Aesthetic Constructions of Korean Nationalism: Spectacle, Politics and History (review)

Hyung Il Pai

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Book Reviews

Aesthetic Constructions of Korean Nationalism: Spectacle, Politics and History by Hong Kal. New York: Routledge, 2011. 164 pp. Illustrations. Maps. Bibliography. Index. $133.00 (cloth)

Hong Kal's *Aesthetic Constructions of Korean Nationalism: Spectacle, Politics and History* takes the reader on a guided tour of exposition pavilions and museums in Seoul. The six short chapters cover two exposition venues from the colonial era (1915–29), three national museums built in the 1980s and 1990s (War Memorial of Korea [WMK], the Independence Hall of Korea [IHK], and the National Museum of Contemporary Art [NMCA]), one war memorial in Japan (Yūshūkan), and the recently constructed waterway of Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn.[1] Even though the sites are widely separated in time and space, Kal believes they manifest the re-imaginings of the "Korean" nation as the embodiment of both an ancient, but also a modern construct, engineered by successive autocratic regimes beginning with the Colonial Government General of Korea (CGK, 1910–45) to the current president, Lee Myung-bak (Yi Myŏngbak) for their own legitimization schemes.

As Kal correctly observes in her introduction, fundamental questions surrounding interpretations of Korean nationalism since the colonial period have been stymied due to the over-reliance on textual sources. As a remedy, in this book, she wants to show how exhibition complexes constructed at key junctures in "the historical process of making Koreans" served as a technology of governmentality (p. 3). Established in central locations where the state allowed people to relate to themselves as part of a national community, she asserts that these exhibition complexes created shared sensations and experience at a time when society was perceived as in need of a reordering collective body (p. 3).

The book's chapters are grouped into two parts and eras, the colonial era (modernity, colonial expositions, and the city) and the postcolonial era (Korean nationalism and postcolonial exhibitions). The first part revolves around "the visual and spatial languages encoded in the built forms" (p. 13) on the grounds of Kyŏngbok Palace during the few short periods when the two largest colonial exposition venues—the 1915 Korean Industrial Exposition and the 1929 Chosŏn Exposition—were sponsored by the CGK. For the former, Kal identifies three main exhibitions: Kwanghwa Gate (figure 1.3), Railway Hall (figure 1.7), and the Development Display Hall (figure 1.9), as the main vehicles for advancing

CGK's "civilizing mission" and introducing the "Japanese" idea of progress to the masses. The building of the CGK headquarters (figure 2.2) required the transfer of Kwanghwa Gate to the east, a move that was followed by the construction of a linear visitors' corridor into the palace's main exposition halls in 1929. Kal claims that, as a result, the CGK not only upended the North-South layout of the palace, but that this alignment had the unintended consequence of transforming Kyŏnghoe Pavilion into the new ethnic symbol of Korea. The re-landscaping of the palace grounds with an unprecedented east-west causeway, she suggests, was more in line with traditional spatial axis for Shintō shrines (pp. 35–37), all part of a grand CGK-initiated urban development project to reorganize the city center as a showcase of their assimilation policy and racial slogan of the Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The latter half of the book is devoted primarily to two war museums: the War Memorial of Korea and the Independence Hall of Korea built in the 1990s in Yongsan (the former site of the U.S. Army headquarters) and Ch'ŏnan, respectively. Kal describes the WMK as the "temple of ethnic nationalism" (p. 61) because its exhibition halls lined with busts of war heroes, dioramas, and video narratives take the viewer on a temporal journey from Korea's sacred origins to the secular present. The displays of the Korean War room, which occupies the largest section, is where the Republic of Korea situates itself as the true victim of the war, and therefore, projects itself as the sole legitimate government (pp. 66–73). Following the WMK, she makes a brief detour to Tokyo's Yūshūkan, in order to see how the Yasukuni Shrine portrays the war dead. Even in the more neutral and aesthetically pleasing space of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (pp. 94–99) in Kwach'ŏn, Kal finds patriotic themes of the immortal nature of cultural heritage grounded in the discourse of pure ethnic lineage and independent state origins (pp. 59–60). Kal points out that even though these museums were constructed under civilian rule, they continue to reinforce the same visions of the Korean people fighting off imperialists and Communists advocated by past military presidents, such as Park, Roh, and Chun, thus targeting a new generation who have no personal memories of wars and thereby instilling in them an awareness of the "new security" (p. 63).

