Colonial modernity

E. Taylor Atkins

A new highway now runs beneath Mt. Samhak,
And all become a playboy in the wind of automobiles.
—‘Ch’unch’ǒn Arirang’ (Kim et al. 1948: 258; Kim 1988: 10)

All usable trees were sold as telegraph poles,
All pretty girls as entertainers.
—‘Chǒngsǒn Arirang’ (Kim 1988: 10)

Old-fashioned people thought it was heresy to think things they had never thought, but it was actually the comprehension of new truths that the old-fashioned people had never known before. A son must always be better than his father. Otherwise there would be no such thing as progress. People who are behind the times, however, dislike it when newcomers know more than they do. Old-fashioned people are thus often responsible for the tragedy that results from the clash of modern and traditional thought.
—The Heartless (Mujǒng) (Yi Kwangsu 1917: 252)

The first half of the twentieth century was a bewildering, disorienting time for Koreans. The people of Chosǒn had once prided themselves on excelling the Chinese in the implementation of an ideal Neo-Confucian order. But in the modern hierarchy of nations, Korea rated poorly, and in the age of ‘high imperialism’ even such presumed moral perfection seemed of little use to the cause of national survival. The privileged few who constituted the ‘enlightenment’ (kaehwa) generation understood well what it meant to lose national sovereignty to Japan, accepted Social Darwinism as the merciless, ‘inviolate’ principle of international relations (Schmid 2002: 37–38), had some notion of how industrial capitalism would affect material and social life, and grasped the monumentality of the Yi court’s failure to prevail against both domestic dissent and predatory foreign powers—but they were no less distressed or flummoxed than the less worldly majority. Both the kaehwa intellectuals and their country cousins expressed their perplexity eloquently in their respective literatures.
The oral literature of commoners depicted a world turned upside down, if not gone completely mad.

Those who are fluent of speech are summoned to court,
Those who can work get to the public cemetery,
Girls who can produce get to be whores,
And those who have muscles are called to slave labor.

—’Ponjo Arirang’, Kyŏnggi (Sŏng and Chang 1949: 3–4; Cho 1974: 49)

Poisonous grass grows before a virtuous woman’s gate.
A peony flower blooms before a whore’s gate.

—’Arirang t’aryŏng’, Muju, North Chŏlla
(Im 1971: 424; Kim 1988: 9)

As soon as a new road emerged, I lost my love.
Automobiles always remind me of my lost love . . .

—’Chindo Arirang’ (Kim 1988: 6)

These fragments of folk songs (minyo) from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depict the devastation of sacred landscapes, working bodies, and feminine virtue. They offer prescient critiques of the transformative effects of modern technologies and their attendant mindsets; even the wind generated by a passing automobile could change an observer into a dandy ‘playboy’. If a sense of loss necessarily accompanies modernity (Lears 1994: 4–5), their songs indicate that Korean commoners grasped and felt it deeply.

For the newly emergent Korean literati—writing in vernacular han’gŭl rather than in classical Chinese (hanmun)—modernity was not so unwelcome; indeed, they were among its strongest advocates and beneficiaries. But they were well attuned to its challenges and costs. They spun dramatic fictional narratives around the very real, unprecedented ethical dilemmas and uncomfortable social situations that the modern age and colonial subjugation presented to Koreans. Yi Kwang-su’s 1917 novel, The Heartless (Mujŏng), opens with a series of awkward encounters and observations that illustrate the sense of anxiety and disorientation. Protagonist Yi Hyŏng-sik, an English teacher, has a ‘code-switching’ conversation with a friend, peppered with Japanese and English words and phrases. He feels ‘powerless’ because ‘he did not have the power of money, in a world dominated by money. . . . Most of the worries of modern day people . . . had to do with not having money. It was no surprise that people valued money in a world in which one could purchase someone’s body and even their soul if one had the money . . .’. When calling on a pupil (a young aristocratic woman preparing to study abroad in the United States) for the first time, he observes, ‘In former times, a guest would never have been allowed past the inner door; just being allowed to enter the inner door was a big change from the old ways’ (Yi 1917: 79–80, 131). Throughout The Heartless, characters are torn between fidelity to the ‘old’ ideals of filial sons and ‘virtuous women’, and the ‘new’ order of ‘free love’ (chayu yŏnae, consensual marriage without parental involvement), female self-determination, and individual ambition. For some of the older characters, modernity is little more than an affectation (255–259, 301); Hyŏngsik and his fiancée Sŏnhyang are thus ‘children . . . who had lost the traditions of thought transmitted for generations from their ancestors, and were wandering about, not knowing what would be appropriate for them to choose from the confusion of Western Colonial modernity
thought. They had been thrown into a world without standards for life, or ideals of a nation, and without someone to guide them in the world’ (324).

‘Colonial modernity’—which Park Chan Seung (2008) has elegantly defined as ‘a particular articulation of the universal notion of “modernity” in the colonial context’ (105)—has come into fairly widespread use as an analytical term among scholars of modern imperialism. They have taken advantage of its concision to depict historically specific conditions in disparate regions of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperial world, such as Egypt, Indochine, the Dutch East Indies, China, sub-Saharan Africa, Siam, British India, and Manchukuo. Although its application in Anglophone and Japanese scholarship on Korea has been prodigious, ‘colonial modernity’ (sikminji kündacsoon) has proven far more controversial a concept among Korean scholars, some of whom regard it as another way of unduly crediting the Japanese colonial occupation for the ‘genesis of modernization in Korea’ (Cho 2012: 655; Lee, et al. 2013: 10–16).

