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Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light orange color, located in the bottom right corner of the page. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and organic shapes, resembling a stylized flower or a traditional Indian mandala.

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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KOREA'S COLONIAL HISTORY AS SEEN FROM ABROAD

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Ku Daeyeol, *Korea 1905-1945: From Japanese Colonialism to Liberation and Independence*, Kent, CT: Renaissance Books, 2021, 468 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-912961-21-4).

The period of Japanese colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula has been covered widely. Ku Daeyeol's treatment is unique, however, in that he examines the vicissitudes of Korean history between 1905 and 1945 from the outside, focussing his analysis particularly on how Great Britain and the United States, but also the Soviet Union and China, reacted to the Japanese invasion.

Professor Ku's background is important here. He did his post-graduate studies in the United Kingdom, at SOAS University of London. He, then, returned home to join the Korean Foreign Affairs and National Security before transferring to Ewha Women's University in Seoul, South Korea, until his retirement in 2011. In the work under review, Ku, in his quest to determine «how we can define the Korean question in the wider context of international relations» (xix), finds extraordinary the extent that the «outside powers shaped Korea's domestic landscape» (xviii). Ku relies heavily on primary materials from the British and United States national archives, as well as on secondary sources from Russian and Chinese literature. He concludes from this broad survey that the major powers that shaped Korea's destiny shifted between realist-directed balance-of-politics policies and the more idealistic trusteeship approach to determining the place of the Korean Peninsula in regional, as well as global, politics. The decisions made by these states regarding Korea's post-liberation future, following Japan's defeat in the Pacific War, were contingent on their confidence, or lack thereof, in an independent Korean state being able to sustain viable political and economic institutions amidst shifting dynamics in the post-war global community. The situation that the two Koreas confront at present is a legacy of the negative aspects of these two factors, as well as the historic policies of neighbouring states, which placed greater attention on their own national interests rather than over those of the Korean people.

Ku divides *Korea 1905-1945* into two sections: the first considering the years leading up to the 1910 annexation of the Korean Peninsula and up to the early 1930s; the second focusing on the wartime years, from the late 1930s until Korea's liberation from Japanese rule. In the latter section, Ku attaches primary focus on how the wartime years and their aftermath saw primarily the United States, China, Great Britain, and, to a lesser extent,

the Soviet Union, debating Korea's post-war future. Ku uses Chapter 1 to set the framework of his study:

Politically, the Korean peninsula was important for some Western powers, i.e., Britain and the United States, mainly for the protection of their interests in China. However, this value was not «vital» but negotiable, since their interests in China were safeguarded by other means.... Nevertheless, the Korean peninsula retained its significance in East Asia regional politics. For China, the peninsula bordered the Gulf of Bohai, which extended to its political center, the Beijing-Tianjin area, and also «Manchuria»; for Japan it was a «dagger» pointing at its heart; for Russia, it offered an ice-free port, as well as a potential rear base that could support resources, both human and material, for its Siberian and Far Eastern development. In this sense, the three [Asian] nations' interests in Korea were vital, immediate, and direct (16).

Japan, which had been strengthening its position on the Korean Peninsula from the late 1860s, was able to gain the upper hand over its competitors through military successes over China (1895) and then Russia (1905). It was able to appease the Anglo-American powers with guarantees to respect their economic interests on the Korean Peninsula for a period of time after annexation. Thus, the powers reasoned, Japan's influence on this territory would not disrupt the balance of power that had existed through this time. Following its defeat of Russia, Japan established Korea as its protectorate in 1905, before finally annexing it in August 1910. The delay in the latter advancement had been due to Russian objections and the Japanese anticipation of a second Russo-Japanese War on the horizon. Japan, however, was able to negotiate away this danger in 1907 and 1910, and thus cleared the way for incorporating the Peninsula into its empire (58-60).

