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THE COLONIAL FRONTIER
Primitive accumulation, migration, and settler colonialism in Kando literature

Travis Workman

Although it lies outside of the contemporary borders of North Korea and South Korea, the Kando region of Manchuria, which now comprises the southern part of the Yanbian Autonomous Korean Prefecture of the People's Republic of China, is a significant region for the study of modern Korean literature, culture, and history. Before the twentieth century, this border region was a frontier and a site of encounter between the Chosŏn and Qing dynasties; it was also a place to which farmers migrated from the Korean Peninsula. Japan had attempted to colonize Kando between 1907 and 1909, but during the Kando Convention of 1909, it agreed to cede the territory to Qing China in exchange for railroad rights. With the establishment of the Manchurian puppet state in 1932, Japan actively encouraged Korean migration to Kando, because Koreans were Imperial Japanese subjects and because increasing their already large presence in the region helped to provide legitimacy to Japan’s rule of Manchuria. There was already a sizable ethnic Korean population in the region before Japan’s colonization of Korea. Due in part to these migratory connections between the peninsula and Kando, the region came to hold an important place in the nationalist imaginary of major intellectual figures such as Sin Ch’aeho, and Korean claims to Kando during the era of Japanese colonialism and imperialism in Korea (1910–45) were often in conflict with both the Japanese Empire and Chinese warlords.¹

Kando literature emerged in the late 1910s and was a significant cultural phenomenon throughout the colonial period. After the defeat of the Japanese Empire and rearrangement of East Asian territories in 1945, South Korea was cut off from North Korea and Kando by the division of Korean Peninsula along the thirty-eighth parallel and the incorporation of Kando into the People’s Republic of China after the communist revolution of 1949. However, in both North Korea and South Korea, Kando, often reimagined through the larger territory of Manchuria, continued to be an important setting for period fiction and period film about the era of the Japanese Empire. In addition to the territorial treaties and disputes concerning Kando, a number of other historical factors led to the positioning of the region as a central site of cultural, political, and literary representation. One of the historical factors that led to the proliferation and significance of Kando literature during the colonial period was the displacement of Korean farmers and their increased migration to the region due to Japanese settler colonialism on the Korean Peninsula, colonial cadastral surveys, and the institution of an exploitative agricultural system divided into large landowners and poor tenant farmers—a massive migration that also led to the intensification of conflict between Korean settlers to Kando and local Chinese
farmers and landowners. In addition to this mass migration, Kando literature’s lasting cultural significance is also due to the emergence of an anticolonial partisan movement in Manchuria that drew from the history of Korean nationalism in the Kando territory and eventually provided the ideological foundations of the North Korean state. This anticolonial movement also led to the gradual escalation of the Japanese state’s efforts toward counterinsurgency and its interest in colonizing the territory with loyal imperial subjects. Due to this historical background, representing the lives of migrant Koreans in the region entailed situating them between the Japanese Empire, the Korean colony proper, and the frontier territory and its local Chinese population. Due to this position of Korean Kando migrants between primitive accumulation, settler colonialism, and imperial rule, Kando literary texts disrupt any simplistic nationalist narrative of colonial politics. Even when the political position of the writer seems to be transparently critical of or complicit with Japanese imperialism and colonialism, the migrant characters that appear in Kando literature almost always express an ambivalence about the relationship between the Japanese Empire and Korean nationalism.

Given the competing national and class interests in Kando, as well as the attempts of the Japanese state to police and regulate a region characterized by acute socioeconomic crises, it is not surprising that the various journalistic and literary representations that make up Kando literature would convey a variety of divergent perspectives on settlement, the nation, social class, and the function of literary representation. As much as we have learned about the debates concerning the Korean nation and Korean nationalism during the colonial period, the influence and importance of Kando migration and Kando literature on the national question in colonial Korea have been explored in detail only in the past two decades, by historians such as Hyun Ok Park and literary scholars such as Kim Chul (or Kim Ch’ŏl) and Kwon Bodurae (Kwŏn Podŭrae). This delay is attributable in part to the Cold War division of the Korean Peninsula and the way that post-1945 national borders informed the political and geographic sense of modern nationality and linear modernization in both the communist North and the anticommunist South. Because the North Korean state emerged out of the Manchurian partisan movement and has maintained a clear border with communist China since the end of the Korean War (1953), there has certainly been a greater attention in North Korean literature and film to the Kando region; however, due to the application of a rigid binary between pro-Japanese and anti-Japanese, and the shifting status and recognition of colonial-period socialist writers in North Korea, some of the political and cultural ambivalences of Kando migration and Kando literature have been retrospectively rewritten by North Korean national myth. In South Korea before the 1990s, the exclusion of socialist writers and writers who went to North Korea from the national literary canon meant that the story of Kando literature could not be explored properly until these texts, as well as Japanese-language texts on Kando from the late colonial period, became widely available to a South Korean readership and scholarly community.

Another issue confronted in reading colonial Korean literatures vis-à-vis the Kando region is the approach to colonial-period literary culture that addresses primarily major national figures—from Yi Kwangsu to Yŏm Sangsŏp to Im Hwa—whose experiences of migration were rather to the metropole (Tokyo) and occasionally to the government in exile (Shanghai) and whose images of the Korean people and Korean urban and rural landscapes were determined as much by their comparative references to Japan proper and by the dominant literary forms of Western Europe, Russia, and modern Japan as they were by their everyday experiences of colonial Korean society. The renewed interest in Kando literature in the past twenty years has offered some correctives to this myopic focus on migration to the metropolitan center. Likewise, this chapter contends that we should broaden the scope of our understanding of the relationship between migration and modern Korean literature to include not just the peregrinations of
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elite intellectuals and the forced mass migration of 2 million Koreans to Japan proper at the end of the colonial period but also literary representations of the other, more long-standing migration of displaced Koreans to the Kando region. Working through the history of colonial-period Kando literature provides a unique vantage point on a period of history that has too often been discussed as simply a period of conflict between Japanese colonizers and Korean anticolonial nationalists.

