

Review Essay

The Individual in Colonial Korea

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Park, Albert L. 2020. "The Individual in Colonial Korea." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* (e-journal) 34: 95–99. <https://crosscurrents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-34/park>.

Yoon Sun Yang. *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2017. 224 pp.

Sungyun Lim. *Rules of the House: Family Law and Domestic Disputes in Colonial Korea*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. 188 pp.

Korea's pull into the modern world system during the late nineteenth century ushered in a whirlwind of trials. Not only was the crumbling state-supported Confucian system struggling to deal with a vast number of domestic challenges and imperial threats, but Koreans of all social classes also encountered the limitations of Confucianism in helping them make sense of the changes in society and guide individual lives. There was a disjuncture between representation and reality, and Koreans found themselves reacting to the disconnecting milieu with a variety of emotions. Identifying, defining, and giving meaning to these emotions led to an intense process of asking fundamental questions about society, human identity, and subjectivity that extended well into the Japanese colonial period of Korea (1910–1945). What does the ideal society look like? What economic and political systems will create the ideal individual? What constitutes the human subject? What should constitute the identity of Koreans? For many people, it was imperative to get answers to these questions, for they would help shape and direct new affective conditions and furnish a meditative process for reflecting on what it meant to be modern and how to actualize a modern life.

A core question raised by numerous Korean writers and intellectuals centered on individual selfhood—that is, what is the individual, or, more specifically, the modern individual? This was *the* crucial question of the time, because answers to it would determine what type of systems and conditions should be built in order to materialize the ideal modern individual in colonial society. In other words, this query determined the direction and fate of the modern nation-state under Japanese colonialism and afterward. In a superbly researched and written book, *From Domestic Women to*

Sensitive Young Men: Translating the Individual in Early Colonial Korea, Yoon Sun Yang carefully explains how Korean fiction in the early colonial period translated and defined the notion of the individual for the general public. Yang's book stands out from other studies that have tackled this subject, by "claiming that the first literary iterations of the Korean individual were prototypically female figures" (179). Yang points out that questions about individuality and the quest to define it and the overall discourse on a modern individual selfhood in Korea were not embodied by male elites in Korean literature, but by "female figures in a group of works loosely classified as *sinsosŏl* (the new novel)," which were "serialized by male reformist writers in newspapers and magazines, and reached their widest circulation between 1906 and 1915" (6). From beginning to end, the book carefully introduces readers to a number of novels, such as Yi Injik's *Hyŏl ui nu* (Tears of blood, 1906) and Yi Haejo's *Pak chŏng hwa* (A coldhearted flower, 1910), to demonstrate how male authors used female characters who occupied different positions within the family and society to advocate for reform and to criticize and transform established norms. Yang shows that the stories in these novels served as public vehicles through which everyone could negotiate and reflect on what it meant to be an autonomous individual in a changing light: influenced by modern forces as well as traditional norms, such as the Confucian system, which were losing authority but remained very powerful forces that structured everyday life.

Yang's book introduces and analyzes a wide range of stories in which readers could discover the struggles for articulating and grounding identities and subjectivities that were appropriate for the constantly shifting discursive and material context of early modern Korea. For male writers, working out conceptions of the individual through female characters was unsurprising. The Confucian-based patriarchal system long targeted the female mind and body in order to ensure the realization and longevity of Confucianism. More than any other subject in Chosŏn Korea, the state expected females to abide by established norms and traditions and follow the male-led collective. The female's individual subjectivity and agency were to be in the service of upholding the Confucian system. Male writers of *sinsosŏl* presumably thought that focusing on female struggles and protests against this patriarchal system would lead to a general questioning of established norms and a path of liberation from forces that were preventing the creation of a new individual selfhood. Of course, many of the stories featured in the book still tied the individual to the nation and family. Yet, what Yang's work does so well is to demonstrate how the "figures of domestic women do not silently perform a set of prescribed roles but unsettle and even radicalize them" (179). The stories in her book, such as *Pak chŏng hwa*, problematize traditional male patriarchy and attempt to de-center the notion of the male-centered nation by speaking to several ruptures, including "the disappearance of the moral foundation on the basis of which male patriarchy was given the right to control female sexuality" (107). These stories question the long-held assumption that "male writers' portrayals of women in early colonial Korean literature...eventually became passive and objectified products of male and male nationalism" (179).

Even though readers may raise several questions and issues, such as the position of female writers of *sinsosŏl* and other genres on individuality, Yang's book is a first-rate platform for thinking about the overall discursive construction of the individual in early modern Korea. During the late nineteenth century, several groups ranging from followers of Civilization and Enlightenment discourse to supporters of Protestant Christianity and Tonghak¹ engaged in debates about what the individual is and how the individual should be and act within the new political economy of Korea. The outcome of these debates undergirded conceptions of the relationship between individuals and society. In particular, it led to new forms of interaction between humans and non-humans. Followers of the Civilization and Enlightenment group who were influenced by Protestant Christianity spoke about how humans, particularly males, should be autonomous beings who should no longer be bound by nature. Instead, they should dominate nature for the advancement of humanity. Their views about individuality drove intellectuals to merge human and natural history into a single historical process that would be authored and directed by humans. *From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men* gives today's readers the opportunity to imagine and think seriously about the larger context—both historical and theoretical—in order to translate the individual and forge an individual selfhood.

