

Review: Hildi Kang, *Under the Black Umbrella: Voices From Colonial Korea 1910-1945*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2001

Pages: 159

Korea Under Japan: Dark Period?

Extremely interesting and varied first-hand accounts from fifty elder Koreans of what is assumed a dark and oppressive period for Korea; the 1910-1945 occupation.

No doubt any occupation is evil in the eyes of the occupied, however, it would seem from a not insignificant number of witnesses that life under the Japanese was not always a “living hell”. Undoubtedly there were murders, oppressions, and injustices, but so there were when the Communists in the north immediately took over in the power vacuum. Also, no Colonial society was free from injustice and maltreatment, e.g., Australia under British rule.

Other than fairly documenting the eye witnesses, it does not pretend to be a scholarly work, which leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions. The author uses a sound methodology of documenting diversity and exclude redundancy when selecting interviewees.

Preface: Collecting the Interviews (pp. xi-xv)

Hanbok: traditional Korean clothing.

Author’s methodology: document diversity and exclude redundancy.

I) Introduction (pp. 1-5)

For hundreds of years the basic Korean lifestyle was farmer subsistence topped by an educated elite.

Invasions from the Mongols (1231), Japanese (15192), and Manchus (1627) caused Korea to close its borders, except to Big Brother China.

The Japanese occupation was split into: subjugation (1910-1919); cultural accommodation (1920-1931); and assimilation (1931-1945). They built roads, railroads, harbours, modern schools, and semi-industrialised the economy. Japanese held 80% of senior positions whilst only 2.5% of the population. Koreans had little political power, but economically there was much opportunity.

II) First Encounters (pp. 6-14)

Kang Pyonju, m, 1910, bank manager, North P'yongan Province

His young wife had no personal name; inconsequential since Koreans don't use personal names anyway.

A story in Manchurian warlord: he had heard immortality came from eating the liver ripped out of a living persons: "Three soldiers have been captured and are about to be executed,. Before I kill them, while they are alive, you must choose one and cut out his liver No. I cannot do such a cruel thing. Then I will execute you also.' So Father did as he was told."
[p9]

Tongbak: 'Eastern Learning' which combines elements from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Yi Sangdo, m, b. 1910, truck driver, Kyonggi Province

One kind of tax had to be paid in rocks for road works.

"I must say their organisation impressed me. They planned things. They came with blueprints. They built things that worked ... I think probably it was good, in the long run."

The first governor, General Terauchi Masatake ... prohibited meetings, closed newspapers ... burned over 200,000 books ... A tight network of spies worked alongside the police ... by 1918, over 200,000 Koreans had been labelled rebellious.

Yi Sungbong, m, b. 1912, tailor, Kyonggi Province

The Japanese ... land survey required land holders to register ... many peasants ... failed to do so and had their land confiscated by the Governor-General, causing Koreans to label it the Japanese “land grab”.

The Japanese targeted fertile agricultural plains for possession.

Some chose to fight, secretly crossing over into Manchuria to join the resistance.

Chin Myonghui, f, b. 1932, housewife, South Hamgyong Province

“About 1910 ... many of Grandfather;s comrades were caught and beheaded by the Japanese.”

When the First World War ended, leaders of the Korean nationalist movement ... planned to make a public proclamation of independence ... [on] March 1, 1919.

III) Shouts of Independence: (pp. 15-23)

Thirty-three representatives met at a Seoul restaurant, read aloud their declaration ... [then] walked to the Japanese police station and turned themselves in.

As a result, Japanese records show 46,948 arrests, 7509 killed, and 15,961 injured. In one of the worst acts of cruelty, twenty-nine people were locked in a church that was then set afire; all inside burned to death. [p17]

“Independence now!”

“Mansei” (*Man*: 10,000): “Mat Korea live ten thousand years.”

The Japanese shot blanks to scare people.

Ch’u Pongye, f, b. 1913, housewife, North Kyongsang Province

“In those days very few people sent their children to Japanese schools with Japanese teachers.”

