

Mid-century Modernism, Decolonisation and the Literature of the Korean Peninsula

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Today's talk

- Korean modernism studies in North America:
 - The context for the rise of modern Korean literary studies
 - The popularity of “colonial modernity” studies
 - Survey of studies of modernism
- Remaining questions and future possibilities:
 - East Asian modernisms
 - Mid-century modernism

Korean literary studies in North America: An anecdotal history

- In 1993 there were three professors of Korean literature in North America, with an emphasis on premodern studies (UHawai'i, UCLA, Cornell)
- Little acceptance of modern Korean literary or cultural history as a valid field of study
- Korean modernity seen as imitative, inferior, colonial and thus derivative (of “European modernity”)
- Korea understood as a “conduit” for passing of culture from China to Japan

What changed?

The emergence of modern Korean literary studies

- Funding:
 - Establishment of the Korea Foundation (1991) and the widespread creation of tenure-track positions in Korean literature in North American universities
- Intellectual currents in American academy:
 - Rise of postcolonial theory in English departments in the 1980/90s
 - Growing interest in Japanese empire in East Asian Studies departments
 - Increasing popularity of cultural studies
- Korean history:
 - Korea's position, along with Taiwan, as a colony in Japanese empire
 - modern Korean literature itself emerged during the era of Japanese colonial occupation, making it difficult to separate literary questions from historical questions of colonialism and empire

Why has the concept of “colonial modernity” been so influential in studies of modern Korea?

- Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson’s edited volume, *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Harvard University Asia Center) appeared in 1999. Invokes the Foucauldian notion of discourse and Gramscian conception of hegemony to rethink colonial Korea through a triangulation of the national, the colonial and the modern.
- With the popularity of “colonial modernity” studies in both North America and South Korea, we see:
 - A shift from political/social history to cultural history, studies of discourse
 - Shift from literary/textual studies to cultural studies
 - Emphasis on the productive (not repressive) powers of colonial formations
 - Critique of Cold War nationalisms
 - Nevertheless, difficult to overcome the understanding of Korean modernity as derivative
- Note: colonial modernity, rather than colonial modernism, became popular. In literary studies, less emphasis on style and form, greater emphasis on content and social context.