Kal's book makes a contribution to the field of Korean Studies as the first English-language monograph that addresses the aesthetics and politics of invented places, museums, and monuments from an art historian's perspective. It is also significant that she has attempted to take a long, historical view as well as an inter-regional perspective. Her work is therefore squarely situated amid the broader historical debates and century-old culture wars surrounding the role, function, and educational mission of museums as key sites and arbiters of national tastes, artistic values, and identity/memory-making spectacles. Despite Kal's choice of compelling subject matter, however, I cannot recommend this book to graduate students in cultural studies, art history, or museum studies because it is lacking in methodological rigor, original research, and in-depth

analysis based on primary sources. For example, in the first two chapters, she relies exclusively on a handful of contemporary sources consisting of four exposition committees' reports, two anonymous visitors' impressions featured in two newsletters, the *Chōsen Ihō* and the *Chōsen oyobi Manshū*, and newspaper articles from the *Maeil sinbo*. Since these are all publications that were controlled by the CGK, the writers, academics, and correspondents were selected for their pro-development agenda endorsed by colonial state enterprises. Due to her uncritical reading of CGK-commissioned propaganda materials, Kal herself ends up repeating the same overarching master narrative that the purpose of colonial expositions was to present art, culture, and civilization for the benefit of Koreans.

Though it is undeniable that these expositions contributed to the formation of ethnic spectacles and spaces for entertainment and propaganda, Kal loses sight of their primary goal, which was in fact commercial, not political. The staging of spectacles in scenic palaces was meant to lure not only the casual visitor, but also to convince buyers and exposition judges that Korea was an economically viable colony and that Keijō was an attractive place for the colonists, settlers, soldiers, merchants, and their families to invest their future lives, jobs, and careers. Therefore, the exhibitors, Korean and Japanese businesses both large and small, were keen to incorporate agricultural products as well as manufactured goods (figure 1.6) for potential export to Japan and its other colonies.

Her understanding of the history of museums is also circumspect since Kal seems to be unaware that the layout of all modern exhibition architecture features prominent entrance and exit signs to track ticket collections, long corridors, and radiating halls. Exhibited goods have also been arranged in glass cases and classified by material type and geographic region since the birth of the public museum in Europe, dating back to the early to mid-nineteenth century. The spatial configurations of all exhibition spaces—and by extension, department stores, shopping malls, and tourist spaces—are primarily designed to facilitate traffic flow so as to enable the monitoring of the thousands of daily visitors and potential consumers so they can view the displays in an orderly manner and to ensure the safety of goods from theft or damage. For this reason, after undergoing more than a decade of reconstruction overseen by the Cultural Heritage Administration, the main ticketing entrance to Kyŏngbok Palace today remains in the east because there is ample room for parking cars and tour buses.

What is even more surprising for this reviewer is that Kal, who is an art historian and a professor of visual arts, is just as naive in her use of the illustrations, cartoons, postcards, and tourist maps scattered throughout her work. For example, when describing the figures on the commemoration postcard issued for the 1929 Exposition (figure 2.1), she refers to them as simply two women, dressed in traditional costumes of Korea and Japan (p. 32). However, their makeup, hairstyle, and costumes clearly indicate that they are a pair of courtesans (one geisha, one *kisaeng*), posing seductively for the camera and the male tourist gaze. In another postcard (figure 1.7), she fails to identify the South Manchuria Railroad

as the main sponsor of the Railroad Pavilion (p. 25). The obelisk on top of the viewing platform, which she mentions but does not name, is, in fact, the pagoda erected on top of White Jade Hill in Ryōjun (Port Arthur, Manchuria) commemorating the thousands of soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). Therefore, the tallest and most impressive structure in the 1915 exposition grounds was not Kwanghwa Gate, as Kal claims, but rather a Russo-Japanese War monument. Its image emblazoned in the postcard, therefore, served as the tangible symbol linking the Japanese homeland and the new Manchurian frontier via the Government-General of Korea Railways (Chōsen Sōtokufu Tetsudō), which effectively situated Keijō as the new hub of the empire-wide transportation network.