The word ‘modernity’ designates a host of interrelated historical conditions and ways of looking at time, space, and human relations: reliance on rationalism, science, and technology to bring order and efficiency to human affairs; a notion of progressive time, in which the present moment is perceived as a profound departure from—and improvement on—traditions and precedents; a sense that humanity has detached from and transcended the limits of the natural environment; industrial capitalism and specialisation of labor; urbanism and cosmopolitanism; mass media and consumer capitalism; individualism and subjectivism; increased mobility of people, commodities, capital, and information; and the rise of the nation-state as the standard unit of socio-political organisation, governed by a centralised, bureaucratic state authority whose ever-widening purview includes public health and sanitation, education, national defence, legislation and law enforcement, protection of property rights, regulation of commerce, economic planning, and credentialing. Historians generally agree on a concept of modernity that encompasses capitalist democratic, socialist, and fascist political arrangements. They also acknowledge that the sense of triumphal achievement that celebrates progress is tempered by nostalgic yearning for preindustrial modes of production and ways of life. ‘It was . . . modern urban life’, Henk Schulte Nordholt (2000) observes, ‘that invented the traditional village and produced the memory of the good old rural way of life that belonged to the past’ (102).

Whereas ‘colonial modernity’ suggests these historically specific conditions and their attendant lifestyles and mindsets, ‘colonial modernisation’ (sikminji kündachwua) refers to the ‘compressed’ process of social, economic, political, and cultural engineering directed toward attaining those conditions within a colony (Lee 2011: 90). The latter phrase is the subject of much dispute among historians of East Asia, because for some it implies that Japanese imperial rule was beneficial to former colonies such as Taiwan and Korea and territories under military occupation like Manchukuo and the collaborationist Reorganized National Government of China. The colonial modernisation argument presumes to take a neutral, clear-eyed stance, unmoved by indignant nationalist emotion; it employs quantitative analysis to balance the humiliating loss of sovereignty and imperial abuses against the valuable infrastructural, commercial, sanitary, educational, and managerial investment and expertise Japanese brought to territories under their administration. Unsurprisingly, right-wing historical revisionists in Japan, such as the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact (SDHF), favour this argument. However, there are Korean scholars (Kim Unt’ae and An Pyönggik, among them) who do not dismiss it lightly in toto (Park 2010: 74–77), though they still take umbrage at the triumphal self-congratulation the theory encourages in some of their Japanese counterparts.

Proponents of colonial modernisation theory contend that, whether or not Japanese-sponsored efforts to modernise colonial and client territories were intended to benefit local populations, they clearly did, by creating transportation and communication infrastructure,
Colonial modernity

educational and entrepreneurial opportunities, agricultural innovation, mass media, and new technologies, all of which enabled the colonies to integrate within the modern world. These laid the groundwork, some say, for economic development and prosperity in the late twentieth century, particularly in Taiwan and the Republic of Korea (Cumings 1984; McNamara 1990; Eckert 1996). Advocates of this historical narrative regard it as far more constructive than counterfactual speculation about whether or not Koreans, Taiwanese, and Chinese could have accomplished modernisation without Japanese interference. Korean nationalist historiography (minjok sahak) emerged in part to counter the ‘distorted’ claims of beneficent Japanese rule and the incapacity of Koreans to self-modernise, creating an alternative balance sheet in which the only real ‘benefit’ of colonial subjugation was a deepened nationalist identity and spirit of resistance among the Korean people.

If modernisation directed by the colonial regime is the process, then presumably colonial modernity would be its result or product. But that schema itself distorts somewhat the political agenda that is implicit in colonial modernity scholarship, but which its critics tend to understate or overlook. For many scholars, colonial modernity intimates greater contribution and agency from colonised populations: rather than being a unilateral imposition by omnipotent imperial regimes, it is a modernity conceived, refashioned, and lived by people under colonial domination, sometimes in conformity with and sometimes in opposition to the colonial state’s visions. Colonial modernity, then, consists of ‘neither disfigured nor unsuccessful replications of any prior stable object, artifact, or concept from another place or time’ (Barlow 1993: vi-vii); rather, it is an ‘alternative’ modernity selectively marshaled to promote the welfare and improve the lives of locals, rather than to further the financial or strategic interests of imperial overlords. If it encourages anti-colonial nationalism, it also fosters other forms of identification that compromise the homogeneity nationalism idealises. Traditionally disadvantaged constituencies are able to use new mass media to participate in the public sphere and assert their interests (Limapichart 2009). Colonial modernity is negotiated—as are most things in colonial settings—between colonisers and colonised, and amongst the colonised, exhibiting attributes peculiar to each locale. Therefore it is more akin to Antonio Gramsci’s theory of ‘hegemony’ than to a model in which violent coercion is the only means of maintaining control: conflict between the political/economic elite and ‘subaltern’ classes is managed through a complex negotiation in which relatively minor concessions are made to subaltern demands and sensibilities in exchange for a more general acquiescence to authority. Hegemony is a process by which the status quo is ‘normalised’ or ‘naturalised’, so that no other political or economic order seems remotely viable, even to those who remain disadvantaged by it.

