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Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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YI GWANGSU'S LITERARY CONTRIBUTION TO KOREA'S 1919 MARCH FIRST
MOVEMENT

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Michael Shin, *Korean National Identity under Japanese Colonial Rule: Yi Gwang-su and the March First Movement of 1919*, London: Routledge, 2011, 246 pp.

In present-day Republic of Korea (ROK), March First is still celebrated as a day to commemorate the Korean people's most important statement of protest against Japanese rule. Pagoda (Tapgol) Park in downtown Seoul, the starting point of these demonstrations that carried on throughout the year, is preserved as a permanent monument to the memory of this event. Michael Shin's purpose in writing his manuscript is to in part to preserve the contribution that a man regarded as the author of Korea's first modern novel, Yi Gwangsu (1892-1950), to the cultural movement that «helped create the conditions for the full emergence of modern nationalism» among the people (p. 3). He grounds his arguments on the idea of «conjunctural history», which he used in its most common meaning: «a combination of things happening at the same time and place» (p. 7). Shin is clear in indicating the fallacy of the term March First, as it suggests that the event lasted but a single day whereas in reality the movement stretched over a period of months. This simple point is critical to understanding Shin's analysis of Yi's contribution to this movement which he traces over the half decade that followed the event.

While Yi Gwangsu's writing continues to enjoy popularity in contemporary ROK, he is also remembered for his collaboration with the Japanese colonial administration and is thus regarded as a member of the pro-Japanese faction (*Chinilpa*), an epithet that has come to be tagged on all Koreans suspected of colonial-era traitorous behavior. Shin does not ignore this characterization, but does not dwell on it. He suggests that a more productive way of looking at collaboration is, rather than to see it as a betrayal of the nation, to examine the issue in a more conjectural way that «engages with the texts of the collaborators more comprehensively in a study of colonial nationalism» (6-7).

Shin sees this five-year period of Korean history as unique for a number of reasons, but perhaps most important for his purposes as a period that developed Korea's civil society. The people were assisted by Japan's «culture rule» (*Bunka Seiji*) reforms that their colonial subjugators introduced to Korea in 1920, following the March First Movement in response to the harsh criticism Japan received from its fellow colonial powers over its violent response to the demonstrations (p. 3). This period was also one

that saw Korea's political landscape diversify with the emergence of political ideologies such as communism, socialism, and anarchism. Shin sets 1926, the year that Sunjong, the last emperor to be seated on the Korean throne prior to Japan's annexation of the country passed away, as a bookend to his study. His death, he explains, ended many of the «developments in cultural nationalism [that transpired] over the early 1920s» (p. 205).

Shin frames his discussions within the context of Yi Gwangsu and his writing. Though Yi's direct contribution to the Movement was minimal – he authored the 8 February 1919 draft of Korea's declaration of independence for the Korean Independence Youth Corps (*Joseon Dongnip Cheongnyeondan*) located in Tokyo, Japan, which was slipped into Seoul, Korea and served as a first draft of the March First declaration. His writing, both before and after the Movement, reflected many of the themes that were popularly debated in Korean society at this time. Shin divides his discussion into six chapters, two of which weave Yi's more popular productions into the early 1920s.

Chapter one introduces Korea's northern province of Pyeongan, Yi's birthplace, as a location unique among Korea's provinces. Its major city, the present-day North Korean capital of Pyongyang. The province provided one-third (11 of 33) of the signers of the March 1919 declaration of independence, and the locations for over half (58 of 91) of the demonstrations that took place in its aftermath (p. 21). Also, a disproportionate number of Korea's most creative thinkers of the time hailed from this region. He credits the province's unique economic conditions, its strong modern education system, and its vibrant Christian community – at this time it became known as the «Jerusalem of the Orient» – for this result. While Shin's purpose here is to suggest the region's influence on Yi as a writer, he also mentions that Yi saw his roots in the region as a handicap. The writer «had no particular affection for his home province», although he did maintain ties with a number of colleagues from the province (p. 21).

Chapter two turns to the active print culture that emerged in Korea following the March First Movement, one that benefitted from Japanese culture reforms that allowed the Koreans to publish three indigenous newspapers to compete with the one Korean language colonial government-friendly newspaper. the *Maeil sinpo* (Daily News), over the initial decade of its rule. Yi had benefitted from this newspaper when it serialized his most famous novel *Mujeong* (Heartless) from 1917. Yi's writing also benefitted from expanded exposure in the active Korean print culture over the first half of the 1920s.¹

1. Korean cultural development in the 1920s has received generous attention in English historiography on Korea. See, for example, chapters in Gi-Wook Shin & Michael E. Robinson (eds., *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999; Michael Edson Robinson, *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920-1925*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988; and Kenneth M. Wells, *New God, New Nation: Protestants and Self-Reconstruction Nationalism in Korea, 1896-1937*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

Chapter three is Shin's first chapter to deal directly with Yi Gwangsu in it providing a literary analysis of *Mujeong*, considered to be Korea's first modern novel. Here, Yi develops a love triangle to illustrate the old Korea against its development of a modern society. He represents the former by a traditional Chinese-centered *kisaeng* [female entertainer] and the latter by a Western-trained female student; the two formed an «allegory for the struggle between two competing worldviews and ideologies» (p. 95). Shin quotes literary critic Gin Donjon's 1935 characterization of Yi's novel as having laid «the most important foundation stone in the large building that is the new literature of Joseon» (p. 95). The uniqueness of Yi's writing stood out for its ability to introduce changes in Korean writing style by choosing to reject the traditional classical Chinese writing style and, as a fan of Leo Tolstoy, for incorporating Russian-style literature at this early time period (p. 86). Yi reflected on his writing philosophy as follows: «novels faithfully depict the world within the writer's imagination and enable the readers to experience this world directly» This idea contrasted with the Chinese culture and Confucian ideology that hid personal identity (Yi quoted on p. 87).