As Kim Chul has shown in a controversial essay on Yi T’aejun’s “Peasants” (1939), turning to literature set in Kando or Manchuria does not offer up an unproblematic image or memory of an oppressed and colonized Korean people, because the displaced Korean migrants at the center of these literatures, particularly in the late 1930s, were often just as likely to express their dependence on the Japanese police and army to protect their economic and social interests (particularly against Chinese landowners) as they were to show political opposition to Japanese colonialism and imperialism. Elaborating on this political position of Kando literature between empire and settler colonialism, this chapter examines, more specifically, representations of primitive accumulation, settler colonialism, and transnational border crossing in order to explore the mutability of national and class positionality in the Japanese Empire. Of particular interest is how the space and time (or chronotope) of Kando literature contrast with the mapping of center and periphery in terms of more typical cultural migration between Kyŏngsŏng (or colonial Seoul) and metropolitan Tokyo.

In the final chapter of Capital: Volume One, Karl Marx discusses primitive accumulation as the process of enclosing agricultural lands, the transformation of land into property, and the subsequent displacement of peasants, which creates the conditions for the possibility of forming the proletariat, a social class that has only its labor to sell in the capital market. Underpinning the entirety of Kando migration and Kando literature is the problem of primitive accumulation, because with the creation of a large landowning class in colonial Korea and the transformation of peasants into tenant farmers who were subjected to exploitative taxes and rents, Kando became both a sign for the utopian possibility of escaping the social and economic effects of primitive accumulation and, more realistically, a site of acute symptoms of the economic, political, and social crises of the Japanese Empire, from anticolonial partisanship and army and police counterinsurgency to the largely unsustainable nomadic life of migrant peasants.

To examine how the representation of Kando transformed over time and how the critical fictions dealing with primitive accumulation and social class gave way to more overtly imperialist visions of the region, this chapter identifies three distinct periods of Kando literature. In looking at the 1920s, I will examine the seminal works of Ch’oe Sŏhae, who was inspired by the early formation of Korean national literature by leading intellectuals such as Yi Kwangsu but turned the attention of colonial Korean literary circles to the lives of poor migrant peasants and their alternative geography and politics within the empire. In examining the early 1930s, I analyze the works of Kang Kyŏngae, whose representations of primitive accumulation and migration focused uniquely on the gendering of these processes and on the limits of nationalist or imperialist discourse in addressing the intersection of class and gender in the context of the settler colonial frontier. Finally, the chapter turns to the late 1930s and the 1940s, showing how the works of Chang Hyŏkchu and Yi T’aejun set in Manchuria turned away from primitive accumulation as a problem of class, gender, and nomadism and instead articulated an intersection of Korean nationalist and Japanese imperialist interest in modernization and cultivation that reflects the late stage of Korean northern migration, during which the settler colonialism of Koreans maintained a fraught but often-cooperative relation with Japan’s imperialist expansion.
1. Migration, letters, and death in Ch’oe Sŏhae’s Kando fiction (1920s)

At the age of eighteen, most aspiring intellectuals and writers in colonial Korea were likely to try to study abroad, in Japan, if their families could afford it or they could obtain a scholarship. In 1918, the eighteen-year-old Ch’oe Sŏhae, born into a poor farming family, instead decided to divorce his wife and migrate to the Kando region. Before going to Kando, Ch’oe was greatly inspired by Yi Kwangsu’s The Heartless, but he must have taken notice of a large gap between his own life and those of the main characters, who upon devoting themselves to improving the Korean nation choose to study abroad, in Japan and the United States, and mainly concern themselves with individual cultural improvement and the national education of the people. Ch’oe was retrospectively canonized as part of the New Tendency Group (sin’gyŏngch’ŏn’g’a) and an early member of KAPF, but he was distanced from the organization and did not get directly involved in the debates between the main proletarian arts theorists. Upon returning to Korea in 1923 and gradually establishing himself as a writer, Ch’oe had some contact with Yi. However, his stories of migration and return do not follow the familiar trope of a Korean man who has returned from Japan as a modernized intellectual and is alternately nostalgic and dismayed in observing the present conditions in Korea. They are concerned instead with the loss of spatial proximity and emotional intimacy between family members and friends caused by attempts to escape grinding rural poverty by migrating north.

Unlike the main writers and theorists of KAPF, Ch’oe worked a number of proletarian jobs and died at the age of thirty-two of stomach illness likely brought about by extended periods of hunger during his migration experience. His works are exemplary of the Kando literature of the 1920s: they describe the economic motivations for migration (including the process of primitive accumulation), the social and familial fragmentation experienced by migrants, and both the hope and the nihilistic resentment of male migrants who found in Kando nearly unlivable poverty rather than a way out of the oppressive system of tenant farming on the Korean Peninsula.

Ch’oe effectively uses the epistolary form, diaries, framed stories, and other modes of personal address to highlight the sense of distance, loss, and social fragmentation in colonial modernity. Kwon Bodurae explains in which ways Ch’oe’s works are modern and defends their form, content, and aesthetic against the kind of historical claim made by the colonial-period proletarian arts critic Im Hwa (that Ch’oe’s works are overly fragmentary and lacking in characters with modern consciousness). There are two main consequences for politics that we can retrospectively recognize in Ch’oe’s works:

1. His foci on primitive accumulation, rural poverty, migration, broken families, and partisan struggle are more representative of the prevalent social conflicts of colonial Korea, compared to the romantic, urban Marxism-Leninism of Pak Yŏnghŭi or Kim Kijin, who abstractly and allegorically declared Korea a proletarian nation.

2. His use of the epistolary form, as well as diaries and other private genres, made his works appear more fragmentary compared to what I call proletarian allegory: the use of metaphoric and symbolic language and tropes to represent in prose everyday experiences of exploitation as moments in the progressive emergence and unification of a singular, nationalized class subject (the proletariat or proletarian nation).

The mediated fragmentariness of letters addressed between characters disrupted notions of a unified human, national, or class subject, revealing the relationality involved in self-expression,
confession, and other modern speech. Ch’oe’s texts also present another chronotope of colonial Korean society. Ch’oe’s chronotopes emphasize the time of migration from the countryside to the frontier region (Kando) or to Seoul, as well as that of the delays created by sending, receiving, and missing news about one’s family and friends. The space of Korea is neither the underdeveloped home country to which the elite intellectual returns nor an anthropologically defined space of the ethnic nation or national proletariat but rather a porous territory with dramatic internal spatial and temporal differences as well as its own frontiers that promise a better, decolonized future but whose realities are as grim as the troubled situations that the migrant farmer attempts to escape. By creating a different chronotope of colonial Korea undergoing rapid primitive accumulation, Ch’oe’s stories emphasize relationality rather than unified subjectivity, borders rather than nations, and the intractability of rural poverty rather than the subjectivity of the urban proletariat.