Colonial modernity’s foremost theorist, Tani E. Barlow, begins from the Marxist premise that ‘colonialism and modernity are indivisible features of the history of industrial capitalism’ (1997: 1; 2012: 623–624). First and foremost, the concept draws attention to the fact that modernity was imagined, constructed, and experienced within a world of empires. Colonial modernity is thus a critique of ‘modernisation theory’, the belief (shared by Marxists and non-Marxists alike) that civilisations and nation-states progress at different paces through universal stages of economic, political, and social development toward national self-determination and emancipation of the individual citizen/subject. Modernisation theory has a ‘tendency naively to disavow power differentials’ that colour experiences of modernity (1997: 6) and to portray ‘Euro-American influence in Asia [as] historically moderate, benign, humanistic, benevolent and helpful’ (2012: 623). On the contrary, exploitation of colonial resources made European, North American, and Japanese modernisation possible; that is, modernity was not a previously accomplished state of being that facilitated or enabled imperial conquest and colonisation of ‘less developed’ areas of Africa, indigenous America and Australasia, the Middle East, and Asia.
Secondly, in contrast to prior depictions of the imperial world as a field of interaction between discrete regions at different stages of historical development (modern or primitive, civilised or savage, East or West), colonial modernity encourages transnational thinking and highlights ‘historical synchronicity’ (Barlow 1993: vi; 2012: 629–630); scholars thus frame metropolitan and colonised regions as a ‘unitary field of analysis’ (Schmid 2000: 953). A corollary of this is acknowledgment of the mutual impact of colony and métropole on one another: although their relations are explicitly unequal, cultural influence and institutional development flow in both directions, rather than simply from the stronger party to the weaker. The possession of colonies profoundly transformed and defined imperial nation-states in myriad ways, from their economic, military, and political structures to their imaginative lives (Thomas 1994; Cooper and Stoler 1997: 1; Shin and Robinson 1999: 5; Schmid 2000: 958). Without colonialism, there would likely have been no Tintin or Tarzan, no Bōken Dankichi or Babar the Elephant.

If ‘colonial modernity enables us to understand synchrony between Empire and colony’, it likewise promotes a sense of ‘diachrony between colonial and postcolonial periods’ (Cho 2012: 59). Piercing the historiographical boundary between ‘colonial’ and ‘postcolonial’ eras to examine continuities, persistent inequities, and legacies, colonial modernity ‘helps us focus squarely on the unevenly borne heritage of imperialist occupation and colonial domination’ (Barlow 1993: v; Dirlik 2007: 110). What some call the ‘postcolonial condition’—or, more colloquially, the ‘colonial hangover’—thus falls within the concept’s scope.

One of the more controversial aspects of a colonial modernity approach is its attention to ‘everyday life’ and material culture under conditions of colonial subjugation. The prevailing structural critiques of empire, as well as the shopworn dichotomies of coloniser/colonised and collaboration/resistance, obscure ‘some of the density, richness, and complexity of the original ecosystem’ in which people lived their lives (Shin and Robinson 1999: 4–5). While some scholars welcome this attention to the ‘subconscious, intangible dimensions of colonial life’ (particularly because it often allows for greater scrutiny of gender and culture), critics claim it is ‘at the expense of structural historical narratives’ and the realities of colonial coercion and violence (Do 2004: 202–203; Park 2010: 70, 83; Cho 2012: 652, 656; Lee et al. 2013: 14, 16–30; Kim 1996: 21, 43). Moreover, with its emphasis on urbanisation, consumerism, mass media, industrial capitalism, and leisure in the ‘nascent “bourgeois public sphere”’ (Arumina 2003: 74), colonial modernity scholarship naturally gravitates toward urban spaces and their residents, neglecting the rural majority.

For scholars whose primary intents are to expose Japanese imperialism as ethnocide, to document and memorialize the collective suffering of the Korean masses (minjung), and to trace the occupation’s impact on post-liberation Korean political and social development, studies of the ‘subjectivity’ of ‘new women’ (sinyŏsŏng) in literature, or the impact of chemical seasoning (MSG) on modern palates (Jun 2005), for instance, seem inconsequential by comparison. In the charged political climate of contemporary East Asia, in which the Korean and Chinese states remain unconvinced by Japanese government expressions of contrition for colonial and wartime atrocities, some Korean scholars think studies of the ‘micro-dimension’ experiences and thoughts of colonised Koreans detract from more substantial inquiries into colonial-era economic exploitation, political repression, and human rights abuses, the effects of which linger to this day. Frequently criticised by their North American, European, and Japanese counterparts for their nationalist outrage, Korean historians retort that it is much easier to take a ‘post-nationalist’ posture when one does not actually reside in a former colony (Cho 2012: 658).

Despite such criticisms, colonial modernity remains an attractive shorthand descriptor to many scholars who focus on the period of Japanese occupation (1910–45). Scholars do appear to agree that a fundamental social transformation transpired in colonial Korea (Shin and Robinson 1999: 128...
The conditions of colonial modernity noticeably flattened the explicitly hierarchal and patriarchal social order of Chosŏn; novel forms of prestige and identity, and new routes to individual advancement, gradually supplanted heredity and Chinese learning in determining social status. In The Heartless, Hyŏngsik recognises an idle old man in P'yŏngyang who had once been a provincial official, living in ‘desolate loneliness’:

Before 1894, when the old man was in his prime, he must have thought the rivers and mountains of P'yŏngyang, and all the people in the world existed for him. With the cannonfire from Úmil Pavilion in 1894, though . . . [h]e became a person abandoned by the world, and young people whom he did not know and had never seen before, took over. He knew nothing about railroads, telegraphs, telephones, submarines or torpedo boats. . . . Since he would never realize what this new world was like, it was as though he were living outside of the world, even though he dwelled within it (215).