Chapter four continues Shin's analysis of Yi Gwangsu's works, here centering on his writing at a time when Yi took steps to join Korea's cultural movement in the early 1920s. In 1922 Yi founded the Group Cultivation Society (Suyang Dongmaehoe), an organization that followed the ideas of the Young Korean Academy (Heungsadan) founded by one of Yi's mentor's, An Changho, in Shanghai. Yi also joined the editorial staff of the *Donga ilbo* (East Asian Daily) in 1923, at the time the most radical of the three newspapers that the Japanese had granted publishing rights (p. 143), as well as that of the literary journal *Joseon mundane* (Literary Sphere of Korea?). During this time Yi completed what may be regarded as his most controversial piece of non-fiction writing, «On National Reconstruction» (Minjok gaejoron) in May 1922. Yi's attempt to «slight the changes that occurred after the March First Movement» made the writing controversial among Koreans (p. 143). Yi's discussion here centered on Korea returning to its pre-Joseon (1392-1910) native, non-Neo-Confucian roots, the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392) period. Yi also laced his ideas with those of modern culturalism. Shin sees this work as Yi's attempt to define reconstruction through a «mix of straightforward modernization with some culturalist aspects, creating tensions that opened up his position to critique and weakened his political standing in colonial society» (p. 160).

Chapter six examines another major work of fiction by Yi, *Rebirth* (Jaesaeng), that Shin sees as one of Korea's most popular works of the early 1920s. It served as a «commentary on modernity» (p. 177). Here Yi developed the concept of «romance» by, like *Heartless*, forming a dichotomy between two types of revolutionary ideas that 1920s Korean society grappled with at this time: women were going through revolutionary change that differed by the extent to which they should extend this change: as the «new

woman» who got educated, worked, and adopted a modern appearance or the «modern girl» who represented an «eroticized version» of the new woman by followed a new set of moral codes such as by drinking, smoking, and engaging in free love relationships. In this novel, one of the first among Korean writers to address this topic, Yi molds both types of women into a single character who undergoes a change toward the latter woman over the course of the novel (p. 189). Her eventual downfall, Shin argues, represents Yi attempt to «scare young women» to «prevent them from asserting their sexual autonomy» (p. 198).

Michael Shin's conclusion addresses the June 1926 funeral of Korea's last emperor, Sunjong, who had died the previous April. At this time the Korean people anticipated a second independence movement, the symmetry being that it had been the death of Sunjong's father, Kojong, in 1919 that in part ignited the earlier movement. The *Donga sinbo* wrote in its 10 June 1926 edition that the day represented the «end of 5,000 years of Joseon history» (quoted on p. 207). With no prodigy – the monarch was sickly from a young age – the question arose as to whether his death signified the Korean people's forced acceptance of Japanese rule? Different from the March First Movement, progressive influences initially assumed control of the planning for the 1926 movement. (The day's success was compromised by the Japanese invoking its Peace Preservation Legislation to roundup progressive thinking «troublemakers», who happened to be the movement's organizers, prior to the funeral.) Shin identifies another difference that affected the day's outcome: While the former 1919 efforts appealed to the Western nations for assistance, the latter 1926 movement focused on revolution (p. 206). Examination of the 1926 movement reveals, Shin concludes, just how «ill-defined national identity remained» in the late 1920s (p. 212). Also, an important difference to consider is the situation in the international scene: the latter movement lacking the post-World War I environment that featured calls for ending colonial occupation which encouraged independence movements like the Korean March First Movement.

Shin states his purpose for writing *Korean National Identity* as his attempt to demonstrate how the ideas of arguably Korea's most important writer at the time, Yi Gwangsu, could be used to «produce a new perspective on the early colonial period and for critically examining its strengths and weaknesses» (p. 214). He provides an informative, but frustrating, read in the process with his manuscript in places reading more like an edited volume than a monograph. Chapter one reads like a biography; Chapters two and four resemble historical analyses of Korea's early 1920s; while Chapters three and five read like literary critiques of Yi Gwangsu's most important works. These chapters in and of themselves, however, contain an abundance of interesting detail that makes for informative reading. The volume will prove difficult to the reader unfamiliar with the basics of Yi's life, the March First Movement, and Japan's administration over Korea,

particularly over the decade of Cultural Rule. However, Michael Shin presents an original perspective on a topic, the March First Movement and its immediate aftermath, that deserves far more attention than it has generated to date.²

2. To date, surprisingly little has been written on the March First Movement. The best summary of its events remains Frank P. Baldwin Jr.'s dissertation, *The March First Movement: Korean Challenge and Japanese Response*, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1969.