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Colonial Seoul’s Contact Zones

Todd A. Henry’s new book, *Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, offers the first in-depth study in the English language of the history of Seoul in the first half of the twentieth century. This was the era of Japanese colonial occupation and Seoul functioned as the colonial capital, an often unique field on which the imperial state attempted to impress its authority over both the city and the colony as a whole. Some of the state’s strategies are explored here: monumental architecture, urban planning, imperial commemoration, and hygiene movements. Through an ethnographic approach, Henry explores the contested interactions in the public spaces of the capital, thus giving the reader a lively and compelling account of certain aspects of urban life during the colonial occupation.

Henry adopts Mary Louise Pratt’s productive concept of the contact zone to explore the public spaces of Seoul as sites where the imperial state interacted in daily life with the inhabitants of Seoul, both Japanese settlers and Korean residents. He aims to show the multifaceted relationships that emerged in the spaces of the colonial capital: among Korean residents of different classes, between Japanese and (mostly elite) Korean residents, and occasionally between Japanese settlers and the colonial state. These relationships, he efficiently shows, were sometimes harmonious and sometimes disputed. Henry relies on a variety of sources to explore these interactions, including Government General surveys and statistics and the Japanese-language local newspaper *Keijō nippō*, which is one of the least explored of the colonial-era newspapers. His sources themselves constitute one of the public spaces about which he writes and thus his method is one of attempting to read “against the grain” of the official discourse, showing how these public records can reveal a messy and contested history in the very act of attempting to disguise it. It would be possible to complicate the experience of these spaces still more were other genres and more vernacular writings brought into full consideration. Nevertheless, given the situation whereby Japanese-language public writings in particular have not been fully examined, Henry’s work offers a contribution to the accumulated knowledge on colonial-era urban life.

*Assimilating Seoul* begins with a chapter on the introduction of urban planning into the colony and a series of planning and infrastructure reforms that fundamentally transformed certain sections of the city while leaving others untouched or even cut off from the main arteries. These main arteries emerged to shape the paths of circulation through the city. While the planners failed to enact their models perfectly, they did create and reshape the public spaces that emerged as the main stages for the demonstration of state power, linking the Japanese settlers’ residential and business districts to transport networks and military stations. Furthermore, the downtown district of royal palaces was reconfigured to downplay their symbolic importance. Some of the palaces were re-
purposed to provide new spaces for leisure activity: a zoo, museums, and the exhibition grounds that were later used to commemorate milestones in colonial rule.

Having established this fundamental reshaping of the city, Henry moves into the three case studies that constitute the heart of the book and are each treated in a chapter of their own. These case studies comprise the history of the Namsan Shintō shrines and their festivals, the expositions held on the Kyŏngbok Palace grounds to commemorate anniversaries of colonial rule, and hygienic movements aiming to reform daily life in Seoul’s neighborhoods. Each chapter treats the trajectory of its subject across the entire period of colonial rule, with only the wartime period of 1937–45 being treated separately in a final chapter where all three of Henry’s case studies are revisited under the conditions of wartime. A brief epilogue surveys the course of postcolonial Seoul and its treatment of colonial-era public spaces. Henry’s three case studies are organized around corresponding concepts of what he calls “assimilation” and which he typologizes as the spiritual, the material, and the civic respectively. Such official efforts to guide the conduct of Seoul’s residents are read as “contested experiments of colonial governmentality” (p. 3).

Spiritual assimilation is examined through the building of the Korea Shrine in 1925 on the downtown mountain Namsan and its interactions with the preexisting Seoul Shrine, founded by Japanese settlers in 1898. The coexistence of the two shrines to Japan’s national religion allows Henry to bring out the differential relationship between the colonial state and the settler community, a topic that has recently been opened up by the work of Jun Uchida, Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945 (2011). Henry takes us through the public statistics of shrine attendance and various attempts to appeal to Seoul’s Korean inhabitants through festivals. By examining the changing routes of the festival parades and corresponding newspaper coverage, Henry explores the possible experiences of Shintō shrine worship by Koreans. While acknowledging the impossibility of knowing what shrine visitors were thinking as they visited a shrine and quoting his sources’ anxiety about that fact, Henry still frames this experience through the term “spiritual assimilation.” This seems to suggest some notion of belief by the visitor and I wonder if a different organizing concept might have more accurately grasped the dilemma Henry is describing.

For material assimilation Henry turns to the key expositions held at the Kyŏngbok Palace in 1915 and 1929 respectively. Through a detailed examination of the different architecture and exhibitions built for each event, Henry examines the public presentation of the colonial state as a provider of material progress. Once again he uses newspaper accounts to suggest the possible experiences visitors to the exposition might have had, whether congruent or not with the state’s self-presentation. Similarly, in his third case study of civic assimilation, Henry examines the hygienic movements in downtown neighborhoods and shared goals and contestations between Japanese settlers and Korean elites as they wrestled with illness and sanitation in a city deemed “diseased” by the colonial state.

Japan’s colonial occupation of Korea did not last long in the comparative order of things, but scholarly work on the era tends to focus on segments identified as unique in some way. One of the strengths of Henry’s book is the way in which he tracks his case studies throughout the entire period of colonial rule, thus giving a sense of the state’s ongoing negotiation with key areas of social life. Another strength lies in Henry’s attention to the marshaling of a variety of sources, and especially the public sources, such as surveys and newspapers, that in themselves constitute one of the public spaces they describe. Henry does a good job of teasing out the range of meanings that inhere in such public words and images, rather than accepting the language at face value.

Yet this raises the question of the concept of assimilation that is used throughout the book. The use of the term “assimilation” poses a problem for everyone who tries to think about colonialism in general and late colonial Korea in particular. Surely assimilation is the language of the colonial state, which tries to produce certain behaviors and then interprets them as connoting some compliance to or differentiation from the national phantasm of the colonizing power. Henry’s own epilogue shows that few of the governmental projects he describes ended with colonial rule but were repeated by the postcolonial South Korean state, suggesting that whatever transformation is at stake here is not inherently of some national nature. Henry’s initial definition of “assimilation” is unclear and left me wondering what benefit derives from using the term to describe “practices of rule that might otherwise be captured under the more universal rubric of modernization” (p. 5). Here material assimilation seemed instead to function as a way to avoid talking about economy. Civic and spiritual assimilation, too, begged the question of just what exactly these colonial subjects were assimilating into. For the colonial state’s propagandists the answer might well have been something called the
“Japanese spirit,” but are we not merely repeating that ideology when we use such an undefined notion of assimilation?

This point aside, Henry has written an entertaining and highly readable book, which expands our sense of daily life in the colonial capital and its public spaces as the site of the most intense encounter between the presentation of the state’s self-image and compliant or contesting inhabitants. It is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Korea’s colonial history and on urban history more generally.

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