

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

A Genealogical Interrogation of Prussian Neoclassical “Tectonics” in East Asia

Chun Jin-sung 전진성. 상상의 아테네, 베를린-도쿄-서울: 기억과 건축이 빚어낸 불협화음의 문화사 *Sangsang ūi At'ene, Perŭllin-Tok'yo-Sŏul* [Imaginary Athens, Berlin-Tokyo-Seoul]. Seoul: Ch'ŏnnyŏnŭisangsang, 2015. ISBN: 9791185811086.

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In this impressively ambitious book, Chun Jin-sung (Chŏn Chinsŏng), the Berlin-educated historian of modern Germany, traces the entangled formation of urban landscapes and architectural landmarks in Berlin, Tokyo, and Seoul. Readers who know Chun primarily through his critically acclaimed work on modern German history may find his inclusion of Japan and Korea as a field of inquiry, as well as his venture into architectural history, rather unexpected. Yet this turn has been long in the making. For a start, Chun's 2008 critical biography of Kim Hyŏng-nyul, a second-generation *hibakusha* (a survivor of either of the atomic explosions at Hiroshima or Nagasaki in 1945) in Korea, attempts to problematize the dominant culture of oblivion in both South Korea and Japan that forced Kim to shoulder the unredeemed burden of a traumatic event in his frail, deformed, and ultimately failing body. Likewise, Chun's 2004 study of the invention of museums in the modern era is a probe into modernity's creation of collectible “pasts” and its physical and architectural manifestation. These earlier engagements with historical memory in its corporeal and architectural forms are consummated in this book on a grander scale and scope. Chun moves seamlessly from late eighteenth-century Prussia to briskly “modern” 1920s Tokyo to 1990s Seoul, with its frantic efforts to perfect cultural nationalism.

Along the way, he makes stops in Qingdao, Dairen, and Shinkyō (Changchun). The result is an exemplary genealogical inquiry into modern architectural form and its co-constitutive modernity.

The initial point of departure for Chun is the juxtaposition of the architectural landscapes of Seoul and Berlin, which reveal unmistakable and almost eerie signs of mimicry. Why does one find an array of architectural examples in the heart of Seoul that remind one of Berlin's Museum Island, the boulevard Unter den Linden, and the Rotes Rathaus, the town hall of Berlin? Chun's answer is much more complex than a simplified narrative of diffusion and transfer of architectural styles and expertise from imperial Germany to Meiji Japan to colonial Korea. To Chun, architectural design and its topographical placement in the spiraling urban landscapes in each of these three capital cities are physical representations of the respective "imaginative geography" (to quote Edward Said) of the ruling powers. No matter how tangible these buildings may have been, however, they were, according to Chun, mere phantasmagorias that projected the illusion of totality and the "organic whole" of the state (and empire), hiding the acute tension between image and reality in their overdrawn shadows. In other words, "modern" architectural landmarks in Seoul are not an indelible reminder of the "distorted" modernity of the colonial era, as is often argued; rather, they are peculiar discursive formations (in the Foucauldian sense) that mythologized "newness" and violently imposed the urgency of chasing the future in colonial society (431). In deconstructing these discursive formations in their multiple iterations, this book is as much an intellectual history of global modernity as it is an architectural history of three countries.

According to Chun, this global narrative starts with the Prussian infatuation with ancient Greece that began in the second half of the eighteenth century (but grew more intense around the turn of the nineteenth century), which was a reflexive reaction to the rapacious influence of the French state and culture that had dwarfed and haunted the already small and fractured presence of the German nation. In their search for a transcendental essence that would save them from the turpitude of reality, German intellectuals posited ancient Greece as the epitome of pristine culture uncontaminated by Roman (and French) modification. However, the ancient Greece that Germans imagined in this period of neoclassicism did not necessarily correspond to historical reality. As Chun notes, the fact that Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who ushered in the Greek boom with his publication of a Greek art history in 1755, had never been to Greece is illuminating in this regard. This Greek-centered neoclassicism that envisioned an alternative

image of a nation then found its most vocal and visual proponent in Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841), royal architect of Prussia, who translated this “imaginative geography” into architectural reality in Berlin. To Schinkel, the ultimate principle and purpose of architecture was a perfect balance between function and form, which Chun defines as “tectonic.” As both an architectural principle and an organizing rule of state, Schinkel’s neoclassical tectonic was a conservative ideology, an “aesthetics revolution” that served as a surrogate for a radical political revolution that was unmistakably associated with France and abhorred with suspicion. In Chun’s understanding, Schinkel envisioned the state as “an organically constructed architectural piece” in which, just as every component of a building supports the overall structure, every subject fulfills his responsibility in service of the king (133). Schinkel’s architectural renderings of conservative ideology in the forms of Neue Wache, Königliches Schauspielhaus, and Altes Museum were then critically embraced by Gottfried Semper, who in the name of historicist architecture completed a number of significant buildings in the neo-Renaissance style. But the shift from neoclassicism to historicism, from Schinkel to Semper, was not the repudiation of the former; both emphasized function as well as the monumentality of architecture (180).