Some of Ch’oe Sŏhae’s stories focus on urban migration, such as “Paekkŭm” (which is a semi-autobiographical account of a father who moves to Seoul to work as a laborer, becoming estranged from his family and learning only secondhand of the death of his young daughter, Paekkŭm) or “Farewell” (an epistolary fiction, written as a letter to a young man from his younger brother, who has migrated to Seoul and become a shoeshine). However, Ch’oe is best known as the first writer to write extensively and effectively about Kando migration. Ch’oe’s five years in the Kando region working as a dockworker, a cook, a messenger, and a Korean-language teacher were formative for both the themes and the forms of his fiction. In Ch’oe’s second published story, “Native Land” (1924), Na Unsim has just returned to the city of Hoeryŏng from Western Kando: “It was the middle of March 1923, when the shadow of Unsim, who had left his native land with great aspirations, appeared again on Korean soil.” He talks about how immediately after the March First Movement, he went to Kando and found a place where various Koreans escaping from the crimes or failures of their past gathered to hunt, farm, or steal: “Therefore, there were no ethics, morality, or education.” As for the local Chinese, “the policemen arrest opium dealers and beat them, while themselves eating opium.” Such depictions by a writer returned from Kando were certainly cast as adventure stories, of a sort, for the urban intelligentsia. At the same time, they revealed the seriousness of the economic and political crisis brought about by Japanese colonial expansion, which appeared differently when approached from the peripheries of the empire compared to metropolitan Tokyo or the colonial capital of Kyŏngsŏng.

“Escape” (1924) is typical of Ch’oe’s stories set in Kando. Like other of Ch’oe’s stories, it is an epistolary fiction, narrated by Mr. Pak and addressed to Mr. Kim. The story begins with Pak thanking Kim for Kim’s letter, which he seems to have received quite some time ago. In this letter, Kim had implored Pak to return to Pak’s family and his role as household provider. Pak’s response comprises the entirety of the text. He is partly embarrassed and partly defensive about having abandoned his mother and wife and insists repeatedly that he is also a human with emotions. He writes that he wants to explain to Kim why he left his family so that his friend will better understand his circumstances. Pak begins by describing how he left his home village for Kando five years previously. He had heard that it was easy to farm there and that there was plenty of wood to be had from the mountain forests. With great hopes and high ideals, he set out with his mother and wife. However, when he arrived in Kando, he could not find any land to farm, and his family lived on the edge of starvation. He tried to establish a bean curd business, but it was unsuccessful. He resorted to salvaging wood from the mountaintops but was caught by a landowner and taken in by the police. Out of his frustration and embarrassment at not being able to feed his family, he decided to leave. In the only censored portion of the text, he writes that he entered the XX group; the censored part probably reads “Liberation Army.”
Ch’oe and later Kang Kyŏngae present the anticolonial partisan movement as the only way to resist Japanese imperialism and its tragic effects on the Korean migrants to Kando, although these statements were often censored or understated. Kando literature of the 1920s and early 1930s provides revealing images of those displaced and desperate migrants who were mobilized into the Korean anticolonial movement in Manchuria, including the Korean wing of the Chinese Communists to which the future North Korean leader Kim Il Sung belonged.

However, the possibility of being mobilized into partisanship largely remains in the background of the stories, which seem more concerned with representing the sense of loss and alienation experienced by migrant workers. In “Escape,” Ch’oe uses letters to great effect as the reader’s glimpse into the scene of writing and the performativity of the narrative. Kwon Bodurae states that scholars tend to view the epistolary form as the expression of subjectivity and the self-fashioning of confession. However, she argues that epistolary literature is concerned not primarily with the formation of a unified proletarian subject but with relationality. She interprets this aspect most poignantly in her readings of the new ideas of romance that emerged with the postal system and the practice of letter writing.15 Because of the letter form of Ch’oe’s story, the reader is figured as a second addressee and feels the ethical conundrum of the plot more strongly. The hints of embarrassment and regret that appear in the narrator’s letter increase the sense of tragedy, because the position of the reader as addressee is that of a sympathetic friend rather than an anonymous observer. The relation between narrative voice and reader is more intimate and demanding because the reader is figured as the addressee of a lost friend’s letter.

As proletarian literature became the dominant mode of representing the popular experience of colonial modernity, the epistolary novel unfortunately lost its prominence. Ch’oe Sŏhae’s fiction is committed to representing the economic hardships of the popular masses, but in literary forms that better capture the new possibilities for social life that emerged in colonial modernity through migration, trains, and the postal system. Later proletarian literature and literary theory, emblematized in Im Hwa’s synthesis of the humanism of socialist realism with that of the late Japanese Empire, were caught in schematic claims about dialectical historical development, both emanationist and linear, that accentuated Japan as an economic model, migration to the metropole, and the need to pass through stages of economic development in a temporally uniform manner. Ch’oe’s works provide one model for a politically committed literature that did not code the lives of its characters with the abstractions of dialectical logic and the imaginary unity of the proletarian subject within the capitalist stage of development—it recognizes the subaltern status of the colonial Korean working class.