Without a basic working knowledge of the complex, intertwined nature of the economic, political, and commercial agendas involved in the mass production of these highly romanticized, exoticized, and commodified orientalist images of Korea commissioned by the CGK, the Keijō Tourism Board, and the imperial railroad companies, she naively suggests that all of "Seoul had become like an exposition" (p. 44). Though, in her introductory chapter, she argues that gauging the popular reception is critical to unraveling the cultural impact of these staged events, she ends up citing a coterie of well-educated and well-traveled elite, authors such as Yi Kwangsu, Yun Ch'iho, Ch'oe Namsŏn, and Ch'ae Mansik (pp. 50–55). If Kal had delved deeper, however, she would have discovered that by the 1930s, the capital had been transformed into one of the most stratified cities in the empire, divided by race, class, and gender, as evident in the short stories of Hyŏn Chin'gŏn, Yi Sang, and Pak T'aewŏn. If she had read these authors, known for their realistic portraits of the urban underclass of rickshaw drivers, beggars, prostitutes, madmen, and café hostesses, she might have been more sensitive to the lives on the backstreets of Seoul behind the façade of modern tall buildings, which were characterized by grinding poverty, hunger, disease, and death.

Finally, despite the hundreds of artists, artworks, and buildings she probably encountered in her research visits to museums, she only names two pop artists, Paik Nam-june (Paik Namjun, pp. 85–86) and Claes Oldenburg (p. 112) and one Korean American architect, Kim Tae-su (p. 94), each of whom earned their fame outside of Korea. It is a shame she did not work harder to track down the dozens of living artists, architects, landscape designers, sculptors, and museum curators involved in the making and staging of exhibitions and artwork. Consequently, she has failed to identify the main historical agents, including the various state government committees, municipal authorities, national museum organizations, and cultural bureaucracies responsible for visualizing and aestheticizing the collective experience of national struggles, real and imaginary. Last but not least, the book is missing a concluding chapter in which she should have explained why works of state-generated monumental art have long lost their power to inspire citizens or appeal to a broader audience. In my own excursions to the same museums in Korea and Japan, I was left with the impression that, were it not for the

hundreds of school children who are bussed in daily for mandated educational field trips, these museum spaces would resemble empty mausoleums devoid of warm bodies.

Because of these factual errors and many other unsubstantiated statements, I also discourage the use of this book for undergraduate instruction. For readers of Korean, I have cited below recent scholarship that has exposed with more detail and finesse the multifaceted nature of the power relationships inherent in the evolution of urban, public, and cultural spaces. For those general readers interested in the subject matter in English, I recommend Sheila Miyoshi-Jager's article (2002) and Kal's own articles available online (*Pacific-Asia Focus Journal*), which duplicate the same contents of the latter half of the book.

NOTE

1. Kal's book is a revised version of her dissertation, "The Presence of the Past: Exhibitions, Memories and National Identities in Colonial and Postcolonial Korea and Japan." (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, Binghamton, 2003).

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Hyung Il Pai
University of California–Santa Barbara

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Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols by David M. Robinson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 450 pp. Maps. Bibliography. Index. $49.50 (cloth)

One of the least-studied periods in Korean history is the century following the collapse of military rule in 1270, before the rise of Chosŏn at the end of the fourteenth century. To examine this period comprehensively, a scholar must not only work with Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Mongolian sources, but also be well versed in the individual histories of these areas. Few are willing to take on this daunting task, but for readers of English we now have an excellent window into this very period. *Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols* by David M. Robinson demands our respect. As Robinson notes from the start, because of the complexity of this subject, historians have long remained "confounded" by this period. With this publication, students and scholars should no longer be "confounded."

Western scholarship has virtually ignored this period that saw the unraveling of the Mongol empire, and few scholars writing in Korean, Chinese, or Japanese have made this era a focus of their research. In the West, John Duncan, in his monograph *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty*, has provided the most in-depth study of Korean society at that time, but his focus was more on internal dynamics than Koryŏ's relations with the Yuan. Duncan also oversaw Peter Yun's dissertation, "Rethinking the Tribute System: Korean States and Northeast Asian Interstate Relations, 600 to 1600,"[1] which also skirts this same period. In the Korean language there are a number of studies over the last twenty or so years that have tried to put this period in perspective, but these, like those in the West, have remained focused on Koryŏ specifically and do not try to provide a more global approach to understanding Koryŏ within the Mongol sphere. Here is perhaps Robinson's greatest contribution.

Although this book focuses extensively upon Koryŏ within the Mongol empire, particularly during the "twilight years" of the empire from 1350 to its final collapse, it also looks beyond Koryŏ, bringing in perspectives from both Shangdu