Attitudes toward Japan's handling of its Korean colony changed over the initial decade of its rule due to foreign powers judging Japanese rule over Korea to be overly harsh. Japan also retracted on its promises to honour British and American economic interests in Korea (94, 101). Ku describes in Chapter 4 the decisive turn of the attitudes of the global community toward Japan's rule in Korea caused by Japan's violent reaction to Korea's largest display of anti-Japanese sentiment, the 1919 March First Movement. The Movement was encouraged by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's self-determination declaration contained in his «Fourteen Points» speech of January 1918, and planned around the anticipation of large crowds assembling to attend the upcoming state funeral for King/Emperor Kojong – his death rumoured to have been through poisoning, perhaps by the Japanese, who had forced him to step down from his throne in 1907.¹ The Korean lead-

1. Kojong, king until 1897 when he declared himself emperor, was forced out of his position by the Japanese after they learned that he had sent a delegation to The

ers of the movement drafted a Declaration of Independence and turned themselves in to the Japanese police. The Korean people, on their part, proceeded to peacefully march through the streets of Seoul. These demonstrations spread quickly throughout the country over the following months. The Japanese crackdown resulted in as many as 7,000 Korean deaths, and tens of thousands more arrested, many of whom were tortured.

Ku's summaries of the British and United States' reactions are informative. He contends that the British, guilty of similar violence in the Amritsar massacre of the same year, had an «anti-Japanese bias, though no one advocated the independence of Korea» (114). The United States' reaction, however, was more open. It appeared in government circles, as well as the press, and through missionary channels (122). Foreign pressure on Japan was instrumental in the colonizers making major changes in their colonial rule that included freedoms of press and assembly. They also initiated discussions on allowing the Korean people higher administrative positions and possibly self-rule. The Korean people standing up to the Japanese caused these outside powers to momentarily see the Koreans in a more positive light (136).

In this first section, Ku also traces the Japanese development of the Manchurian region across the Korean border as the «bridge» that Japan required to expand further into the Asian mainland. This was a primary factor that led to Japan engaging China, and then the United States, in wars from the 1930s (Chapter 6). Here Ku traces the rather long history that Koreans had in the region, and the crossfire they encountered when their interests conflicted with those of both the Japanese and the Chinese.

Koreans saw Manchuria as both a refuge from oppression and an economic opportunity. From the mid-1930s Korean migration to Manchuria steadily continued to increase, yet not nearly at a pace that would reach the five million people goal planned by Japanese Governor General of Korea Minami Jirō and aimed at opening up space to allow for Japanese migration to Korea (181). The Chinese reaction, fuelled by nationalist sentiment, was to oppress the Korean migrants. This gave the expansion-minded Japanese reason to intervene on behalf of its «subjects», leading to incidents that increased Japanese strength in the region.

Ku contests a «conspiracy theory» that claims that Japan plotted incidents, such as the 1931 Wanbaoshan Incident,² to increase its presence in the area. Instead, he argues that its cause is related to the Chinese harbouring the idea of «expelling the Koreans from the area» (174-75).

Hague in an attempt to gain a seat at the conference table at the 1907 The Hague Peace Convention. The Japanese considered this to be in violation of the protectorate treaty that had placed Japan in charge of Korea's diplomatic affairs.

2. The Wanbaoshan Incident of 1931 involved a dispute between Chinese and Korean farmers over the latter's irrigation practices that threatened to flood Chinese fields. News of Chinese ill-treatment of Koreans farming in this area reached Koreans on the Peninsula and resulted in the outbreak of anti-Chinese movements (p. 174, 175).