Ch’oe’s stories tend to treat economic and social problems through a depiction of their psychological and emotional effects on individual subjects, and he did not attune his stories to the possibility of a collective subject of political struggle. Many of Ch’oe’s stories portray the progressive destitution of a struggling family man who is eventually led by his resentment to commit acts of murder or arson. In “Bloody Flames” (1926), a migrant tenant farmer who has lost his land in Kyŏnggi-do moves to Western Kando, only to become indebted to a Chinese landlord, In’ga.16 He is forced to give his daughter Yongnye to In’ga as payment for overdue rent but then kills In’ga with a hatchet to rescue his daughter. In “Starvation and Slaughter” (1925), Kyŏngsu’s family is barely surviving in Kando. He has no work and is forced to steal and sell trees. His wife is sick with palsy, but the doctor will not treat her, because he has no money. His mother is bitten by a rabid dog belonging to a Chinese man. Experiencing dislocation, unemployment, and starvation, as well as racism on the part of the native Chinese, he kills his family, stabs others, and is eventually shot and killed at the police station.17

How to view such depictions of violent criminal acts is an important question in an evaluation of Ch’oe’s works. Some see this violence as an expression of the inability of the colonized
intellectual to escape the logic of imperial rule and see the reduction of political revolt to barbaric crime as a reproduction of imperial enlightenment ideology. Others have related this violence to the relatively unmodern character of Ch’oe’s works and their dispersive, rather than integrative, aesthetic. Because his impoverished and desperate characters have no context in which to organize into a proletarian subject, they remain psychological individuals who can respond to oppression only through spontaneous acts of violence rather than with purposive consciousness (to use the binary that KAPF eventually applied to such new tendency literature). However, there is nothing unmodern about Ch’oe’s depictions of the violent psychological effects of alienating and impoverishing economic and social conditions. The moral question of whether crime is a proper or improper response to economic inequity or familial conflict is at the basis of many modern stories. Furthermore, the acts of violence are always contextualized, particularly within the realistic economic and social struggles of Korean migrants to Kando. Rather than poverty and violence being depicted as primarily questions of morality, the violence of Ch’oe’s male protagonists is not judged in ethical terms but rather as images of the failure to survive conditions that in many ways are unlivable.

In this respect, Yi Kwangsu’s development of a modern vernacular certainly inspired Ch’oe’s emergence as a writer, but in choosing Kando as his frontier rather than Japan, he created an alternative chronotope for Korean modernity. In stories like “Starvation and Slaughter,” as well as “The Death of Pak Tol,” in which Pak dies because he cannot afford medicine, the body of the migrant worker is a real material limit that gains its clearest image at the borders, where the stateless and nationless individual, even when they embrace the hopes of the frontier and a new life, confronts the impossibility of escaping or overcoming the dispossession of primitive accumulation. Despite being critiqued by Marxists of the time for his depictions of mere “spontaneous consciousness,” Ch’oe’s stories are in many ways the most reflective of the crisis of a rapidly expanding Japanese capitalism, in which massive numbers of people were displaced from rural areas and left to try, and in Ch’oe’s stories always fail at, various preindustrial economic ventures at the edges of the economic system. Ch’oe stories were critiqued by KAPF critics such as Im Hwa because their chronotopes challenged the developmental image of Marxism preferred by the Marxist-Leninists, who thought of capitalism not as a system of crisis and the maintenance of crisis through imperialism—as Rosa Luxemburg theorized contemporaneously—but rather as a stage within which primitive accumulation and the emergence of the national proletariat could be assumed as historical eventualities and as moments in the unfolding of world history and national history. In an attempt to overcome the economic crisis that Ch’oe’s stories depict at the everyday level, the Japanese state eventually intervened to remake Kando and the rest of Manchuria. In this sense, Ch’oe’s image of Kando was also a kind of political and ethical warning against seeing the imperial frontier as the place of opportunity, as it would be represented to displaced rural Koreans.

Ch’oe Sŏhae’s stories direct our spatial consciousness to the frontier, where historical progress dissipates or is channeled into rural partisan struggle. They guide our temporal consciousness to the tremendous and irreparable loss brought about by colonial modernity and rural poverty and to the melodrama of arriving too late to a destination or missing an important letter from a long-lost family member or friend. His focus on the irredeemable death of the migrant as the limit to both the imperial economic system and nationalist politics questions the crisis and crisis management of Japanese imperialism and its ongoing processes of primitive accumulation. At the same time as Ch’oe points indirectly to partisan struggle as one proper political response to Japanese colonialism, the conflicts with local Chinese landowners often at the center of his stories also adumbrate the future governmental strategy of the Japanese state, which manipulated these conflicts between migrant Koreans and local Chinese in order to integrate migrant
Koreans displaced by primitive accumulation into a settler colonial project compatible with Japanese imperialist expansion. If the alienated and nomadic characters in Ch’oe’s 1920s stories rarely find a way out of the economic and political situation other than through death, the Kando literature of the late Japanese Empire would find power and livelihood for settler colonials in the protection of the Japanese state.

2. Kang Kyŏngae: gender, migration, and primitive accumulation (1930s)

Ch’oe Sŏhae’s Kando fiction was able to effectively represent the precariousness and alienation of the lives of Kando migrants and connect them to the larger social and economic transformations occurring on the Korean Peninsula, but he did so primarily through male protagonists who are driven by the economic system to acts of violence against themselves, their families, or their exploitative landowners. Kang Kyŏngae’s fiction and essays set in Kando in the 1930s, as in most of her work, shift the focus from the male family man, intellectual, or worker-hero to female workers who experience various gendered forms of exploitation. Her stories and essays offer a rereading of primitive accumulation and migration to Kando as problems of gender, prefiguring more recent interventions by feminist Marxists such as Maria Mies and Silvia Federici, who have connected the dispossession and extraction of primitive accumulation to gendered colonial domination. Ch’oe’s use of epistolary forms and attention to mediation, relationality, and social fragmentation worked against both the nationalist and mainstream proletarian arts’ notions of space, time, and subjectivity. Likewise, Kang’s geographic orientation toward the northern border, as well as her unique position as a woman writing in the male-dominated mode of proletarian realism, sets her apart from the other primary tendencies in colonial-period fiction and politics. At the same time, her work transformed the dominant image of the Kando migrant from the male to the female subaltern, bringing to light how integrally connected primitive accumulation is to modes of exploitation committed by men against dispossessed female bodies—from sexual violence to uncompensated reproductive and household labor. Furthermore, Kang does not allegorize the exploitation of women, making it stand in for the colonial exploitation of a bounded national community, but rather uses the porosity of the Kando border and the frontier landscape to create distinct literary metaphors around primitive accumulation; through her invocations of the Kando region and her criticisms of nationalist intellectuals, she questions whether or not the nation is the only idea through which one can respond politically to the social and economic crisis of colonial and imperial expansion.