Debates about individual selfhood through the female figure occurred during a period when Japanese colonial rule became formalized and began to alter the legal structures in ways that would dramatically impact the lives of women. Like Yang's book, Sungyun Lim's richly researched and well-conceptualized *Rules of the House: Family Law and Domestic Disputes in Colonial Korea* examines issues related to individuality and agency during the colonial period. Lim focuses on "how women's rights were redefined from one patriarchal system to another" (8) through a study of the colonial state's drive to move away from a legal system centered on lineage toward a new system based on the household. Lim meticulously reviews legal cases involving women who publicly pursued their protection of rights over family property and wealth. Her research uncovers a fascinating story about a colonial-period gendered legal system that simultaneously gave some women more power and authority over traditional collectives and lineage ties *and* reinforced premodern patriarchal norms. The book clearly demonstrates that moving from one legal system to another was a messy, complex process that was influenced by a diverse range of human emotions and actions. It shows how a layered legal system with the preexisting (Chosŏn patriarchal) norms and the new (modern) laws that privileged individual households caused immense confusion and conflicts yet also created new opportunities for strengthening the rights and power of certain females.

Rules of the House unmistakably shows the power of legal instruments to impose a new order that not only strengthened colonial rule but also reconfigured social

¹ Tonghak was an indigenous religion in Korea started by Ch'oe Che-u during the late nineteenth century. It combined principles found in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and in the 1890s it influenced peasant uprisings.

relationships at the family level. As the book clearly demonstrates, the colonial state pursued a process of simplifying the legal system by instituting the household family, rather than a clan/lineage system, as the main administrative unit in society. Simplifying the administrative unit served as a modern process to increase the state's influence over Koreans, because the family unit was easier to manage and regulate. Unsurprisingly, this process caused new conflicts between family members over inheritance and other family rights. Under this new legal system widows, in particular, acquired new legal rights over extended family members—usually the deceased husband's family. Employing either modern legal discourse or traditional legal language that protected clan/lineage rights, families, as the book carefully shows, battled each other over various issues, with the colonial judiciary system making the final decision. Sometimes, the colonial legal system ruled in favor of parties based on modern legal language that protected the rights of the household. At other times, it protected traditional customary rights of Koreans, especially out of fears of backlash by conservative, patriarchal Koreans. Lim's book is a tour de force on legal history because it complicates the standard narrative of colonial power by showing that instituting a new legal system was far from a top-down campaign that affected Koreans uniformly. Instead, as Lim shows, it was an intricate process that served different purposes and gave way to diverse responses and a variety of social, cultural, and economic outcomes. Specifically, the legal arena served as a realm in which women staked their ground as individuals who were free to make their own decisions without interference and claims from clans and extended families. Even though most women waged their legal cases privately to advance individual claims without the intention to expand the rights of women, Lim's book successfully proves through carefully analyzed cases that the shifting colonial judicial system became a space in which patriarchy was debated and fought over—successfully and unsuccessfully. In so doing, Lim adds the legal space as another dimension to the history of 1920s and 1930s women's activism, which has mostly been centered on the New Women's movement.

Like Yang's book, Lim's *Rules of the House* can be a platform for studying and gaining deeper understanding of a wide range of issues. In particular, readers will find a sophisticated approach for examining assimilation policies. Chapters 4 and 5 both show the challenges and contradictions of assimilation that tried to reconcile the preexisting with the new. Indeed, as Lim points out, the "ideal of affective marriage" paved the way for "the assimilation of the Korean family into the Japanese family system" (13), whereas the Civil Ordinances Reform of 1939 and 1940 "ended up maintaining and fossilizing what had been deemed unique features of Korean family customs" (13–14). Readers will especially appreciate how the book links together colonial Korea and postcolonial South Korea by discussing the influence of 1940s Japanese reforms on the Civil Code of South Korea in 1960.

There are moments when readers may wish for more contextual information, especially regarding the construction of the legal system and the connection between the legal system and the ongoing discourse in the New Women's movement. Moreover,

it is a little strange that *Rules of the House* is published under a series title “Global Korea,” in that this book has little connections to any global themes and phenomenon. What exactly is global about a story on the transition from a lineage/clan-based legal system to a system centered on the individual household in colonial Korea? The author should not be blamed for this strange fit, as the responsibility to select titles and push the author to articulate global connections lies with the editors of the book series. Nonetheless, the editors performed a great service to the field of Korean studies by publishing this deeply informative book, which forces readers to rethink occurrences and events of the colonial period in fresh and intellectually exciting ways.

Yang’s and Lim’s books should be read together, because they complement each other nicely. Both authors write eloquently about the gendering of society and its negotiation by a variety of parties through two languages—literature and the law. Together, they accomplish what any scholarly book should do—that is, become the means to investigate, interrogate, and gain new perspectives on larger and broader categories and concepts that are questioned not only within Korean studies but also in other fields.

About the Reviewer

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