The emergence of neoclassical “tectonic” was in turn critically embraced and modified by the leaders of Meiji Japan, who, during the almost two-year-long Iwakura Mission (1871–1873), “discovered” Prussia as a fiducial point to accurately position Meiji Japan on the global topography of modernity. To Chun, the official chronicle of the Iwakura Mission by Kume Kunitake, a Meiji official and historian, was a foundational document that reveals the discursive formation of the Japanese version of “imaginative geography.” In this imaginative geography, England emerged as the ultimate destination of civilization that Japan should strive to achieve, but it was simultaneously an unobtainable and elusive goal that continued to distance itself from Japan. In contrast, Prussia was an achievable model, a state of equal stature that Japan could see eye-to-eye with. Only once Prussia was fixed as a nodal point, Chun argues, using the Lacanian concept of gaze, was Japan able to position itself firmly on the global hierarchy of modernity. The positioning of Prussia and, by extension, of Japan on the ontological map of modernity in turn meant that Japan now emerged as a self-conscious subject that accurately assessed its mission of modernization. As it turns out, Prussia was not just a conceptual nodal point; it also provided practical guidance in the creation of the Meiji Constitution, the most dramatic and symbolic self-declaration of Japan as an equal participant in the global affairs of modernity. This

familiar story of reform from above modeled in the Prussian constitutional system is rephrased in Chun's book as the "tectonic" restructuring in the spirit of Prussian neoclassicism that forced orderly and organic principles of architecture onto the emerging body politic. The architectural rendition of this tectonic principle in the landscape of Tokyo as a way to inculcate a new sense of spatiality and temporality was not, however, as orderly as the government intended. Wilhelm Böckmann, a German architect, was contracted by the Meiji government to devise architectural masterpieces for the nation's capital, but his vision of "Forum Japanum" never materialized, due to fiscal pressures, while the ensuing tension and competition between academic architects and bureaucratic circles, represented by Tatsuno Kingo (1854–1919) and Tsumaki Yorinaka (1859–1916), respectively, made public buildings in Tokyo eclectic in their architectural style, with no real pivot point.

The shattered vision of creating an architectural fulcrum in the imperial metropole was subsequently resurrected in the fringes of the empire. As Chun notes, this was a natural progression of Japan's pursuit of modernity, since Japan's "tectonic" reconfiguration of time and space at home was predicated on its imagined membership in the civilized West and was in turn inseparably paired with the forceful imposition of this "geography of modernity" on the neighboring "semi-civilized" countries in Asia. In the "empty" spaces of Manchuria and Chōsen, Japanese architects and urban planners were given free rein to explore their "tectonic" aspirations without any inhibitions stemming from local customs or peculiar historicity. Yet this unilateral expression of the imperial desire that deprived colonized people of their agency was not a result of Japan's proud mastery of modernity. To the contrary, Chun maintains that the obsessive colonial fixation on modern civilization impregnated with scientific rationality was a tangible sign of its vulnerability, a symptom of "schizophrenia" that oscillated between unfounded pride and a palpable sense of inferiority in the West-dominated world of the twentieth century. In other words, the seemingly unsurpassable power of the colonial empire sculpted in "modern" buildings in imperial peripheries was a mere illusion that thinly masked the anxiety and restlessness of Japan's self-perception. But here lies precisely the irony of "modernity"—the phantasmagorias that the Japanese created in the urban landscape were so conspicuous and glittering that both the colonizers and colonized found the new tempo-spatiality to be undeniably real. As Chun puts it, colonized Koreans, mesmerized by the illusion of newness, found

themselves incarcerated in the prison of “modernity,” increasingly out of their own volition (519).

Grounded in meticulous and copious readings of German, Japanese, and Korean sources, Chun’s discursive analysis makes a number of important interventions in the discussion of globally constructed “modernity” in East Asia. First, Chun’s expansive view of Prussian neoclassicism and historicism from its inception in Germany to its conscious modification in Meiji Japan to its exaggerated implementation in colonial Korea allows us to move beyond an essentialized reading of global entanglement. All too often, a historically contingent expression such as “German influence” has been employed without proper contextualization, only to function as a timeless point of reference. In Chun’s analysis, precise moments of encounter are captured to reveal historical contingencies and tensions. Similarly, Chun’s detailed discussion of the tectonic desire of Japan that foregrounded the construction of the Japanese Government-General Building in Keijō (now Seoul) dispels the pernicious myth of omnipresent and omniscient colonial power that is often interpreted as having treacherously desecrated Kyōngbokkung Palace. As Chun persuasively argues, Kyōngbokkung Palace was lost even before the Japanese intervention, and only when the Japanese Government-General Building obstructed its entry and vista did it regain prominence as the foremost “place of memory” of the lost nation.

Almost eight hundred pages long, a massive book like this is bound to have a couple of weak scaffoldings. Often paired with the concept of “imaginative geography,” the original architectural notion of “tectonic” also functions as shorthand for a governing principle of a state and empire. This dual conceptualization of “tectonic” both as an architectural rationale and as a political ideal and practice certainly has the benefit of accentuating the co-constructive nature of architecture and politics, but the almost indiscriminate overuse and approximation of the concept—applied to everything from logic of control to a new formulation of tempo-spatiality—makes it as elusive as it is revealing. Likewise, there are occasional cases of overanalysis. For instance, reading the violent nature of modern empires from the Japanese description of a scene at the old Berlin Aquarium in which a snake sucks blood from a rabbit is not entirely convincing (290–291). The significance of the Iwakura Mission should also be properly contextualized. It is true that Meiji Japan’s encounter with Prussia during the trip engendered epistemological awakening, but the enduring affinity between the two countries was

conditional and cemented only when it became clear that the German promise of nonintervention in Asian affairs was carried out in an actual diplomatic move. For example, the gravitational move of Inoue Kaoru, one of the founding fathers of Meiji Japan, toward Germany cannot be fully appreciated without considering the role of Karl von Eisendecker, a German diplomat in Meiji Japan who, by advocating treaty revision, saved the face of Inoue in 1880–1881. On a minor note, readers may wish to know more about German architects in Qingdao, especially their educational backgrounds and practical experiences in imperial Germany.

These minor suggestions notwithstanding, Chun's multifaceted history of the global intertwinement of three countries is an important book that empirically and theoretically challenges the still-dominant framework of nation-centered historical scholarship, especially in South Korea.

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