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JAPAN AND ASIA: REPRESENTATIONS OF SELFNESS AND OTHERNESS

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# ***Primitive selves: Koreana in Japanese colonial gaze, 1910 – 1945* – E. Taylor ATKINS**

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, 280 p.

Review by Kara DISCHINGER (Nagoya University, Japan)

*Date of submission: 16 September 2017*

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In 2010, E. Taylor Atkins published his book *Primitive Selves: Koreana in Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910-1945*, seeking to make sense of the seemingly recent Japanese enthusiasm for Korean culture. As a historian of modern Japanese and Korean cultural history who focuses mainly on transnational popular culture, Atkins sought to prove that the twenty-first century South Korean, or *hallyu*, wave is not without historical precedent. This book positions itself within historical Japanese Imperial scholarship, focusing on cultural history rather than military or policy. Instead of concentrating on how the Japanese Imperial gaze of Korean culture shaped Korea through the imposition of Japanese culture onto the colonies, Atkins instead emphasises how the Japanese gaze on the Korean peninsula worked to shape the identity of the metropole, highlighting the importance of transnational flows on the creation of Self. The result is an interesting view into the complexities in the current and historical cultural connections between Japan and the Korean peninsula. *Primitive Selves* (2010), offers the reader a comprehensive and well researched look into the historical Japanese fascination with the Korean culture and traditions, something that continues to be relevant in an increasingly globalised world.

In his very detailed introduction, Atkins explains the book's purpose to focus primarily on the dual nature of Japanese Imperial rule in Korea, one that worked to both distance the perceived backward Korean peninsula from the Great Japanese Empire, legitimising the Japanese Imperial presence, while simultaneously highlighting the historical and cultural bonds between the two to better facilitate the Korean presence in the Empire. Atkins states three principle arguments he wishes to accomplish throughout the book. Firstly, to challenge the prevailing idea in Korean historiography that Imperial Japan sought to destroy Korea's independent national culture and identity

through assimilation policies. Secondly, to demonstrate that the Japanese discourse surrounding Korea focused not on notions of destruction, but instead on notions of nostalgia and perceived loss. Lastly, to reiterate the belief that the act of gazing transforms the observer and the observed, insisting that the Japanese gaze upon Korea transformed both societies, reshaping what it means to be both Japanese and Korean. These lofty goals are interwoven throughout each chapter, sometimes getting lost in the myriad of argumentation, but ever present as an overarching theme.

Chapter one positions the book as a critique of the current beliefs surrounding Japanese policy towards Korean culture during Japanese Imperial rule. The author offers the reader context into the long history between Japan and Korea, positioning the Japanese annexation of Korea within a long turbulent history between the two nations. This chapter provides the much-needed historical background for the reader to truly understand the complex relationship between Japan and Korea, culminating in the period of Japanese rule over Colonial Korea. He describes historian tendencies to separate colonial rule in Korea into three distinct periods, military rule (1910-1919), cultural rule (1920-1931), and mobilisation for war (1931-1945). The focus on period distinction, while a helpful tool in separating certain policies, showcases the tendency for historians to separate Japanese allowance of Korean cultural expression as an irregularity, relegated towards the eleven-year period of cultural rule instead of something present continuously. Atkins instead argues that the idea of cultural rule was not limited to solely the years 1920-1931, and governmental policy ebbed and flowed throughout the entire period of colonization. His analysis is correct in that the Japanese rule of Korea cannot be contained solely in three distinct periods, instead it was contingent on a variety of factors, and by categorizing policy into three distinct periods historians are doing a disservice to the complexities of Imperial Japan's relationship with colonial Korea. This chapter perfectly sets up the rest of the book, giving the reader a detailed foundation upon which to understand the rest of the book.

Chapters two and three both focus on the seemingly contradictory ways in which the cultural relationship between Imperial Japan and Colonial Korea during the period of colonisation both emphasised cultural similarity and difference to promote certain Japanese agendas. In chapter two, Atkins uses the lens of ethnography to illustrate how the Japanese relationship with Colonial Korea was more complex than the simple notion of total domination. Giving examples of the Japanese active utilising examples of

ethnographic photography from the Japanese Empire in comparison with other European empires, Atkins reiterates the way in which the Japanese gaze influenced the creation of what it meant to be Japanese and Korean during colonial rule.

Chapter three expands on chapter two, focusing instead on the colonial cultural policy and governmental efforts to curate Korean culture through the preservation of documents, art, folk traditions, and sites deemed important to both strengthen the Japanese claim over the peninsula and highlight the cultural similarities between Korea and the metropole. Like the ethnographic excursions into Korea in search of premodern Japanese culture, official governmental policy towards Korea not only distanced modern Japan from the premodern Korea, but also curated a presumed shared history that allowed Japan to rediscover itself as a modern nation.

