

Readings from Asia

### Seeking Modernity in Twentieth-Century Korea through Sugar

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Lee Eunhee 이은희. *Sölt'ang, kŭndaeüi hyŏngmyŏng: Han'guk sölt'ang sanŏpkwa sobiüi yŏksa* 설탕, 근대의 혁명: 한국 설탕 산업과 소비의 역사 [Sugar, the modern revolution: The history of Korea's sugar industry and consumption]. Seoul: Jisik-Sanup Publications, 2018. 512 pp. ISBN: 9788942390434.

Korea was an isolated country, cut off from the outside world until the late nineteenth century. About a generation ago, some historians in South Korea tried to find within Korean society social and economic motives by which the society could develop from feudal to modern. Those attempts, however, mostly ended in failure. After all, Korea was introduced to modern civilizations and cultures only under the influence of Japan.

It is true that modernization in Korea began to take place in relation to Japan; and because the modernization was not self-sustaining, it developed in a distorted manner under the Japanese influence. This phenomenon is often called "colonial modernity." How should we understand modernization in Korea in the first half of the twentieth century? Macro approaches focusing on colonial rule or resistance to it are important, but micro assessment is also needed. For example, one could attempt to keep track of the modern changes in Korean society by looking at the introduction, production, and consumption of the products that epitomize modern civilization, such as cotton fabric and sugar, which are essential to the everyday life of ordinary people in a modern nation.

However, few studies in the field of Korean history are concerned with how modern goods such as sugar, oil, rubber, and cotton fabrics have turned from luxuries into necessities in the process of modernization, and how they have been consumed and expanded. In this regard, Lee Eunhee's *Sölt'ang, kŭndaeüi hyŏngmyŏng: Han'guk sölt'ang sanŏpkwa sobiüi yŏksa* 설탕, 근대의 혁명: 한국 설탕 산업과 소비의 역사 (Sugar, the modern revolution: The history of Korea's sugar industry and consumption, hereafter *Sugar, the Modern Revolution*) is of great significance. This study not only tracks the consumption and market expansion of a particular product but also presents an important channel through which we can understand the major social changes in South Korea—modernization, industrialization, and globalization—in the twentieth

century. This channel reveals how ordinary individuals' lives were structurally connected to the major changes in the society.

Lee's book divides Korean society into six periods from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s to explore the changes involved in the process of producing, distributing, and consuming sugar. The six periods are (1) the premodern period, (2) the time of the opening of Korean ports in the 1880s–1890s, (3) the 1910s and 1920s, (4) the Great Depression in the early 1930s, (5) the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Second World War (1939–1945), and (6) the independence of the Korean peninsula in 1945 and the 1950s in South Korea. In each chapter, the author discusses the production and supply of sugar, the consumption of sugar for food, and the influence of sugar on everyday life in each of the six periods.

In the premodern era, Korea consumed the least amount of sugar of all the East Asian countries (31). Even its upper class was not accustomed to consuming sugar, and sweeteners were obtained from honey and grain. By contrast, China had already developed its sugar-making technology since the Song dynasty (960–1279), and in Japan, the upper class has been able to consume sugar since the seventeenth century.

The second chapter of the book discusses the changes in sugar supply in East Asia, including Korea, from the 1880s to the 1910s. According to Lee, the supply of sugar in East Asia in the late nineteenth century should be understood in the broader context of world history. During this period, the raw sugar produced in Java took the upper hand in its competition with China's traditional raw sugar, and the refined sugar made in Hong Kong began to dominate the Chinese market. At that time, the Dutch colonial government of Java fostered sugar cultivation and pioneered raw sugar markets in Asia as the competition over raw sugar intensified in Europe. At the same time, some changes in sugar consumption occurred in China as Hong Kong's refined sugar industries began to use Java's raw sugar rather than China's (53–55). As a result, China, the largest sugar exporter in Asia until the first half of the nineteenth century, was reduced to a net importer.

Afterward, Korea began importing sugar in earnest. In the late nineteenth century, an English company controlled sugar supplies in Korea. After the Russo-Japanese War ended in 1905, however, sugar in Korea was mainly provided by Japanese merchants. This practice stemmed in part from Japan's policy of nurturing sugar industries, an interest based on the recognition of sugar consumption as a marker of *munmyŏnggaehwa* 문명개화 (civilization and enlightenment) (74–75). The markets for Japan's refined sugar then began to expand in the Korean peninsula, Manchuria, and China. The sugar-added foods introduced to Koreans during this time were mainly Chinese and Japanese snacks. Chinese restaurants run by Chinese immigrants sold traditional Chinese noodles, Chinese bread, and so forth, to which sugar was generally added. Meanwhile, a Japanese bakery operating in Korea sold sweetened Japanese snacks and bread.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *Sugar, the Modern Revolution* discuss changes in the supply and consumption of sugar in Korea from the 1920s to the mid-1940s. First of all, an