Part 2 of Ku's monograph deals with wartime Korean relations with these same powers, of critical importance as they basically determined the country's fate following Japan's defeat in August 1945. Independence was promised, but «in due course», in a communiqué forged by the United States (President Franklin Roosevelt), Great Britain (Prime Minister Winston Churchill), and China (Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek) in Cairo, and then approved by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in Teheran, one week later. The communiqué's words badly hid the idea that the Korean people would be granted their sovereignty but only after an undetermined period of trusteeship managed by a collection of states that would guide the Korean people toward responsible government. Ku borrows Martin Wight's definition of «trusteeship»: a «combination of the Machiavellian tradition of realism, the Kantian tradition of revolutionism, and the Grotian tradition of rationalism» (Wight 1992, 385). In addition, British officials saw liberating colonies through trusteeship as also opening the door for the U.S. to gain «sound advantages» in these territories. The Chinese reaction was mixed but among the more powerful voices were those who argued for Korea's immediate independence upon liberation. The Soviet Union, most of this period unengaged in the Asian wars, argued that the period of trusteeship should not involve the deployment of non-Korean militaries on the Peninsula, and be limited to as short a time span as necessary.

Behind the positions of the individual powers involved in determining Korea's political future there was, of course, the desire of each of them to advance their own individual interests on the Peninsula. However, the original thinking behind trusteeship, at least as expressed by Roosevelt, was more benevolent: to simply fulfil the Korean wish of immediate sovereignty would be to cast that nation into the same situation that the Japanese had used to justify its conquest in the first place. An «independent but weak Korea would become subject to international pressure and intrigue and would threaten political stability and peace in the Pacific» (405).

The author's discussion on trusteeship (Chapter 12) presents an in-depth analysis on how the different allied powers viewed this proposed policy and how the Koreans reacted to it. Ku's claim, however, that all Korean people were against any policy that would prolong foreign occupation beyond that which was necessary (404) requires clarification, as Korean attitudes toward this policy changed over time. While at first it is true that people of all ideological suasions, from the extreme right to the extreme left, objected to foreign occupation, in the end the more moderate elements came to see the trusteeship policy as the best route to their country eventually emerging united and sovereign. Their voices, nonetheless, were silenced by Syngman Rhee and the extreme right-wing campaign against trusteeship that he led.

The emerging Cold War rendered fruitful discussions between the Soviets and the Americans next to impossible as the two ideological camps

took to moulding the actions of their Korean clients in their own interests. Britain, shedding the little attention it had for the Korean problem, and the Nationalist Chinese, engaged in a civil war with the Chinese Communists, transformed the issue by default into a Soviet versus the United States confrontation. Ku reflects as follows:

[W]hen the Cold War began, the confrontation with the Soviet Union became the most important agenda of U.S. foreign policy. As a result, policy objectives in the peninsula had to take on different priorities. The Soviet Union was pushing for the «Sovietization» of the north, and the Joint Commission was failing to create a blueprint for a unified government in the peninsula. To most of the Americans, compromise with the Russians was now impossible (421).

The United States, unwillingly Ku suggests, coming to support extreme, anti-communist politics, further complicated any idea of discussion across the thirty-eighth parallel that divided Soviet and U.S. occupations. The Soviet side supported a North Korean government at its border that it deemed «friendly»; on its part, the United States buttressed a South Korean government to combat the North and to buffer its interests in Japan and the Northeast Asian region (421). Soviet and U.S. national interests on the Korean Peninsula trumped cooperation with Koreans, aimed to determine their country's future.

Through *Korea 1905-1945*, Korea's mid-twentieth century history can be seen as a microcosm of the Cold War that engulfed the world in the decades following the Second World War. Ku's story sets the stage for three years of civil war between the two halves of their Peninsula, decades of totalitarian rule, and a division that continues to separate the two Korean states up to the present. Although important new angles of this history have emerged in recent decades, as Ku laments, the critical documents that tell the Soviet side of it remain insufficient, and thus leave us (as in 1945) guessing at Moscow's true intentions.

Ku is to be complimented for retaining an objectivity in telling this story that has not been seen in other surveys on these issues. From the start he questions whether the «Koreans themselves are free from all responsibility» for their unfortunate fate (xxiv). His research undertakes a deep survey into the interests and thinking of the global powers, thus making it unique among studies of this period. It deserves attention by students on twentieth century Korean history as well as those undertaking the study of the Cold War.

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