
As the frequent application and misapplication of transnational theory threatens to erode its functionality, Richard S. Kim’s study of Korean immigration underscores the concept’s ongoing capacity to illuminate. Kim argues that a Korean American consciousness formed “within a triangulated web of geopolitical relations involving the interests of a colonized Korea, imperialist Japan, and exclusionist United States” (p. 7). Efforts to establish a sovereign Korean nation (outside Korea’s territorial boundaries) actually became a pathway for Americanization. The political movement forged an ethnic identity within and apart from “Asian America,” spurred constant interaction with all three branches of government, and exercised American political values and rhetoric to garner necessary support. The cause for independence ultimately “represented the only means to exercise a meaningful voice within the U.S. polity” (p. 120).

Kim illustrates that Korean statelessness, combined with strident, anti-Asian barriers to citizenship, made for a singular immigration experience. For this reason alone, scholars of the American West and ethnic studies will find his work informative. Historians of modern America should also appreciate the book’s incorporation of the larger Korean diaspora and the consequential divisions between the “Siberian-Manchurian group” (which advocated Leninist liberation) and the “American group” (which advocated Wilsonian democracy). The latter stamped Korean immigrant nationalism in the United States as a “carrier of postwar American order” (p. 163).

Kim deserves credit and appreciation for synthesizing the activities of numerous civic and political organizations dedicated to delegitimizing Japanese colonialism. The Korean National Association, the Korean Provisional Government, and their various national and regional headquarters not only assumed legitimate state functions, but those living in the United States occupied “privileged positions” (p. 47). Struggles over authority, money, and ideology eventually grew rampant and occasionally violent and were expensively litigated among and between these organizations.

Social historians might take issue with Kim’s limited notion of the Americanization process, which overwhelmingly occurs within these bureaucracies. Save for a fascinating anecdote in his introduction, few everyday Korean Americans are depicted. Later chapters focus exclusively on a handful of organizational leaders. One such figure, for example, goes to great lengths to propagate Japanese yellow peril scenarios that accord completely with America’s most nativist organizations. The political strategy is understandable, if lamentable, but one wonders how ordinary Korean Americans expressed such sentiments in their interactions with their Japanese American neighbors and the larger, xenophobic majority. More generally, how did Korean American traditions and cultures embrace “the quest for statehood”? Given the Cold War’s perseverance in the Korean Peninsula, Kim concludes, that quest “remains unfulfilled” (p. 163). How this quest continues to shape Korean Americanism, if at all, is unelaborated.

Such questions do not deviate from the fact that Kim has put forward and authenticated a fascinating thesis about exclusion and assimilation within a distinctive transnational context.

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