important feature in Korea's sugar supply in the 1920s was closely related to Japan's imperial management of the East Asian region at that time. Japan encouraged the cultivation of sugar cane in Taiwan and implemented a sugar-beet cultivation policy in Korea to achieve self-sufficiency in raw sugar within the empire. This policy was in part spurred by the changes in global trade. As central European countries expanded their own sugar-beet production in the late nineteenth century, the exports of raw sugar from Java decreased. To compensate for this decline, the Dutch government of Java made efforts to expand into Asian markets, including India, China, and Japan. After the Russo-Japanese War, Japan responded by encouraging sugar-cane production in Taiwan and sugar-beet cultivation in Korea (112–115). In Korea, however, the sugar-beet cultivation policy failed, and Japan instead tried to foster a refined sugar industry, which imported raw sugar from Taiwan to produce refined sugar (138).

When the price of sugar began to fall during the economic recession in the 1930s, Japanese sugar companies formed a cartel to maintain the sugar price in Korea. To this end, they established a hierarchy of supply distribution, which connected them to wholesalers and retailers through a sugar-supply union (231). Meanwhile, Japan's refined-sugar companies, which had entered the Manchurian market upon the founding of the state of Manchukuo in 1932, increased Japan's imports of raw sugar from Java. In the process, sugar-beet cultivation in Korea and Manchuria was hit even harder.

However, exports of refined sugar from Japan to Manchuria effectively took the form of Japanese domestic trade, and as the refined sugar industry developed, Japan suffered from a shortage of foreign currency due to the ever-increasing imports of raw sugar. After the 1930s, this problem only worsened. As a consequence, Japan shifted its policy from expanding its sugar supply to reducing it. In order to cope with the shortage of foreign currency after the Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese government had to impose import restrictions on sugar and other products to tighten trade control across the Japanese currency bloc (322).

Lee also tracks in detail the changes in the sugar consumption of Koreans between the 1920s and 1940s. During the period of expanding sugar supplies from the 1910s to the early 1930s, Japanese confectionary products, especially sugary ice water and ice cake, became popular among Koreans in urban districts (178–179, 269), and the movement to encourage sugar consumption was actively developed. As mentioned, sugar consumption was, at that time, considered to be a mark of civilization and enlightenment. People thought that sugar improved nutrition and the enhancement of nutrition implied civilization (186). Various social movements related to such discourse were developed. In particular, the dietary improvement movement, which sought to develop new kinds of foods with added sugar to replace traditional foods, was representative. The new foods were also easy to cook, and the advocates of the movement were mostly *shin yŏsŏng* 신 여성 (new women) who had received a modern education. There was a widespread belief that traditional foods were low in nutrition, challenging to cook, and therefore an outdated part of the culture. According to advocates of this movement, traditional foods should be replaced by simple, hygienic,

and nutritious new foods (204–205). Along with the new nutritional discourse, cooking lessons were frequently held in Seoul and other local cities in the 1930s. The slogans of those class meetings included words like “nutrition, hygiene, economy, and convenience,” all of which concerned the betterment of life (302).

After the Sino-Japanese War, Koreans experienced a change in the discourse on sugar and food, along with the policy of curbing sugar consumption. Before the war, nutrition meant calories. Accordingly, sugar was virtually synonymous with nutrition. However, the introduction of a new theory of nutrition that emphasized the importance of protein, minerals, and vitamins over carbohydrates resulted in the suppression of grain and sugar consumption. That emphasis gave rise to a myth that still exists today: the belief that sugar produced traditionally was healthier than refined sugar. Nowadays, no sugar is made in the traditional way in South Korea. Only two types of refined sugar (white and yellow) are sold in markets. Due to the influence of the myth, however, yellow sugar has been more popular among Koreans. It is still believed that yellow sugar is more beneficial to the human body than white sugar. As a matter of fact, the two kinds of sugar are the same. This myth serves as an example of how the discourse on sugar in the late 1930s has affected Koreans right up to the present day (360–361).

This book is noteworthy in that it reveals new possibilities in microhistory, to which Korean historians have paid little attention. In particular, the book surveys the changes and trends in sugar prices in several East Asian countries, including Java, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and China, which is not an easy task to accomplish. This must have involved extensive research into local data and studies. The author seems to have worked hard to track the price changes by distinguishing refined sugar from raw sugar. And these price fluctuations are related not only to the economy and trade of East Asian countries, but also to the supply of sugar in global markets, including that of Europe. The price survey represents *Korean history in world history*, because it leads from world history through regional history to Korean history. The author also introduces the reader to the development of Japan’s refined-sugar capital in the first half of the twentieth century in detail by referring to research in Japan.

