitution to the Japanese and colonial-era trained Koreans that the USAMGIK retained in positions of influence. However, the OSS, and many of the people it approached during the war (including Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh), soon fell out of favor with the Harry S. Truman administration that ascended the presidency following Franklin D. Roosevelt's untimely death in April 1945. Just one month after Japan's surrender, Truman fired Donovan and disbanded the OSS entirely, eventually replacing it with a new spy organization, the Central Intelligence

3. Kim (1987) and General Yi Beom-seok Memorial Project Association (1992).

Agency.[4]

Korean American Pioneer Aviators and *Project Eagle* present a drop in the bucket in terms of the rich history of overseas Korean activities during the long period of Japanese colonial occupation. Indeed, the aviation school founded in Willows was but one of a number of aviation schools in northern California that trained Korean pilots; Project Eagle represented one of several examples of US and British efforts to train Koreans for undercover activities in the Asian theater. Behind these efforts were active lobbying campaigns conducted by Korean leaders in the United States and China for diplomatic recognition of the China-based KPG, efforts often compromised by bitter conflicts between factions. Among others, Robert S. Kim details the story of two rivals, Sino-Korean League representative Kilsoo Han and Korean Commission director Syngman Rhee, who petitioned State Department officials in an effort to gain US acceptance of Koreans in the US as non-enemy aliens, diplomatic recognition of the KPG, and military support of Koreans battling the Japanese in Asia. Yet another story that links the two projects chronicled in these volumes.[5] The dearth of research on this history, and the limitations of these otherwise ground-breaking accounts, remind us that much more work remains to be done in this area of history.

4. On August 7, 1945, Donovan became the only US official to meet personally with KPG President Kim Gu during the war, a meeting that Kim Gu described as a "positive contribution" toward future US-Korean relations in a letter to President Truman (Kim, pp.169–170). The letter reportedly "infuriated" the new president, who took Donovan to task for conducting this unauthorized meeting (Yu 1997, 229–230).
5. For examples, Kim (2011).

REFERENCES

Cha, Mam J. 2010. *Koreans in Central California (1903–1957): A Study of Settlement and Transnational Politics*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

General Yi Beom-seok Memorial Project Association (Yi Beom-seok Janggun Ginyeom Saeophoe). 1992. *Yi Beom-seok pyeongjeon* (A Critical Biography of Yi Beom-seok). Seoul: Samyuk.

Kim, Jun-yeop. 1987. *Jangjeong 1: na-ui gwangbokgun sijeol* (The Long March 1: My Experiences with the Korean Restoration Army). Seoul: Nanam.

Kim, Richard S. 2011. *The Quest for Statehood: Korean Immigrant Nationalism and US Sovereignty, 1905–1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Myers, Robert J. 2001. *Korea in the Cross Currents: A Century of Struggle and the Crisis of Reunification*. New York: Palgrave.

Yu, Maochun. 1997. *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.