Kang’s essay “In Praise of the Tuman River” (1934) is indicative of her regional orientation and her attention to the border as a site of uncertain national identity, the deterritorializing movements of migrant “people” (paeksŏng), and the state’s reterritorialization of the people into a population through policing. She writes emotively about the Tuman River and its role as border between Korea, China, and Russia. She discusses the many ways that the river has served as a border historically and the legends that were spawned to make sense of its social meaning, from early in the millennium when it provided a loose boundary between the Puyŏ and Ŭnmu peoples until it became a more rigid border between the Chosŏn dynasty and the Ming and Qing dynasties from the fourteenth century until the nineteenth century. Kang then turns to the term Kando, which is of Manchu origin, and tells a popular legend about the origins of Korean agricultural migration across the Tuman river into the region. The Chinese characters for Kando mean the “between island.” Since it has been a borderland for centuries, and very much remains so today, the use of the character kan (“between”) is logical, but the original reason for the use of the character do (“island”) is unknown. It may refer to the land area between two bodies of
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water, the Hailan and Tuman Rivers, or perhaps originally to one of the many islands on the Tuman River itself.

Kang takes up the explanation that Kando originally referred to one of the many islands on the Tuman River, but she adds her own twist through the quotation of folk legend:

There is an interesting story concerning the Tuman River. There is a small island called Kando in the middle of the Tuman River, on the bank opposite from the village of Chongsŏng. This island has such fertile land that if you planted grain it would grow better than the grain grown on Korean land. Therefore, the people used to cross in secret to do business. However, the powerful country of the Qing Dynasty was frightening and their border defense was strict, so the people could not farm with ease. So, one day in the middle of the night they gathered and the discussion turned to trying to transfer Kando to Korea. The people immediately went to Tuman River and in order to transform the current flowing toward Korea into a current flowing toward Manchuria, they filled it with earth and tried to make Kando into Korean land. Even now, if you go to Chongsŏng, the remnants of their effort remain.

Before trying to make Kando Korean land in this way, coming to the island in secret to farm was already referred to as “Kando farming.” From then on anytime someone crossed the Tuman River and did farming, even if it wasn’t on Kando, it was called Kando farming. Following this legend, it is as though the Tuman River gave birth to Kando. The Tuman River, the mother of Kando.21

Through her recounting of a folk legend, Kang provides a unique and peculiar image of the river as border, one that recalls the fluidity and relativity of perspective that we find in a number of works of so-called Kando literature. Rather than viewing the Tuman river as a squiggly line between two distinct national territories and national populations, the popular legend instead conveys the movement and shifting perspective of the migrant’s sense of space. It also shows that the frontier border is a site of conflict between the rationality of political authority and the migrant’s rearticulation of space and time. The frontier border is where the people have yet to become a population, in the full sense, and yet are called upon to imagine themselves as a people. Origin and destination are connected to an idea of community, but they are also spatially and temporally mutable and not two sides of a clear cartographic boundary.

In the case of Kando, the mutability of the frontier border is connected to empire and to settler colonialism. Koreans in the 1920s and 1930s were usually displaced peasants from the Korean Peninsula who settled land in Southern Manchuria at a time when this territory was gradually being incorporated into the Japanese Empire and became part of the Manchurian puppet state but was still an ungoverned territory in many respects. Therefore, the flexibility of the spatial orientation of the migrant in Kang’s description is tied up with the sense of flow and movement, and the porousness of borders, that characterize imperial spaces of settler colonialism; on the other hand, by turning to the past and to the feudal forms of accumulation suffered by peasants during the Chosŏn and Qing dynasties, Kang introduces the relation between migrant worker and expanding empire in a temporally ambiguous manner. She asks how the sense of space and time of the migratory, displaced peasant might challenge rather than be conflated with imperial subjectivity. She does so by working with a sense of time and space somewhat outside the modern sense of economic or historical stages but does so without transparently redefining origin atavistically, as the lost starting point of an infinite and ahistorical national community. Therefore, she states that the Tuman River is not the origin of the Korean national people but rather the “mother of Kando,” invoking the regional imaginary of “Kando”—not necessarily to
reclaim it for the nation of Korea, as in Sin Ch’aeho’s project, but rather to sketch or provisionally define a space and community for the migrant worker, who is always not-yet subsumed or captured by the economy and laws of industrial society or imperial subjectivity. As in many of her stories, the phrase “mother of Kando” invokes both origin and displacement in relation to a fundamental dispossession, but she references water imagery and the natural border without transforming them into metaphors of either national origin or imperial expansion.

For Kang, neither Korea nor Kando is a cartographic geobody, to use Thongchai Winichakul’s term, but both are rather spaces that exist only in relation to the movement of the river. Korea does not exist on one defined side of the border, nor is it an imperial territory that expands to incorporate further land. It is defined by its orientation toward the natural border. The imaginary, regional island can belong to the territory of the origin only through an impossible utopian transformation of the landscape that differs from the cartographic representation of the national geobody in that the directional flow of the river as boundary remains—either side of the border might be the territory of Korea, depending on the mobile imagination and perspective of the people. Kang contrasts the spatial imaginary of the political authority of the Qing dynasty and its policing practices with a migrant sense of space characterized by mutable perspectives and orientations, the flow of water, and an uncanny exile from both the origin and the destination.

Given the place of Kando in the spatial imaginary of the Japanese Empire in 1934, Kang’s recounting is clearly not intended to articulate the migrant people as modern, rational political actors but rather to contrast their metaphorical rendering of the space of the border with both the dynastic and the imperial-national sense of territory. In so far as Japanese colonialism and imperialism, as well as general processes of modernization, led to a dramatic uprooting of the entirety of Korean society in the first half of the twentieth century, but without the (re)constitution of a national geobody that belonged cartographically to the world nation-state system, Kang’s articulation of the “people” in terms of the movement of migration and the contradictory and uncanny sense of collective space created by the direction of flowing water is more revelatory in this context than nationalist representations of the population. The people of Kando are always not yet a population.