Pak Chun'gi, f, b. 1914, housewife, Kyonggi Province

“Young men were neaten and speared, slashed with the sabers ... they cut off some men's legs.”

III) A Map Changed My Life (pp. 24-36)

A Confucian scholar (*sonbi*) is “one who doesn't work.”

Japanese: “Improve your own society, so you will come up to the level of us Japanese.”

Most Korean students in Japan became infatuated with communism; one of the Japanese Communist Party's slogans, “Independence for Korea” (they reasoned by helping Korea, Japan would lose a critical income source which would collapse the imperial government).

“I though of many questions about communism and there seemed to be no answers that satisfied me. I decided to abandon communism.” [pp32-3]

The Confucians had a custom of separating males and females.

“You know, the secret police have a blacklist of educated Koreans and anti-Japanese activists. When the order comes, the police will round up and execute those on the list.”

IV) Choosing and Education (pp. 37-48)

Sodang: village school (where local boys studied Chinese writing and Confucian precepts).

Kim Hojun, m., b. 1918, farmer, Hwanghae Province

“What good is it to learn at the hand of the Japanese?”

The colonial government gradually closed down many of the indigenous schools, calling them “strongholds of actual or potential anti-Japanese sentiment”.

V) Through the Eye of the Needle: Kang Pyongju, m., b. 1910, bank manager, North Pyongan Province (pp. 49-60)

Japan's slogan: "One Body, One Spirit".

Early morning regime callisthenics were called, "Spiritual Training and Exercise" ("Spiritual" meant Shintoism, which is simply shamanism).

"In winter we had to break the ice to dunk ourselves in. Then we must hold hands and chant the names of the many gods of Japan – and there are about eight million ... We worked our way through specially developed Shinto body movements ... *Misogi Harai* ... this means warding off the evil spirits and at the same time worshipping and praising those spirits that protect and give prosperity." [p58]

"One Body, One Spirit" supposedly meant Japanese and Koreans were all children of the Divine Emperor ... "They wanted us to carry out their war effort ... they didn't trust us. So they put Koreans into the menial jobs ... assembly-line work ... and to work in the mines." [p59]

VI) Business Ventures and Adventures (pp. 61-74)

"Opium was illegal, and the Japanese kept a close eye on the toxic medicine ... One farm was in North Hamgyong, where the soil was right for it ... Later we heard that most of it was sent to Manchuria to ease the pain of Japanese soldiers." [p67]

"Japan ... had taken all available trucks to the front ... there was severe gasoline rationing".

"The great Nanking massacre of 1937, and with my own eyes I saw corpses piled high on the streets ... blocking sewers, and absolutely brutal bayonet practices." [p71]

VII) I Almost Went to Canada (pp. 75-83)

Hanbok: Korean female head scarf.

VIII) A Red Line Marks My Record: Yi Hajon, m, b. 1921, student, South Pyongan Province (pp. 84-98)

In 1931, Japan turned Manchuria into Manchukuo.

“High Police” were also known as “secret” or “thought” police.

“They crammed about ten prisoners into once cell.”

“I worked during the day in a cosmetic factory within the prison walls ... even the Bible was not allowed. Buddhist scriptures, however, they did allow ... To the Japanese, Buddhism is so like Shinto ... they think it is almost the same.” [p95]

IX) Passive Resistance (pp. 99-106)

Hiding corps; feigning ignorance; conveniently disappearing; Christians refusing Shinto shrine worship.

Japan forbade Koreans wearing their traditional white clothing.

X) Thought Police Stay for Dinner: Yu Hyegyong, f, b. 1924, housewife, Manchuria (pp. 107-110)

In Shanghai, A provisional Korean government-in-exile published the *Independence in han'gul*.

XI) Becoming Japanese (pp. 111-122)

Governor-General Minami Jiro (r. 1936-42): required Koreans to recite the Pledge of Imperial Subjects (1937); speak only Japanese (1938); worship at Shinto shrines (1939); and change their names to Japanese (1940).

