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Book Review

Janet Poole, *When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea* (New York: Columbia niversity Press, 2014), pp. xiv, 286.

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Frequently called a "dark period" (*amhŭkki*) in Korean history, the final decade of Japanese colonial occupation brought with it an intensification of fascism, mass mobilization for the war effort, and the closure of Korean-language print publications. In *When the Future Disappears*, Janet Poole reconsiders this period, closely examining a cluster of modernist works, written in Korean and Japanese, from what she calls "the 'minor' genres of philosophy, literary criticism, the short story, and the anecdotal essay."[1] Through patient readings of these short forms, she persuasively establishes her fundamental claim: the writers all expressed "the sense of a disappearing future," the "paradoxical disappearance of that which was yet to appear" or, more precisely, "the idea, or hope, of postcolonialism itself."[2] The responses to this "disappearing future," in which the Korean nation and language were at stake, significantly varied; nevertheless, these modernists, all bourgeois subjects formed by colonial modernity, converged in making the past and the everyday the focal point of their writings. Seeing these late colonial texts as "most literary," employing an array of literary devices to circumvent censorship, Poole insists that the emphasis on the everyday and the past, rather than marking a retreat into aesthetic autonomy, instantiates a series of nuanced engagements with the incongruities and dissonance "of an everyday life lived under colonial fascism."[3] Perhaps most important for her are the ways in which the urban everyday's repetitions and inconclusiveness juxtapose multiple temporalities, disrupting developmental notions of progress and a linear, teleological history. At the same time, she asserts the inextricability of fascism and global modernity, turning to "fascism's comparative

conceptual power"[4] as a means to more fully situate Korean modernism within a transnational context.

A central preoccupation of *When the Future Disappears*, then, is the conjunction of imperialism and the everyday in late colonial short literary forms; this persistence of the everyday, Poole argues, reiterates "an inability to imagine the future other than as a relentless repetition of the present."[5] In her first chapter, Poole examines Ch'oe Myŏngik's short story "Walking in the Rain," which, in making colonial-era photography and its new visual regime an integral theme, hones in on the "unruly details" of the urban everyday in Pyongyang. Here, she productively situates colonial images of Pyongyang—specifically postcards—in relation to Ch'oe's representation of the alleys and shops outside the city center. The disjunction between Ch'oe's Pyongyang and the clean, aestheticized images of it consumed in the metropole thus draws attention to "the contentious realm of colonial representation," resisting the aesthetic of "local color" favored by "metropolitan interests and concerns."[6] Ch'oe reveals the emergent bourgeois everyday in late colonial Korea to inhabit contradictory spaces and temporalities and be coincident with the rise of fascism and loss of revolutionary spirit. Ultimately, the attention to detail in the story discloses the insufficiency of both nationalist and imperial narratives and gazes in doing justice to the messy experience of living in a developing colonial city on the cusp of war. Instead, Ch'oe expresses the violent juxtapositions that subtend the late colonial everyday, whose dissonance, unease, and repetitions undermine efforts to reinvent the future.

The second chapter investigates the philosopher Sŏ Insik's writing on nostalgia in his late colonial works. What concerns Poole here are the ways in which Sŏ's treatment of nostalgia actually constitutes an attempt to think a different kind of future, one that might escape imperial developmental narratives. Sŏ, she says, was highly critical of writers who sought "the recovery of a majestic tradition" by representing an idealized Korean past, for he considered this to be "a compromised abdication of responsibility for the future"; rather, he sought "to reappropriate nostalgia from imperialism, opening it up as a dynamic and dissonant terrain of differing politics."[7] Highly suspicious of notions of continuity

and progress, the philosopher saw irony and contradiction as essential to accurately understanding and engaging the pervasive inequalities of colonial modernity—and, ideally, jarring his countrymen out of malaise and passivity. In Poole's reading, Sŏ's principal target was the imperial discourse of pan-Asianism, which, for him, stood in the way of reconceiving the future. His inquiry into nostalgia, then, "was seeking a nonrestorationist vision of tradition that was conducive to revolution."[8]

The third chapter deals with the anecdotal essays (*sosli*) of Yi T'aejun, who, Poole argues, attempted to reenchant the past as a means to reenchant the present. Reading the collection *Eastern Sentiments*, she describes his writing as "feudal nostalgia" or "romantic antiquarianism," which, in recasting the idea of the Orient amidst the discourse of pan-Asianism, marks "the contradictions embedded in the unequal colonial relation and the entry of Korea into the regime of capitalism."[9] Yi's anecdotal essay, with its idiosyncratic and interiorized relation to the past, suggests the processes by which colonialism produces notions of inside and outside, as well as how "the temporal divide thrown up by industrialization and urbanization was overlaid by the impermeable imposition of colonial rule."[10] She therefore takes issue with standard interpretations of Yi's fondness "for antiques and things old as love for the nation and an attempt to preserve it during the difficult years of military occupation."[11] Instead, she considers the essays' critical potential: the antique objects Yi lovingly describes "link the present to the past in a seamless stream of lived experience," providing a negative imprint of "the historical rupture of which they are a symptom"—and offering, through this, "a precolonial memory that necessarily stood as a reminder that colonialism was neither natural nor permanent."[12] Yi's personalized, inward turn to the past ultimately meant estranging it, demonstrating the fact that a Korean past could only be accessed through an ideological nostalgia mediated by the imperial knowledge regime. Yi, then, subtly evokes a sense of transience vis-à-vis imperialism and pan-Asianism, while memorializing the complex particularity of this historical moment in Korea.