In this regard, Kang uses the term paeksŏng. Paeksŏng usually refers to the peasants, merchants, and artisan living under the rule of the Chosŏn dynasty. The Japanese term of the same characters, hyakusho, has been the object of much historiographic debate. In modern Japan, this term, as it appeared in Tokugawa-period government registries, was usually interpreted to mean “farmer,” but Amino Yoshihiko has shown that it encompassed a much larger group of people, many of whom were merchants or even involved in manufacture. In twentieth-century Korea, there was an attempt to nationalize the term paeksŏng; by the time of the 1950s, for example, the ultranationalist philosopher and politician and member of the Syngman Rhee cabinet An Hosang discussed paeksŏng as the native Korean pronunciation for the Chinese characters for the people of the state, or kungmin. According to An, paeksŏng is a more Korean—rather than Chinese or Japanese—way to refer to the national people; and this people is already a population, already a group of nation-state subjects. In a more historicist or stageist understanding, Kang used the term paeksŏng, or people, to refer to a kind of in-between state: between exploited villager under feudalism and the industrial proletariat proper. However, Kang represents this in-between state as the condition of modernity looked at outside the language and metaphors of nation-state discourse. Therefore, at the founding of the modern and postcolonial nation-state of South Korea in 1948, nationalists such as An Hosang tried to transform the people into a population through the conflation of the term paeksŏng with kungmin, the “people” with the “nation-state people.”

Kang uses the term paeksŏng to emphasize a class difference between migrant farmers of Kando and the feudal landowners of Chosŏn and the Qing dynasty. It is in the context of a
transition from these feudal relations to the modern nation-state that Kang’s genealogy of the Tuman River as border gains a number of important resonances with problems of translation, figuration, and the *chronotopes* of modernity and modern literature. As in her long novel *From Wonso Pond* and most of her fictional texts, Kang is deeply concerned in this essay with the problem of primitive accumulation, Marx’s term for the expulsion of farmers from land held commonly or feudally, the revaluation of that land as property, and the subsequent creation of a large population of property-less workers, or proletarians, who have only their labor to sell in an effort to sustain themselves. Mies and Federici have emphasized that primitive accumulation is not a singular process that occurs during the transition from the stage of feudalism to the stage of capitalism but instead an ongoing process of dispossession necessary for the accumulation of capitalism. This ongoing process of the dispossession of the means of subsistence is a problem of gender, because the process of being separated from the land occurs concomitantly with the positioning of proletarian women in the household as domestic servants and/or the bodies that reproduce the national population. Kang did not use the term *primitive accumulation*, but the process of primitive accumulation during imperialist expansion was a primary concern to Kang. According to Kang, the connection between the migrant workers of today and the *paeksŏng* of the Chosŏn period is not a singular transition from a feudal to a capitalist agricultural system nor a shared national tradition or identity but rather the continuity of the problem of migrant labor and the articulation of the border across dynastic and colonial and imperial rule.

In her best-known Kando fiction, *Salt*, Kang explores how the gendered body and the sexual division of labor affect the experience of primitive accumulation as an ongoing process of dispossessing the commons of its means of subsistence. A woman identified as Pongyŏm’s mother migrates to Kando with her displaced farming family, but her husband is killed by a Chinese landowner. Because the landowner convinces her that the communists killed her husband, the woman moves in with the landowner and is sexually exploited, eventually having his baby. When she leaves the landowner’s house, the only commodity she has to sell is her labor, and more specifically her body; she becomes a wet nurse for a wealthier woman. In an allegory for gendered primitive accumulation, her own child dies from sickness and neglect, while she is working as a wet nurse for the wealthier woman. In *Salt*, Kang shows that biological reproduction, fundamental to the gendered process of a people (or *paeksŏng*) becoming a national-imperial population, is a form of unwaged labor. After suffering from sexual exploitation, Pongnyŏm’s mother undergoes further corporeal exploitation in working as a wet nurse to the detriment of her own child. After the loss of an agricultural means of subsistence caused by primitive accumulation, there is no smooth historical transition to the modern wage labor; rather, the body of the female subaltern migrant is exploitable in more direct ways. Kang’s focus on Kando migration allowed her to explore the most brutal forms of labor on which the vast imperial economic system depended, particularly at its peripheries. Rather than asserting the national or imperial proletariat as the subject of history, she shows that colonial exploitation is more properly represented outside the space and time of the colonized nation, on the colonial frontier, where vulnerable migrants, and particularly migrant women, are defined primarily by their social class: their dispossession and their dependence on unwaged labor.

Kang’s literary studies of Kando migration led her to have a distinct vantage point on primitive accumulation and proletarianization in the colonial industrial centers such as Inch’ŏn. Her long novel *From Wonso Pond* (or *Human Problems*), also published in 1934, depicts a proletariat in motion, particularly from the countryside to the city, and narrates the complexity of the process of primitive accumulation. Although returning to the countryside and rural enlightenment are impossible for the migrant laborers in the novel, primitive accumulation is present at every moment, both as the general condition of the passage to wage labor and as a literary
metaphorics. The first scene of *From Wonso Pond* describes the pond in the village as a life-giving force and tells the story of how it was formed by the tears of suffering peasants who starved while the warehouse of the landowner was filled with their harvest. The opening registers the sense of loss and the dramatic feeling of displacement from the commons that accompany industrialization and the commodification of land, but it does not fall into nostalgia about the precapitalist past; the image presents both the feudalism of the past and the tenancy system as a means for appropriating life and the means of subsistence. The pond of tears sets the stage for Kang’s exploration of the “human problems” of her time, in which the lot of the peasantry and the workers, particularly women, have not improved through cadastral surveys and industrialization.

This sort of image of the lost past can be usefully distinguished from national allegory because there is no illusion that what has been lost can somehow be regained in its full form. The image lingers melancholically without becoming a lost origin, lost ancestral or social bond, or lost national past that could somehow be reconstituted through development, revolution, or the formation of an internal national self. Kang’s discussion of the pond made of the tears of the people contrasts with the enlightenment nationalist Yi Kwangsu’s descriptions of primitive accumulation as a compressed moment of dispossession whereby the ancestors and their bodies are separated from their rightful ownership over the land. In his developmentalist back-to-the-land novels such as *Soil* (1933), Yi imagined that the connection between the population and the soil might be regained through a new practice and new poetics of the national subject. In this protofascist text, Yi represents primitive accumulation as a separation of the national people from their natural environment by modern imperialism:

Sung’s ancestors had cultivated these fields, probably along with Sun’s ancestors. They had cut down all the trees and dug up all their roots, made a reservoir to provide water to Salyŏul, and mixed their blood and sweat to plow the fields. Sung’s ancestors and Sun’s ancestors ate the rice grown in this field and lived and enjoyed life generation after generation. Weren’t the bone, flesh, and blood of Sun and Sung flowers that sprouted, grew, and blossomed in this soil where the blood and sweat of their ancestors mixed?