It would be overreaching to say that yangban lineage and Sinocentric erudition lost all social importance, but they became far less valuable than a modern education and material wealth in determining one’s social position. Never before had it been so socially advantageous to be conversant in international affairs, foreign languages, the natural and social sciences, mathematics, engineering, and business (ironically, precisely the types of knowledge promoted by eighteenth-century ‘practical learning’ [sirhak] scholars and routinely dismissed by Neo-Confucian elitists).

There are fundamental disagreements among scholars about how ‘emancipating’ this social revolution actually was: some argue that old modes of caste-based oppression were simply replaced with new class- and ethnic-based ones (Park 2010: 88–96). Furthermore, since this transformation occurred within a space under colonial dominion, there were implicit, unadvertised limits to what an ambitious modern Korean could achieve. Even the privileged son of a former noble house, with a degree from a Japanese university, could not realistically aspire to a civil service or private sector career in which he would have supervisory authority over Japanese. A well-educated daughter, with a degree from a Japanese university, could not realistically aspire to a civic or private sector career in which she would have supervisory authority over Japanese.

Shin and Robinson (1999) have noted that modernity in colonial Korea was refracted through the lens of imperial Japan (10). Uniquely among modern imperial powers, from the mid-1850s Japan had itself been subjected to substantial imperial pressure by the United States, Russia, and European countries, via the mechanism of the unequal commercial treaty. The leaders of the Meiji state that came to power in 1868 observed imperialist predations on the Asian continent and fixated on the Korean peninsula as the key to their own homeland security. With increasing rural unrest, continuing subservience to China’s floundering Qing dynasty, and a vacillating royal court beset with factional intrigue (which, ironically, Japanese meddling only exacerbated),
Chosŏn appeared destined to become someone’s colony, Meiji leaders surmised. Nearly three decades before the actual annexation in 1910, Japanese officials worked with Chosŏn dissidents to resuscitate the Korean monarchy by undermining it, hoping to install a pro-Japanese, Meiji-like modernisation regime to govern the peninsula.

Modernity in Korea essentially began with this generation of reformers, Kim Okkyun (1851–94), Sŏ Chae-p’il (1864–1951), Hong Yŏng-sik (1855–84), and others who formed the Enlightenment Party (Kaehwadang). It was no accident that they used the Sino-Korean equivalent of the Japanese term kaika (literally, ‘opening’) from the Meiji-era slogan ‘civilisation and enlightenment’ (bunmei kaika); Kim Ok-kyun was a disciple of Japan’s foremost public intellectual, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), the man who almost singlehandedly defined and embodied that slogan for most Japanese. Another Fukuzawa protégé, Yu Kil-chun (1856–1914) wrote, ‘In an enlightened society, myriad affairs and things are thoroughly studied and managed, and innovation is attempted at all times. There is heroic spirit for greater achievement, and indolence is totally absent’ (quoted in Ch’oe et al. 2000: 250).

The kaehwa faction’s reliance on Japan may seem naïve or foolish in hindsight, but in the 1880s its members believed that Korean independence and modernisation would best be served by accepting Japanese assistance and cutting ties with the Qing. Their fourteen-point agenda included the abolition of formal status distinctions and yangban aristocratic privilege, as the Meiji government had legally erased samurai status through a series of edicts (haitōrei) in the 1870s; cessation of tributary relations with Qing and assertion of Chosŏn’s political independence; land tax reform; and reorganisation of government administration, military, and police forces (Ch’oe et al. 2000: 255–256). The failure of the Enlightenment faction’s December 1884 coup attempt, in historian Yong-ho Ch’oe’s (1982) estimation, was ‘an unmitigated disaster for modern Korea’: the ‘attempted coup totally besmirched the image of the enlightenment movement’, and ‘deprived Korea of a viable model for reform and modernisation as the image of Meiji Japan became tarnished in the eyes of many Koreans . . .’ (108, 120).

The fact that several of the Kapsin Coup’s masterminds sought refuge in Japan inspired little confidence; those who would later aspire to bring kaehwa to Korea would be dogged by suspicions that they were too pro-Japanese (s’in’il) to be trusted. Japanese sponsorship of another attempt at a Meiji-style ‘revolution from above’, the so-called Kabo Reforms (1894–95), virtually guaranteed their failure (Ch’oe et al. 2000: 272–276). Over the next decade, a number of private organisations arose in the rechristened Taehan Empire to push for modernisation through fundamental political, educational, and social reforms: some, like the Independence Club (1896–98), Korean Association for Self-Strengthening (1906–07), and New People’s Association (1906–11), rejected Japanese assistance; others, particularly the Advance in Unity Society (1904–10), worked closely with Japanese officials, believing that political reform and capitalist modernity were unattainable without their guidance (Moon 2013). Ironically, Japanese interventions to assist sovereign Korea’s self-strengthening efforts were so ham-fisted and self-serving as to delegitimize and undermine the whole enterprise.