Poole's next chapter addresses Pak T'aewŏn's three-part collection "Self-Portrait," which represents everyday life in the emergent "peri-

urb," the newly incorporated areas of Seoul located outside the city gates. Identifying Pak as perhaps the exemplary colonial bourgeois writer, she stresses the dissonant conjunctions of new and old, capital and colonialism in the stories, which are highly attuned to "the new contradictory experiences of time that governed lived experience on the urban periphery"; "Self-Portrait," that is, reflects the "increasing gap between capital and national culture, one that was materialized in the contradictory space of the peri-urb and narrated as an everyday in crisis."[13] Part of this sense of crisis, she argues, is conveyed in Pak's strategic use of Japanese in the stories, suggesting a future in which Korean language and national culture have vanished. But more importantly, "the vagaries and crises of the war economy"[14] are mapped onto the peri-urban home in the form of domestic quarrels and anxieties, particularly economic ones. Far from providing a refuge from the contradictions of colonial modernity, the domestic peri-urban space of "Self-Portrait" entails an inconclusive present of dissonance, contingency, and repetition, in which the need for money suppresses hope for a finer future. Formally, Poole interprets the narratives' circular structure and syntactical experimentation as both figuring the contradictory spaces and temporalities of colonial modernity as personal experience and denying sublimation or resolution. The ambivalences of "Self-Portrait," then, reveal the anxieties and "repetitious rhythms of consumption" in the peri-urb to be wholly symptomatic of late colonial modernity, of "the violence of global war and industrial revolution."[15]

The fifth chapter takes up the literary criticism of Ch'oe Chaesŏ, who became "a figurehead for the project of inaugurating a literature on the Korean peninsula that affirmed itself as part of the imperial nation."[16] While highly critical of Ch'oe's political bearings, Poole nevertheless sees the critic as envisioning a different and distinctive future, one "which promises to wipe away all conflicts reconceived as belonging to the past and replace them with a new aesthetic characterized by harmony and an organic unity."[17] Ch'oe's "revisionary" modernism is thus driven by the sense of living in a moment of crisis, one that necessitated moral and cultural transformation. For him, the "cure" lay in reconfiguring the relationship between the individual and the imperial state, "as only

the state could be conceived as lying above the vagaries of the capitalist economy and its class conflict."[18] Poole is quick to point out, though, that Ch'oe's call for a "happy" literature that joyously affirmed imperial subjection and a putatively "authentic" modern culture was predicated on a shocking blindness to the systemic inequalities of colonial modernity. "The cost of this merging of modernism with fascism," she observes, "was surely a tragedy, but not of the cathartic kind."[19]

The final chapter discusses Kim Namch'ŏn's "One Morning," which was written for Ch'oe Chaesŏ's wartime literary magazine. While Kim would later be attacked for writing the story in Japanese, Poole asserts that "One Morning" makes ambivalent use of the imperial language to interrogate the promises of happiness extolled by figures like Ch'oe. In the story, the narrator awaits the birth of his child, yet this figure of future hope, she writes, "is weighed down by a web of memories that prevent the sublimation of messy diversity and a clean break with the past."[20] Here, she also stresses the dissonant conjunctions of capital and imperialism in Kim's literary everyday, revealing the domestic to be "the very space where the imperial subject confronts the event of imperialization."[21] "One Morning," then, contests the idea that the Korean subject could achieve happiness by being incorporated into an organic, fascist whole; in this, Poole is taking issue with revisionist colonial histories equating writing in Japanese to collaboration. To conceive of language in such a manner, as signifying "either loyalty or treachery," she concludes, "is at once to accept the monolingualism of the state and to reinforce the authority of the state."[22] Kim's story thus focalizes the endemic double-binds of late colonial language politics, revealing "the pathos of being only able to construct this thing called the self in the colonizing language."[23]

When the Future Disappears emphasizes the tenuous situation of the bourgeois writer in late colonial Korea. While some cautiously resisted and others actively collaborated, all of them, Poole shows, toiled to summon the capacity to envisage a brighter future. The endeavor was inconclusive, but the struggle itself "proved paradoxically productive to their experiments with literary and aesthetic form."[24] And herein lies perhaps the chief virtue of her inquiry, the productive interplay of

historical context with sensitive attention to the works' formal qualities. Above all, she restores complexity and nuance to these relatively neglected texts, while making a compelling case for their rightful place in a global modernism. With her conviction that colonialism and the sense of a foreclosed future "are central to global modernity,"[25] Poole suggests a fresh and invigorating approach to that unruly movement called modernism.

Notes

[1] Janet Poole, *When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 12.

[2] Ibid., 1.

[3] Ibid., 16.

[4] Ibid., 8.

[5] Ibid., 17.

[6] Ibid., 29.

[7] Ibid., 52.

[8] Ibid., 73.

[9] Ibid., 86.

[10] Ibid., 89.

[11] Ibid., 91.

[12] Ibid., 92.

[13] Ibid., 116.

[14] Ibid., 131.

[15] Ibid., 148.

[16] Ibid., 150.

[17] Ibid., 154.

[18] Ibid., 162.

[19] Ibid., 176.

[20] Ibid., 179.

[21] Ibid., 192.

[22] Ibid., 198.

[23] Ibid., 199.

[24] Ibid., 199.

[25] Ibid., 200.