However, these fields for the most part no longer belonged to the houses of Sung and Sun. They had all become part of some company, bank, union, or plantation. These days those living in the village Salyŏul, Sung’s home village, had become like grass whose roots were cut. The sounds of the birds, dogs, beasts, horses, and oxen, which had risen peacefully and leisurely in the valley’s morning mist, had also diminished greatly this year. It wasn’t just that the number of animals had decreased, but that the peacefulness and leisureliness had left their voices. They were painful, weary, and resentful.27

For Yi, who studied at Waseda University in Tokyo and whose idea of the space of Korea was very much determined by the geobody notion of national population, rural Korea was the space in need of development and enlightenment, on one hand, and the space of ancestral blood origin that defined somatically the Korean population through the metaphorics of a displaced and lost origin that had to be regained and reconstituted through modern technology, on the other. Yi Kwangsu, although a right-wing nationalist, shared with stageist Marxists such as Im Hwa the idea of primitive accumulation as a singular moment of transition between premodern and modern, a gap always in need of being closed through the representation of the national individual and the national people, in contrast to Kang’s works, which represent primitive accumulation as an ongoing process of dispossession connected to the sexual division of labor, seemingly endless migration, and the confluence of feudal and capitalist modes of exploitation.
Much work in postcolonial studies in Korean literature and Japanese literature has focused on issues of bilingualism, translation, ethnic identity, and imperial subjectivity among elite male intellectuals who studied in Japan. However, compared to the problems of Japanese national identity and Korean ethnic identity that we find in the works of Kim Saryang, Chang Hyŏkchu, Yi Kwangsú, and many other writers of the colonial period whose primary orientation for migration was the elite educational institutions of metropolitan Japan, the case of Kando literature provides an example of minor literature written at the peripheral border regions of empire. Rather than concerning themselves with how Korean ethnic identity might best integrate or differentiate itself from Japanese national identity, Kang’s works show that migrant peasants were integrated into a national or imperial “population” only through, on one hand, primitive accumulation and the state’s policing of borders and, on the other hand, the exploitation of subaltern female bodies through sexual violence and unwaged reproductive and household labor.

3. Japan’s expansion into Manchuria and Korean settler colonials: Chang Hyŏkchu and Yi T’aejun

Ch’oe Sŏhae and Kang Kyŏngae provided images of the poverty and suffering of Korean settlers to Kando, highlighting the systemic, structural, and personal forms of violence against the bodies of subaltern migrant subjects. In depicting Kando migration, they broadened the spatial and temporal boundaries of the colonized nation, beyond the relationship between imperial metropole and colonial capital. Although irredentist and settler colonial claims to Kando are certainly in the background of 1920s and 1930s Kando literature, neither Ch’oe nor Kang makes explicitly nationalist claims to the territory. Their anarchist and socialist texts instead situate tensions between Koreans and Chinese within the economic and social crises of the expanding Japanese Empire—the primary motivation for migration in their stories is not to settle or reclaim Chinese land but rather to try (and fail) to escape the increasingly exploitative class and land relations on the Korean Peninsula. Of course, irredentist political discourse around Kando and even broader Manchuria certainly existed, in the works of Sin Ch’aeho and others, but exemplary texts of Kando literature by Ch’oe and Kang still articulate national liberation (written under the erasure of censorship) as something to be obtained through anti-Japanese partisan struggle.

In contrast, the last decade of Kando literature shows a much clearer complicity between Korean settler colonial claims to Kando and Manchurian lands and the political and economic interests of the Japanese Empire and shows the disappearance of overt criticisms of Japanese colonial and imperial expansion. As the timeline of Kang’s texts show, socialist and feminist critiques of imperialism in Kando literature continued after Japan’s official establishment of the Manchurian puppet state in 1932. However, as the surreal and alienated aesthetic of Kang’s later work “Darkness” (1936) suggests, there was diminishing hope of possibility of political resistance to the social and economic forces driving mass migration and poverty on the frontier. 28 In the late colonial works of Chang Hyŏkchu and Yi T’aejun set in Manchuria, we find a shift from Ch’oe’s and Kang’s depictions of the harsh realities of primitive accumulation and migration toward narratives of civilization, development, and modernization. This shift is apparent in the very title of one of Chang’s works, Kaikon (Kaegan) (1943), which means “cultivation” or “land reclamation.”29 Furthermore, Chang and Yi politicized the relation between Korean settler colonials and Chinese landowners and farmers, particularly through the fictionalization of the Manbosan Incident of 1931. Clearly, Ch’oe and Kang also represented class conflict through politically charged images of Chinese landowners exploiting Korean migrant farmers; however, beginning in the late 1930s, such stories of Korean victimization became more obviously resonant of the colonial and imperial discourses and policies of the Japanese state. Anticolonial
partisan struggle and the acts of anarchistic violence in Ch’oe’s works gave way to depictions of state and vigilante violence as the settler’s rightful means of protecting their claim to land, certainly within Kando and also extending to broader Manchuria. Of course, these later texts of literature set in Manchuria are not mere propaganda and contain within them ambiguities about national identity, colonialism, and political conflict in Manchuria. However, the general shift toward defending the territorial claims of Korean settler colonials does follow the changing political and economic context, discussed in detail by Hyun Ok Park, in which the Japanese state made increasing efforts to govern and to mobilize Korean migrants for the benefit of imperialism.30

As the literary critic Kim Chul first showed in an important and provocative reading of Yi T’aejun’s “Peasants” (1939), retelling the Manbosan Incident provided writers with a means to connect the long-standing Kando literature theme of the victimization of Korean migrants by local residents and situate it within an explicitly (imperial) nationalist framework. By representing the conflict between Korean migrants and local residents as one of national victimization (rather than gender or class violence), Yi articulates Koreans in Manchuria as members of a national population. Despite the fact that Yi opposes Korean national consciousness to the colonized Chinese rather than to Imperial Japan, before Kim Chul’s intervention, literary critics emphasized and celebrated Yi’s turn in this story from pure literature to national political engagement. Since Kim Chul showed that Yi’s Korean nationalism is compatible with Japan’s policy of expansion and imperial assimilation in Manchuria, there has been a great deal of debate around whether Yi’s story should be considered propaganda for the Japanese Empire. Kim clearly thinks it should be, and scholars such as ChangYôngu think that Kim misreads the relationship between the fictional text and the historical incident. Lee Sang-Kyung focuses on the problem of censorship, arguing that Yi T’aejun was not in a position to be able to criticize Japanese imperialism overtly and yet did so surreptitiously through the exclusion of the Japanese consulate from the story.31