Japan was not the only source of modern ideas, institutions, technologies, and practices in Korea. Indeed, the abortive Kabo ‘revolution from above’ was precipitated in part by a ‘revolution from below’: the wholly indigenous, millenarian Tonghak movement that preached social equality. Although its original name meant ‘Eastern Learning’, as opposed to ‘Western Learning’ (sŏhak), this syncretic faith’s doctrine of ‘humans are Heaven’ (inmaech’ŏn) and admonishment to ‘treat each person as you treat Heaven’ (sainyŏch’ŏn) clearly resonated with modern notions of the rights and dignity of the individual. Benjamin Weems (1964) has argued that ‘the implications of the doctrine were as staggering to the controlling groups in nineteenth-century Korea as had been the impact of the theories of John Locke or Rousseau upon the
controlling elements in eighteenth-century France and England’ (13). In their 1894 uprising, Tonghak rebels pointedly destroyed slave registries to throw the centuries-old slave system into chaos and compel emancipation. Renamed Ch’ŏndogyo (Teaching of the Heavenly Way) in late 1905, the faith became ‘modern’ in its organisational structure, propagation tactics, and implicit nationalism. Moreover, as publisher of colonial Korea’s longest-lived women’s magazine, New Woman (Sinyŏsŏng), Ch’ŏndogyo sponsored a major forum for public discussion of women’s issues (Lee 2011: 96).

Protestant missionaries from North America and Europe had a deeper impact on notions and experiences of modernity in Korea than they did in either China or Japan. Besides adding thousands of Koreans to the Christian flock, missionaries opened schools, churches, clinics, and hospitals that were preferable to what the regime offered. At the beginning of the colonial period, at least, Korean girls were much better served by schools opened by missionary women, where they could continue their studies much further than in the Japanese schools; they could even aspire to enter Ewha University (founded by American missionary Mary F. Scranton in 1886) or attend college overseas. Many Koreans came to regard the missionary presence as a haven or refuge from their colonial reality. They took spiritual comfort in the Christian message and detected a distinct advantage in learning modern ways and ideas directly from ‘the source’, rather than secondhand from their imperial overlords. They also realised that the whole notion of ‘liberty’ was conspicuously absent from Japanese versions of modernity. ‘When a people saturated in the Bible comes into touch with tyranny’, Canadian missionary F. A. McKenzie (1920) wrote in the wake of the March First uprising, ‘either one of two things happens, the people are exterminated or tyranny ceases’ (7).

By all accounts, Korea was one of the most intensively developed colonies in the world. The peninsula’s strategic value to Japan’s continuing encroachments into Northeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s was multifaceted: it was a site for factories, mills, capital investment, and military garrisons, a source of labor, food, and raw materials, and, eventually, even of soldiers. The consequent transformation was most visible in cities, especially those in which substantial numbers of Japanese settled. Kyŏngsŏng (Keijō/Seoul), Taegu, P’yŏngyang, Mokp’o, and other Korean cities, much like urban spaces elsewhere in the colonial world, were marked by the incongruities of the modern and the antiquated, the Western/Japanese and the indigenous, the planned and the unintended, a ‘mystifying mix of surface and depth, past and present, confinement and mobility’ (Johnson 2003: 317, 330; Myers 2003; Kim 2008; Arnold 2012: 122; Min 2013: 500–501).

Case studies of the capital (Henry 2014), the old inland city of Taegu (Kim 2008) and the new port town of Mokp’o (Park 2008) depict ‘dual cities’ in which Japanese and Korean residential areas were clearly demarcated and improvements in infrastructure, sanitation, and other city services were unevenly distributed. In each case, Korean residents protested against construction or demolition projects that were of no benefit to them, but city councils dominated by the minority Japanese habitually overrode such objections. Only adult males who paid five wŏn in city taxes per year were eligible to vote, which virtually guaranteed disproportionate Japanese representation in city government. According to Park (2008), in 1935 eligible voters in Mokp’o consisted of 883 Japanese and 551 Koreans, nearly all of them industrialists, merchants, or landowners (118–122). With so little Korean representation in city government—and what there was comprising a compradore class deeply enmeshed in the Japanese-dominated economy—there was little to prevent the transformation of Korean cityscapes to serve Japanese interests. In 1906 Japanese residents successfully conspired with a ch’in’il local governor to demolish the fortress wall of Taegu (Kim 2008: 82–83). In Kyŏngsŏng, the Government-General of Chosŏn (GGC) tore down most of the Kyŏngbok palace complex and obnoxiously placed its neoclassical
granite headquarters in front of what was left, obscuring capital residents’ view of their monarchy’s former grandeur.

Despite all the official propaganda about the ‘progress in Chōsen’ under Japanese rule, Japanese settlers could be incredibly stingy about sharing its benefits with their Korean neighbors. Japanese residents of Taegu vetoed the city administration’s 1924 plan to upgrade the streets and sewage system in Korean residential areas (Kim 2008: 88–89). Appeals for piped water, paved roads, street lighting, and garbage collection in Mokp’o’s Korean North Village, to match those of the Japanese South Village, also went unheeded (Park 2008: 123–130). The number of rural migrants into both cities continued unabated, however, further straining city services and exacerbating the difference in living conditions between Koreans and Japanese.