Bowing at the shrines honored the living Emperor by honoring the hundreds of thousands of his god-ancestors .. police pressure ... closing churches to denying food rations.

Kang Sang'Uk, m, b. 1935, physicist, North Pyongan Province

“The Japanese in almost every community set up Shinto shrines high on the hill and once a month they held a ceremony there ... the priests came out in full regalia ... great robes and scepter ... inside was a statue of .. Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess.” [p112]

Yi Okhyon, f, b. 1911, housewife, Hwanghae Province

“Those who opposed going to the shrine expected prison and torture.”

Kim Wonguk, m. b. 1918, Tobacco Authority Officer, North Hamgyong Province

“The first Monday of each month we had a morning assembly and bowed toward this altar by clapping our hands above our heads three times.”

Chong Taeik, m, b. 1911, farmer/lumberman, Kwangwon Province

“We are the subjects of the great empire of Japan.”

“We shall serve the Emperor with united hearts.”

“We shall endure hardships and train ourselves to become good and strong subjects of the Emperor.”

Tenno Heika Ban Zai: “Long Live the Emperor”

Choe Kilson, m, b. 1911, teacher, Kyonggi Province

“We bowed our heads toward the east where the Emperor was supposed to live ... I had to direct the school to bow to the east.” [p116]

Without Japanese name citizens could not enter schools, get jobs, or obtain ration cards. The government stopped issuing permits and postment stopped delivering packages.

Yang Songbok, m, b. 1919, e;electrical engineer, South Chungchong Province

“The purpose of changing names was obviously to make us sound Japanese, so that the younger generation would know nothing but the new names, and their thinking and their attitudes would become Japanese.” [p119]

XII) Drafted to the Kobe Shipyards (pp. 123-129)

“Prisoners of war worked there also ... mostly British, captured in Singapore ... they had been starved – they were just skin and bones.” [p125]

The Japanese police hired *yakuza* as guards.

XIII) The War Effort (pp. 130-138)

Japan needed Korean labor (*ching yong*); they questioned any young man seen on the street.

Comfort Women

“Thousands of young, unmarried Korean women were mobilized ... at the war front ... to provide sexual services for the soldiers. If they refused, they were beaten and denied food.” [p133]

Kim P., f., b. 1931, housewife

“The Japanese told us that we would serve the Emperor and the great cause of the Japanese empire by becoming nurses and taking care of the Imperial Japanese Soldiers ... Japanese called these *Teishintai* ... ‘Volunteer Corps’... The men lined up outside the barracks doors where the women were ... Each man had a given amount of time, about seven minutes ... The woman, on the wall near her head, used chalk ... to make a mark for each soldier she serviced. She thought she would be paid that way, but it turned out they were not paid anything at all.” [pp134-5]

XIV) Mansei: Korea Forever – Ten Thousand Years (pp. 139-147)

“Near the Russian border. Anti-Japanese nationalists let out all their frustrations, and also the Korean communists, who had been biding their time, became militant. Cruel guerilla attacks made everyone nervous. Nobody really knew who was in charge.”

Kim Hojun, m, b. 1918, farmer, Hwanghae Province

Koreans in the south didn’t punish the pro-Japanese ... they kept the pro-Japanese in positions of power.

“Many Shinto shrines quickly became objects of anger ... They tore down the wooden shrines, hacked them to pieces ... burned them to the ground.”

Appendix (pp. 148-159)

1940-4: Though police arrested five thousand ‘though criminals’.

1945: A great massacre of Korean leaders was planned for mid August. “Some weeks after the atom bombs were dropped, we were told that over ten thousand leaders in Korean society who had been on the blacklist of the Japanese police were to have been arrested.”

For many generations, people whose ‘free thoughts’ ran counter to those of the ruling monarch found themselves exiled as far from the royal court as possible, usually to Cheju Island ... or to the far northern provinces.