Another merit of this book is the author’s examination of how Koreans have become accustomed to sugar in their daily lives by weaving together nutritional discourses, enlightened cooking lessons, and the emergence of new foods with sugar in the first half of the twentieth century. The period-based study on this familiarization process is convincing and even fascinating, offering a glimpse into Korea’s modernization through the lens of sugar. Of course, this glimpse does not give us the full process of modernization per se. The author makes it clear that the familiarization process was defined under the influence of Japanese imperial rule and changes in Japanese capitalism—a classic example of colonial modernization. This kind of microhistorical study suggests new directions and perspectives for future studies in Korean history.

Yet, as meritorious as the author’s attempts are, they reveal some problems. Even if we deal with some issues in the Korean peninsula or East Asia, the supply and

consumption of sugar must be studied from the perspective of global history. Although Lee emphasizes this point, the book shows its limitations when comparing sugar consumption in Europe and East Asia or analyzing the sugar supply in East Asia in relation to the sugar industry in Europe. Although it may be due to the lack of data, there is a slight disconnect in the narrative concerning world history, regional history, and Korean history.

In particular, after the First World War, Japan competed with Britain, which was a European hegemonic power in terms of politics and military strength. Furthermore, export-oriented Japanese capitalism competed with British production in the market in India and other British colonies in Asia. Perhaps the most representative examples are found in the cotton fabric industries, but sugar too might have been one of the products over which Japan competed with Britain. Thus, it is necessary to compare Japanese and British refined-sugar capital to understand the accumulation and change in Japanese sugar-industry capital. This process would be equivalent to looking at regional economic history from the perspective of world economic history.

Lee emphasizes that Japanese colonial rulers tried to cultivate sugar beet and encourage sugar consumption in Korea. But, why did they do so? Was it a policy faithfully reflecting the interests of the Japanese sugar capital, or one following the modern nutritional discourse favoring sugar consumption? Alternatively, was it a result of another policy of increasing the exportation of rice produced in Korea to Japan? It seems to me that the author fails to articulate the policy's intentions.

In addition, the author interprets the expansion of sugar consumption among Koreans as a natural phenomenon. However, there is a gap between discourse and reality. In Japanese-ruled Korea, sugar was used mainly in manufacturing confectioneries and bread, and the level of consumption in everyday life was low. Thus, the author's argument seems exaggerated. Nutritional discourses are concerned mainly with the consumption of food in everyday life. In this regard, there is a lack of connection between nutritional discourses and the consumption of sugar in everyday life. The author's focus solely on discourse carries the risk of misrepresenting reality.

It seems fair to suppose, as well, that there was a dual structure regarding sugar consumption in Korea under Japanese rule. There were surely differences as to how people in cities and rural areas consumed sugar, between Japanese and Koreans, between the upper class and the common people. In particular, it was customary among Korean peasants and lower-class people to distinguish the main foods—for example, rice and barley—from auxiliary ones. Rice and barley had nothing to do with the business of adding sugar, and sugar was added only to some auxiliary foods—mainly spicy foods.

Having laid out some of the potential problems that *Sugar, the Modern Revolution* may have, I think that they are insignificant compared to its merits. Over the past half century, the study of Korean history in South Korea has been closely related to recent social changes. Since the 1960s, the main agendas of Korean society have been democratization and industrialization, and in both areas Korea has made remarkable

achievements. Korean historians have made efforts to figure out the contributing factors of those achievements, emphasizing the lives, labor, or resistance of the ordinary people as an opposing force against class rule, or nationalistic movements striving to overcome colonialism. Studies along these lines have tended to understand the development of Korea's history from within, rather than viewing it from the perspective of global or regional history. Today, however, no country's history—its modern history, in particular—can be understood in isolation from the effects of globalization. New studies reflecting these desiderata are emerging in the field of Korean history. One such trend is found in the micro histories, such as the book under review here, which focus on changes in daily life.

I believe that this book will be regarded as an important study that helped pave the way to microresearch in Korean history. I also think many of the controversies surrounding Korea's "colonial modernization" in the first half of the twentieth century will be settled as such microhistorical studies accumulate. I look forward to seeing more studies that explore not only how various products symbolizing modernity were introduced to and consumed in Korea, but how Koreans appropriated them.

#### **About the Reviewer**

Young-Suk Lee is Professor Emeritus at Gwangju University. He is the author of *Chishigin'gwa sahoe: Sŭk'ot'ŭllaendŭ Kyemongundongŭi Yŏksa* 지식인과 사회: 스코틀랜드 계몽운동의 역사 (Intellectuals and society: A history of the Scottish Enlightenment) and *Chegugŭi Kiŏk, Chegugŭi Yusan* 제국의 기억, 제국의 유산 (Memories and legacy of the British Empire).