Rural Korea lagged far behind but was by no means unaffected by modernity. Throughout the peninsula, railroads, telecommunications, irrigation and construction projects wrecked geomantic havoc, ignoring Korean sensibilities about sacred spaces, auspicious landmarks, ancestral burial sites, and fertile soils. ‘Our good farm lands are taken away for railroads’, farmers wailed, ‘Our beautiful maidens become prostitutes’ (quoted in Nahm 1975: 201). To be sure, railroads served Japanese military and economic interests first and foremost, but, as was the case in British India and other colonies, also facilitated the integration of distant regions into coherent national space. In 1899, Japanese completed an American-initiated rail line connecting Kyŏngsŏng to coastal Inch’ŏn; three years later, they secured from the Taehan court rights to build the Kyŏngbu line between Kyŏngsŏng and the southeastern port of Pusan. When hostilities with Russia began in 1904, the Imperial Japanese Army rushed to complete the project to facilitate the transport of troops to the front lines. In its urgency, the IJA sometimes seized agricultural land and commandeered local labor. Peasants occasionally sabotaged rail lines that passed through their lands, risking summary execution. Within a short timespan, by linking the Kyŏngbu and French-managed Kyŏngŭi (between the capital and Úiju) lines, Japanese had succeeded in connecting the southeastern tip of the peninsula to the northwestern border with China with 950 kilometres of rail line (Nakano 2007). A 1936 railway map shows a substantial rail network linking the capital to Mokp’o in the southwest, Kyŏngju in the southeast, Masan in the south, Najin in the extreme northeast, and Sinŭiju in the northwest (where passengers and cargo could connect to the Trans-Siberian Railroad).

As was the case in Japan, the rural peasantry, nominally esteemed in Confucian cosmology, assumed greater prominence in the modern political imagination. Clark Sorensen (in Shin and Robinson 1999) has argued that colonial-era intellectuals identified agrarian cultivators (nongmin) as a Marxist ‘class’ (kyegŭp) in which the very core of Korean national identity (minjoksŏng) resided (288–290). It was in the colonial period, then, that the peasantry assumed political importance as the basis for ‘the people’ (minjung), the ‘agents of social transformation and progress’ (Wells 1995: 25; Shin 1999: 792). But, again, as in Japan, rural folk themselves saw little actual benefit from such exalted discursive status. By the early 1930s, tenant farmers comprised over half of rural Korean households, paying both fixed rents and variable proportions of the harvest to absentee landlords, whose primary concern was to maximize their own wealth through commercial agriculture. Dong-No Kim (in Lee et al. 2013) contends that cultivators bore much of the costs for new seeds, machinery, fertilizers, and irrigation systems for the regime’s Program to Increase Rice Production—for Japanese consumption (162–163). Peasants were endlessly inventive in their methods of passive resistance, sometimes replacing rice with wheat or barley, or refusing to harvest crops altogether (Shin 1996: 137–138). Unable to thrive in the market economy, or even to consume the crops they tended, millions of rural Koreans flocked to cities to engage in wage labor, which promised but was no guarantee of an improved quality of life.
However, Gi-Wook Shin and Do-Hyun Han (in Shin and Robinson 1999) contend the GGC was not completely oblivious or indifferent to nongmin, who were, after all, providing an increasing portion of the rice consumed in the métropole, nor were farmers themselves passive in asserting their interests. Agrarian activists mounted a fully realized critique of colonial modernity, advocating agrarian self-sufficiency rather than integration into the capitalist market, moral reconstruction, and collectivism (Shin 1999: 794–800). The state-sponsored Rural Revitalization Program (1932–40) worked with villages to address agrarian immiseration and resolve disputes between tenants and landlords. Shin and Han point to ‘modest achievements in improving rural economic welfare’ resulting from ‘noncoercive measures to cultivate consent’ in the countryside. In a rare show of well-informed cultural sensitivity, the regime invoked the moral principles of the traditional hyangyak (village compact) to persuade farmers to invest in the campaign. By encouraging village collectives to take charge of their own affairs, and ‘selectively attempt[ing] to incorporate peasants’ demands into state policy’, the GGC sought to cultivate economic and ‘spiritual’ rejuvenation. ‘In addition to Meiji reform ideology in the form of agrarianism and a social policy approach’, Shin and Han conclude, ‘internal developments within Korea crucially shaped the course of the rural campaign’ (88–90, 94–95).

The cultural history of colonial Korea has benefited immensely from the colonial modernity approach. Whereas earlier histories narrated the decline of traditional arts and leisure pursuits, or their purposeful erasure by Japanese assimilation policies, recent scholarship recounts the adaptation of traditional music, dance, theater, visual arts, literature, and amusements to modern tastes and mass-mediated modes of delivery. The everyday creative and consumptive activities of Koreans reveal multiple complexities of life under colonial rule that are far more compelling—sometimes even inspiring—than a simple account of cultural degradation and atrophy. The mixture of Euro–American, Japanese, and Korean elements made the cultural marketplace vibrant, distinctive, and emblematic of colonial modernity.