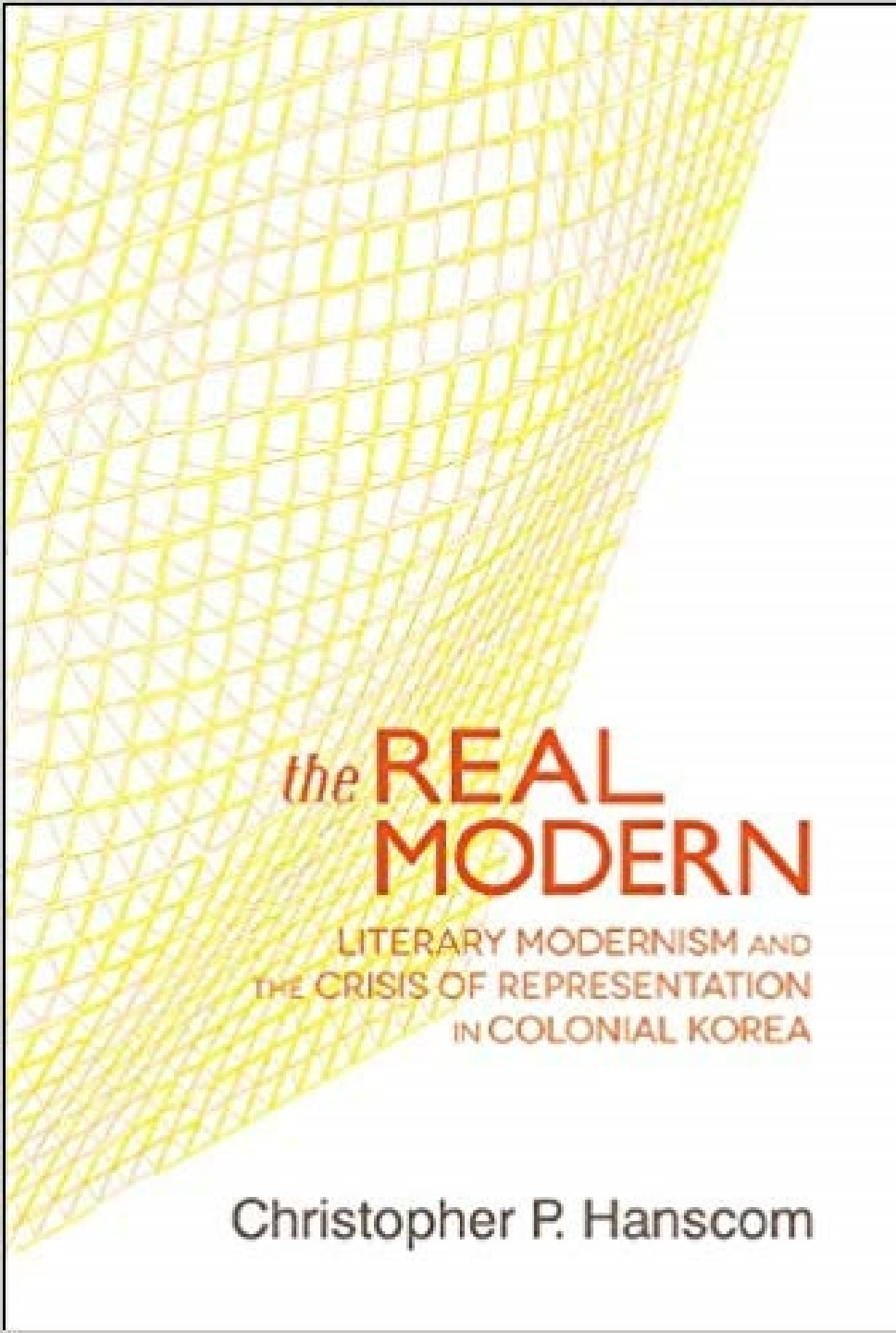


Nayoung Aimee Kwon, *Intimate Empire: Collaboration and Colonial Modernity in Korea & Japan* (Duke University Press, 2015)

- Understands modernity as a globally, and unevenly, shared condition experienced in colonial subjection
- Looks at the shared colonial pasts of the Japanese empire through a study of three writers working in Japanese and Korean languages in the late 1930s (Kim Saryang, Chang Hyöckchu and Kang Kyöngae).
- Keywords: colonial abject, colonial kitsch, local colour, minor writer, conundrum of representation

[COLLABORATION & COLONIAL MODERNITY IN KOREA & JAPAN]

NAYOUNG AIMEE KWON



Christopher P. Hanscom, *The Real Modern: Literary Modernism and the Crisis of Representation in Colonial Korea* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2013)

- Understands modernism to constitute a crisis of representation stemming from “the loss of faith in language as a vehicle of meaningful reference”
- Looks at fiction and critical works on writing by three canonical modernist authors active in the mid-1930s (Pak T’aewŏn, Kim Yujŏng, and Yi T’aejun).
- Keywords: colonial double bind, hysteria, critique of empiricist discourse, irony, lyrical narrative

JANET POOLE

Janet Poole, *When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea* (Columbia University Press, 2014)

- Understands modernity as a culture of time and locates a distinctive form of modernism (understood as a refraction of that time) in writings from the last decade of colonial rule (1935-45), which display the foreclosed sense of a “disappearing future”
- Examines individual works by Ch’oe Myŏngik, Sŏ Insik, Yi T’aejun, Pak T’aewŏn, Ch’oe Chaesŏ and Kim Namch’ŏn
- Keywords: everyday life, detail, nostalgia, colonial fascism, imperialization

WHEN
THE FUTURE
DISAPPEARS

THE MODERNIST
IMAGINATION IN
LATE COLONIAL
KOREA



—
LITERATURE
AND FILM
IN COLD WAR
SOUTH KOREA
—

Freedom's Frontier

Theodore Hughes

Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom's Frontier* (Columbia University Press, 2012)

- Locates a distinctive “visual-verbal relationship” in Korea’s colonial modern literature which persists into the Cold War South Korea literary regime
- Identifies ways of seeing that are central to the organization of postcolonial culture, its anti-communism and “return to the colonial present”
- Keywords: visible/invisible states, development as devolution, colonial modern

Key themes of previous works

- Struggle to define Korean modernity as colonial yet also global: how do we contest the understanding of modernity in Korea as derivative without losing a sense of its specificity?
 - Need to rethink modernity and the colonial
- How can we read Korean modernist texts and their creativity without reading them as second-rate versions of European modernist texts?
 - Redefinition of modernism and understanding of its forms is necessary

Remaining questions and future possibilities

- How can we account for the “longue durée” of modernisms in East Asia?
 - Narrating the pre-colonial, the colonial to postcolonial/postimperial
 - Cold War divisions and creation of new nation-states
 - The ongoing drive for the new
- Previous work on modernism in Korea has mostly focused on the colonial era in isolation, how do we start to think different moments and across moments without creating narratives of continuity and tradition?
 - Think Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean modernist texts alongside each other in differing power structures



Narrating a ruptured history

- Perhaps the majority of Korea's modernist writers and artists moved to the Soviet-occupied northern half of the peninsula during the late 1940s
- They played an active role in the rebuilding of literary and artistic culture in the emergent society that became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948
- Many of them did not survive past the early-mid 1950s: purged, executed, sent into exile, suffering from ill health, often we simply don't know what happened to them



▲ 1951년(44세)의 임지

Decolonisation

- Their works were banned in the Republic of Korea until 1988
- Since then, many of their colonial-era works have been restored, albeit selectively, to the national canon in the south
- Rarely are their works written in the north deemed modernist
- Could our definition of modernism encompass their many experiments across their lives? What kind of reconsideration of aesthetics and geopolitics would we have to undertake to acknowledge their modernism?



Mid-century modernism

- In South Korea these authors are referred to as “those who crossed over to the north” within national histories. Can their works help us to rethink the terms of modernism?
- Mid-century modernism responds to a global history of:
 - Decolonisation and resulting divisions and mobilisations
 - Cold War divides that have shaped our understanding of aesthetics and politics
 - Alternative narratives of Marxist history that have been suppressed under historical state socialisms
- Those expelled by national histories offer clues to an understanding of global modernism