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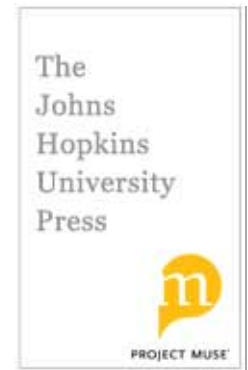
*Intimate Empire: Collaboration & Colonial Modernity in Korea  
and Japan* by Nayoung Aimee Kwon (review)

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## ***Intimate Empire: Collaboration & Colonial Modernity in Korea and Japan.***

**By Nayoung Aimee Kwon. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.**

Nayoung Aimee Kwon's *Intimate Empire* is a thorough investigation of the ongoing contested colonial legacies shared between Korea and Japan. Unlike the postcolonial disavowal of the colonial past, Kwon earnestly examines and redefines the intimate relationship between the coloniser and the colonised by eloquently elucidating the predicament of Korean colonised writers. Her careful examination of their literary work, whether it be an I-novel, a play or a personal correspondence, sensitively uncovers, chapter by chapter, the complex emotions hidden behind this intimacy.

The chapters tackle many sensitive issues, which include: the rise of repression in both the colony and the metropole; the impossibility of expressing themselves comfortably in the vernacular and the imperial language due to the rigorous assimilation policies enforced by the coloniser; the question of translatability from a mother tongue to a foreign language; the deep anxieties, fear and disdain brought about by the imperial hierarchies; the dichotomy between individual desire and collective representation; and the cultural exchange with the Japanese literary world (*Bundan*) through a series of roundtable discussions (*zadankai*) staged and manipulated by the Japanese to serve the needs of the imperial audiences. Their experiences as oppressed colonised writers clearly testify that the Korean colonial reality under Japanese rule was indeed ambivalent, complex, paradoxical, multifaceted and multi-layered. Consequently, Kwon is extremely convincing in challenging postcolonial interpretations, which, by and large, myopically paint Korea's encounter with its oppressor as one of either collaboration or resistance. Alternatively, Kwon's assessment offers a new, more nuanced perspective that explains the complex nature of collaboration and intimacy. For example, it is not as simple as Yi Kwangsu (1892-1950) and Chang Hyökchu (1905-1997) being traitorous collaborators of imperial Japan, nor Kang Kyönggae (1906-1944), a national resistance hero.

Kwon's criticism of postcolonial discourses is both bold and fair. She goes as far as to assert that the logic of postcolonial Korean nationalists is ironically not so different from that of imperial Japan as they are both detrimental to the understanding of the quintessence of Korean colonial literature, albeit for different reasons. In her analysis, the former demands that colonial texts "represent authentic 'colonial reality' which narrowly meant either unequivocal resistance to colonial powers or the sufferings of the colonised under colonial exploitation" while the latter "demand[s] for the authentic representation of the Other which accompanied the erasure of the Other's full humanity or complexities of experiences" (192). This parallel emphasises the importance of examining colonial legacies objectively—otherwise, the contention which divides Korea and Japan will persist.

Similarly, Kwon offers an interesting insight into the psychological aspect of Japanese imperialism. She recognises Imperial Japan's fascination for *Koreanness*—something exotic and nostalgic—and how it contributed to marginalising and misrepresenting Korean ethnic culture, no matter how "genuine" or "innocent" it may have seemed. By making a close link between the notion of this "colonial kitsch" in the metropole and the assimilation policies in the colony, which are seemingly antithetical to one another (differentiation versus assimilation), she persuasively asserts that they were indeed two sides of the same coin in the context of imperialism, as they both exploited and devalued Korean ethnicity in order to exclusively satisfy the imperial agenda.

This book also discusses the question of colonial modernity in a broader sense. As opposed to modernity developed and embraced in the West, colonial modernity is a more complex and paradoxical concept, which is yet to be recognised and examined comprehensively. Reckoning of colonial modernity is indeed an emotive and uncomfortable issue for all the parties concerned (hence, often the disavowal of the colonial past). As Kwon points out, it is not only exclusive to Korean-Japanese relations—rather, it is highly ubiquitous. In this context, the Western colonial powers have much in common with Japan when facing their former colonial Others.

Kwon then explains the complexities of colonial modernity in Korea. She reminds us that modernity was a foreign concept for both Korea and Japan, but while

Japan underwent modernisation of its own accord, Korea experienced it via Japan. The fact that it was imposed by its coloniser, who shared cultural and ethnic affinity, further perplexes the understanding of modernity in Korea.

Japan's desire and anxieties as a colonial power are also considered carefully in this book. However, Kwon could have perhaps elaborated on it in the broader context of imperial geopolitics after WWI. Japan's imperial ambition to expand into Manchuria and northern China collided directly with the so-called Washington System, which subscribed to Chinese integrity and the Open Door policy there. Japan challenged and rejected this seemingly "peaceful" system, which prescribed no more new aggression but maintained the status-quo, which essentially meant the colonised continued to be dehumanised. Consequently, by withdrawing from the League of Nations in 1933, Japan ominously decided to go it alone on the international scene. "The threat of the West" (105) intensified precisely because Japan disagreed with the world order that the West had created. Thus, Japan's experience as an imperial power, its opportunistic nature and its relationship with the West need to be examined in depth as they directly affected its colonial policies.

In conclusion, we may still not know how to overcome the postcolonial impasse of the contested colonial legacies between Korea and Japan, but Kwon certainly highlights the importance of recognising and addressing it in a more objective, comprehensive perspective. Her work indeed sheds new light not only on Korean and Japanese studies but also on colonial studies both past and present. This book is indeed an essential read for anyone who works on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century imperialism, a global phenomenon dominated and engineered ultimately by the Western Powers.

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