As cinema (yŏnghwa), ‘new fiction’ (sin sosŏl), popular songs (kayo), and ‘new theater’ (singŭk) increasingly commanded the attention of audiences, the number of practitioners of traditional arts shrank noticeably during the colonial period; but it is also true that, as these traditions were (re)invented, canonised, and represented in new media, their prestige value and import as signifiers of Korean cultural distinctiveness grew. Musicologist Andrew Killick’s (2012) examination of ch'anggŭk opera is a terrific case study of performers adapting and transforming their art for the modern cultural marketplace while highlighting its ties to traditional aesthetics and Korean cultural identity. In the first decade of the twentieth century, some artists joined forces to create troupes and appropriated the singing techniques and canonical stories of p’ansori—originally performed by a lone itinerant bard (kwangdae) and a drummer (kosu) in outdoor public markets—for indoor, multi-actor theatrical stage productions. As in Morocco (Dieste 2012), China, and Japan, the spectacle and novelty were enhanced significantly by the onstage presence of women; some of the first Korean actresses were former kisaeng who had been dismissed from government employment by the Kabo Reforms.

Although its twentieth-century origins and the influence of American stage plays, Chinese changxi (‘singing plays’), and Japanese shinpa (quasi-kabuki agitprop melodramas) make the ‘traditionality’ of ch’anggŭk debatable (52–61), Killick notes, it retains a ‘traditionesque’ aura: ‘Visually, ch’anggŭk is a parade of traditional Korean clothing, architecture, and landscape; aurally, it can include almost the whole spectrum of Korean musical styles. Thematically, it centers on traditional Korean stories with (at least ostensibly) traditional Korean Confucian morals’ (27). From 1903 to 1912, and again in the late 1930s, ch’anggŭk thrived as a popular form of vernacular entertainment in both urban theaters and provincial tent-shows. It proved popular and durable enough that the colonial regime thought it well suited to promote its intensified ‘national
language’ policy and assimilation agenda in the late 1930s and 1940s and to foster Korean support for the war effort (Park 2003: 103). Nayoung Aimee Kwon (2014) characterizes a 1938 Japanese production of the venerable p’ansori/ch’anggŭk opera Ch’unhyang chŏn as an attempt to satiate parallel yet inconsonant nostalgic desires. For Koreans, Ch’unhyang was part of the nationalist agenda to resuscitate and promote ‘national tradition’ within the cultural realm, which ‘took on rising symbolic import as a metonym for the identity of the absent nation and its lack of political sovereignty’ (117). For Japanese, Ch’unhyang was ‘colonial kitsch’, an exotic curio of peninsular culture, one of many ‘mass-produced objects for indiscriminate imperial consumption’ (115, 121).

The quintessential modern entertainment was, of course, the motion picture. The Japanese benshi, who provided narration, context, and commentary for silent film audiences, and whose celebrity often exceeded that of the actors onscreen, was transplanted to Korea as pyŏnsa. In most respects, the pyŏnsa’s responsibilities and skill set mirrored those of his Japanese counterpart (there are no records of female pyŏnsa, although there were female benshi): in addition to extemporaneous eloquence, charisma, and wit, he needed to be conversant enough in foreign (Euro-American and Japanese) cultures to offer contextual explanation during showings of imported films. Two named pyŏnsa mastered Japanese well enough to perform for Japanese audiences. Yet the pyŏnsa was not simply a Japanese transplant; he was an example of the refraction of imported culture that characterizes colonial modernity. Pyŏnsa had the power to shape audiences’ experiences and interpretations of the films they watched. Film scholar Kim Ryŏsıl (2004) makes a persuasive case that the 1926 blockbuster Arirang was not a self-contained nationalist allegory, but became one whenever pyŏnsa Sŏng Tong-ho (1904–?) ’read’ it to audiences (18, 20, 21–22). When narrating Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ, Sŏ Sang-p’il (1901–?) likened the slave revolt to the Korean independence struggle (Maliangkay 2005). If Japanese police were absent, then, pyŏnsa not only interpreted the wider world for their audiences but also kept the embers of nationalism aflame.

Also emblematic of the complexities and paradoxes of Korean colonial modernity were the kisaeng. These courtesan-entertainers—allegorical if not quite identical to Japanese geisha—are usually known as carriers of traditional Korean vocal and instrumental music, dance, calligraphy, and poetry, and to some degree that was their function in the colonial period. However, like their South Asian counterparts, the taua’if (Jha 2009), they were also prominent in new electronic media as popular entertainers, performing newer Korean, Japanese, and even Euro-American material on theater stages, radio broadcasts, and 78 RPM records. To be sure, their greater visibility and audibility were not uncontroversial, and traditionalists and Japanese Koreaphiles were chagrined to see kisaeng expanding their repertoire.

The stigma of a kisaeng’s presumed sexual availability titillated and scandalised audiences. No longer reserved for government officials, kisaeng were ‘accessible’ to a greater variety of men, anyone who could pay. The Heartless features several lengthy ruminations by protagonist Hyŏngsik, as he struggles to reconcile compassion for his childhood friend Yŏngch’ae and revulsion at the (unfounded) thought of her acquiescing to the sexual demands of possibly hundreds of ‘dissipated’ men after she became a kisaeng (Yi 1917: 111–114, 174–175). When an elite man rapes Yŏngch’ae, he feels no remorse, since ‘the virtue of chastity was for women of good family, not kisaeng . . . a special kind of creature that was beyond morality and ethics’ (165). The Japanese regime’s decision to license kisaeng as sex workers, legally indistinguishable from prostitutes with no artistic skills, had significantly diminished the kisaeng’s already wobbly social standing.