Both chapters work to strengthen Atkins' goals to prove that Japanese policy in Korea did not actively work to destroy Korean culture, but instead focused on curating a shared culture that created a sense of nostalgia within the metropole. He does this by explaining how the field of ethnography created, and governmental policy reinforced, notions of the Japanese/Korean relationship in the early twentieth century. He is correct in arguing that both avenues actively pushed two seemingly contradictory agendas. First, to maximise the difference between Korea and Japan to elevate the greatness of the Japanese empire, while simultaneously justifying Japanese imperial rule over the sovereign nation of Korea, as well as minimise the differences between Japan and Korea to promote empire-building rhetoric in the metropole. His assertion that Japanese colonial policy regarding Korea consisted of seemingly contradictory approaches, and not just uniform policies and actions, solidly places his argumentation within the field of historiography, complicating the ambiguous nature of the relationship between Imperial Japan and Colonial Korea.

Chapter four, titled "The First K-Wave", explains the impact Korean culture had on Japanese popular entertainment during imperial rule. Atkins uses specific examples such as Korean folk songs and images of Korean *kisaeng* (or, as he calls them, courtesan-entertainers) to show how Korean culture was most popular in the metropole when assimilation policies in Colonial Korea were becoming more forceful. This chapter explains how remnants of cultural rule (1920-1931) permeated into the later war mobilisation era (1931-1945), creating a new type of cultural order within the Japanese Empire and challenging the notions that the cultural flow between Imperial Japan and Colonial Korea

was one sided. The author explains that the Japanese fascination with Korean folk traditions wavered between both derogatory representations as well as genuine nostalgia and interest in the familiar yet exotic nature of Korean cultural traditions. This chapter is obviously Atkins' true interest in the relationship between the Japanese metropole and the colony of Korea, and works to explain how the twenty-first century *hallyu* wave has a historical precedent in the early twentieth century. Atkins convincingly explains how the twenty-first century Korean Wave in Japan is not an anomaly, and the cultural connections between the two nations run deeper than just the current fascination with Korean pop music and dramas. His case studies of folk songs and tradition permeating into the Japanese metropole offer just a couple examples of the rich history of transnational cultural flows between Japan and the Korean peninsula.

The book concludes with a survey of the struggle for Korean culture and folk tradition after the end of Japanese rule on the peninsula. More than a simple restating of his thesis, the conclusion works to explain the current state of Korean folk culture and the continuing legacy that Japanese rule has had on South Korean identity. The conclusion primarily works as an addendum, to incorporate how the Japanese policy to document "Koreaness" shaped and had a lasting impact on the South Korean view of what it means to be Korean. His argumentation offers a great conclusion to the seemingly one-sided nature of the rest of the book, which focuses mainly on the Japanese interest in South Korea. The conclusion serves as necessary background into the current state of Japanese-South Korean relations, bridging the gap between the early twentieth and twenty-first century, however refraining from making any real mention of lasting effects of Japanese Colonialism on the shaping of "Koreaness" in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea(DPRK). More research tying the lasting effects of colonial rule in North Korea as opposed to only South Korea would have further enriched the conclusion, allowing for greater consideration of identity building throughout the peninsula.

E. Taylor Atkins provides great insights into the historical precedents for the twenty-first century South Korean wave in Japan, allowing for a greater understanding of the current relationship between mainly the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan. The turbulent relationship between the Korean peninsula and Japan continues to be important in the current state of politics, and the enduring transnational flows of culture only work to complicate that relationship. Atkins attempts to explain the historical



precedent behind these transnational flows, showing that the cultural connections between Japan and the Korean peninsula are far from one-sided, defining not only what it meant to be Korean through the study of folk traditions and culture, but also helping to define what it meant to be Japanese in a time of empire. This book advances the study of East Asian cultural history by reframing the discussion not solely on Japanese destruction, but on the creation of modern identity. Overall, this book is an ambitious feat, seeking to change the way scholars understand the lasting impact that colonial rule has had on the geopolitical climate in Asia.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Kara DISCHINGER** has an MA in Japanese Cultural Studies from Nagoya University, where she researched Japanese Imperial picture postcards and the representations of Colonial Korea and Taiwan. Before moving to Japan, Kara received a BA in history and political science at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY. She is particularly intrigued by early 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-building and the creation of national identity through early forms of media. She seeks to create a better understanding of the early years of The Japanese Empire and its colonies, and the creation of early forms of Japanese international media.