Much of this debate around “Peasants” centers on the degree to which it is an accurate fictionalization of the Manbosan Incident and how to judge the differences between the story and the event. The historical record shows that in 1931 Korean migrant farmers dug a canal to irrigate their land in the small village of Manbosan, north of the city of Changchun. Because the canal crossed land that was not owned by the migrants, the local residents protested to the local authorities. The migrants were ordered to cover the canal and leave the area. Before authorities could investigate, a few hundred Chinese farmers armed with tools drove the Koreans away and filled in the ditch. The Japanese consular police became more directly involved and fired shots to disperse the Chinese farmers. The ditch was completed, even though this required driving the local residents off the land. The incident itself did not lead to casualties, but the sensational stories printed in Korea led to anti-Chinese riots in Inch’ŏn and Pyongyang that did lead to a number of deaths and injuries.32

According to Kim Chul, Yi T’aejun purposefully left out or changed important historical details in “Peasants” in order to provoke nationalist sympathy for Korean migrants and to ignore the background of Japanese imperialist expansion. In the story, Ch’anggwŏn leaves Korea in order to migrate to Manchuria with his family. The first two parts take place on the train and depict the kinds of hopes and fears felt by Koreans trying to escape the difficult economic and political conditions on the Korean Peninsula. The family settles in a village near Changch’un, geographically marking the story as a fictional reflection on the Manbosan Incident, if not a retelling. They participate in the construction of a canal; the local Chinese farmers are angered; and as during the historical event, they try to drive the Koreans off of the land and fill the ditch. Ch’anggwŏn’s grandfather dies in the ruckus. However, rather than the Japanese consular police
getting involved at that point, it is the Chinese farmers who are able to secure the support of the Chinese army, who shoot indiscriminately at the Korean farmers, killing an elderly man and injuring Ch’anggwŏn in the leg. As Kim points out, in the epitaph, Yi sets the story “during the reign of Zhang Zuolin,” which ended in 1928, therefore displacing the political violence in the backdrop of the real Manbosan Incident—namely, Japan’s invasion of Manchuria—onto the Chinese warlord and his army. The story also makes no mention of the anti-Chinese riots that were the real cause of casualties.

Kim sees these omissions and changes as reflecting the kind of repression of history made possible by egocentric nationalism, whereas Lee Sang-Kyung provides a more forgiving reading, stating that Yi T’aejun was trying to avoid writing a more propagandistic treatment of the incident that would include the heroism of the Japanese consular police (as in Chang Hyŏkchu’s rendering in Kaikon). I side with Kim’s reading of “Peasants,” because too many of the details of the historical event—particularly the perpetrators and victims of violence—are obviously distorted into their opposite for the text not to be read as expressing a settler colonial nationalism compatible narratively and aesthetically with the aims of Japan’s imperial expansion into Manchuria. Even more important, however, is the transformation of tropes of primitive accumulation from the earlier decades of Kando literature—this process of expelling peasants from their lands and separating them from their means of subsistence is no longer depicted as a social and economic issue of class and gender but now as a national conflict between a united, victimized settler colonial nation (Korea) and a mythical, repressive, and ultimately more primitive enemy. Therefore, in “Peasants,” we find a colonial representation of local Chinese as “t’omin,” or “natives,” as people less civilized than the population of Koreans, whose right to the land is justified by their relative nearness to modernity and civilization. Such a transformation of the figure of the rapacious, ethnically Chinese landlord of Ch’ŏe and Kang’s fiction into an image of a native Other who must be colonized to be tamed reflects ambivalently, however, the more overt complicity of Korean settler colonial interests and the discourses and policies of the Japanese state in the late colonial period. In the process, primitive accumulation becomes a necessary step in modernization, migration becomes a means to return to one’s national origin, and the border remains porous only such that capital and state can continue their expansion and domination.

Notes

1 Schmid, “Rediscovering Manchuria.”
3 Park, Two Dreams in One Bed; Kim Ch’ŏl, “Mollak hanun minsae”; Kwŏn Podūrae, Yŏnae ēi sidae.
4 Kim Ch’ŏl, “Mollak hanun minsae”; Yi T’aejun, “Nonggun.”
6 Kwak, “Ch’ŏe Sŏhae ŭi chakp’um segye,” 410.
7 Ibid., 422.
8 Kwŏn Podūrae, Yŏnae ēi sidae, 143–45.
10 Ch’ŏe, “Ko’guk,” 7.
11 Ibid., 11.
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 28.
15 Kwŏn Podūrae, Yŏnae p’yŏnjii ēi segyesang, 23–24.
17 Ch’ŏe, “Kia wa saryuk,” 49–66.
18 Luxemburg, The Accumulation of Capital.
19 Park, Two Dreams in One Bed.
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20 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*.
22 Winichakul, *Siarn Mapped*.
23 Yoshikiko, *Rethinking Japanese History*.
24 An Hosang, *Ilminjuŭi ēi pou pat’ang*.
25 Kang, *In’gan munje*, 135–413; From *Wŏnsŏ Pond*.
29 Chang Hyŏkchu [Noguchi Kakuchū], *Kaikon*.
30 Park, *Two Dreams in One Bed*.

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———. “Paekkŭm.” In *T’alch’ulgi*: Ch’ŏl Sŏhae t’ap’yŏnsŏn, 88–111.


Kim Chiyŏng. “’Kaech’ŏk’ kwa ‘kaensang’, ‘sinmin-toegi’ sai ŭi minyo han kŏr: Chang Hyŏkchu ŭi ‘Onnŭ toknongga ŭi sulhoe,’ ‘Sullye,’ *Kaegan* ŭl chungsim ŭro” [The Delicate Distance Between Becoming an Imperial Subject,’ ‘Development,’ and ‘Rehabilitation’: Focusing on Chang Hyŏkchu’s

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