Having been released from servitude to the Yi royal house and provincial governments, colonial-era kisaeng were trained at ‘licensing academies’ (kwŏnbŏn) (Hŏ 2008). Kwŏnbŏn were
mostly self-governing and enabled kisaeng of lower rank to breach the hierarchical structure of their profession. Several former government kisaeng (kwangyi) used kwônbon to transmit traditional arts to a younger generation of Korean women. But kwônbon curricula also adapted to evolving popular tastes and marketplace realities, which meant that some kisaeng were also adept pop chanteuses (Kawamura 2001: 125–127, 147–148). Like contemporaneous Egyptian almas, they added contemporary pop songs to the traditional repertoire of art music that had long been their preserve (Lagrange 2009).

Although Japanese media depicted them as icons of a timeless eroticism (Kawamura 2001; Atkins 2010: 175–184), there is substantial evidence that kisaeng took full advantage of burgeoning mass media and their position outside of patriarchal family structures to promote a modern consciousness and female autonomy; recent studies indeed maintain that kisaeng were among the vanguard of the Korean feminist movement (Min 2013: 511). Kisaeng exploited new mass-media technologies and entertainment venues to earn their livelihoods, preserve their independence, and participate fully in the public sphere. They took their arts out of bars and teahouses, playing and singing music on radio broadcasts and recordings and even performing dances in large theaters in Japan. In January 1927, seventeen kisaeng joined forces to launch a new magazine entitled Changhan (‘Long Suffering’) to share information and dispel negative stereotypes about themselves. ‘Henceforth, this magazine, covering the kisaeng community, is now finally raising its voice’, Pak Nok-chu declared in the first edition (whose cover image depicted a kisaeng in a birdcage). ‘This magazine is a mouthpiece through which we can publicize our lives, opinions, sorrows and joys unreservedly’ (quoted in Kim 2005). This feminist manifesto echoed similar statements made by Japan’s ‘new women’ in the journal Bluestocking (Seitô, 1911–16) and two Korean publications entitled New Woman (Sinyôja, 1920, and Sinyôsong, 1923–34), while still representing the viewpoints of a distinctive professional class. Kisaeng would be not only the topics of public discourse, but participants in it. The voices of kisaeng were thus distinctive, constitutive elements of Korean colonial modernity.

Kisaeng participated in the explosive growth of the popular music industry in Northeast Asia in the 1910s and 1920s. Most Japanese recording companies opened facilities on the peninsula, recorded a variety of Korean singers and instrumentalists, and imported wholesale the various genres of popular music that were au courant in imperial Japan. Although relatively few Koreans could afford phonographs, and slightly more could purchase radios, new forms of popular music were prominent in urban soundscapes, blaring from cafés, department stores, radios, and theaters. Traditional Korean fare, including abridged p’ansori operas, vied with so-called trot (t’ürott’u, from ‘foxtrot’, or ppongjjak), fashionable songs (yuhaeng ch’angga), jazz (chaejû), popular songs (taejung kayo), ‘new folk songs’ (sin minyo), and European classics for listeners’ attention. In fact, those who lament the ‘colonisation’ of musical culture frequently blame Japan for the hegemony of Western art music in modern Korea. Yet it is also true that regional indigenous styles became more widely known nationwide as a result of electronic media (Seo 2010: 184). In Ch’ae Man-sik’s (1903–50) novel Peace Under Heaven (T’aep’yông ch’ôngha, 1938), radio enables the oily Master Yun Tu-sôp to hear ‘southern songs’ (namdo minyo) of provincial Chôlla while residing in Kyôngsông (12–14).

The consumers of modern entertainments, the living embodiments of la modernité coloniale, were young urbanites whose sensibilities favoured the new and the now, and whose fashions, outlooks, behaviors, and mating rituals constituted an entirely new set of ‘customs’ (p’ungsok), largely inspired by Western movies (Min 2013: 503). Like the indigenous middle classes in other colonial societies, ‘What they aimed at in the first place was not a nation, but a lifestyle. And access to such a lifestyle could be obtained by joining the framework of the colonial system and in doing so consolidating the colonial regime’ (Nordholt 2011: 438). The appearance of ‘new
women’ and ‘modern girls’, in particular, generated a degree of moral panic and nationalist indignation, not unlike that which afflicted ‘jazz-age’ Japan. Less judgmental observers regarded the modern girl as ‘an embodiment of the transition from the old practices to the new ways, an ambivalent figure who could manifest different possibilities depending on whether she focuses on material consumption or moral vision and advanced knowledge’ (Choi 2013: 73). Yet the controversy these icons generated in the media—where they were vilified as decadent, bourgeois, ‘seductive’, and materialistic—was way out of all proportion to the actual number of middle-class urban women who could actually sustain ‘consumerism and new adventures in urban modern space’ (Choi 2013: 72–80).

Critical public scrutiny of women’s deportment and conduct was a fundamental characteristic of colonial modernity. In the age of high imperialism, female autonomy was a key index for measuring a society’s progress from savagery to civilisation (Choi 2009: 5; Tran 2012: 411). Moreover, as was the case elsewhere in the world, conflicts between tradition and Western modernity were ‘enacted on women’s bodies and representational praxis’: women were expected to ‘balance desired modernity against undesirable Western values’ (Oza 2006: 94; Tran 2012: 412). That is, women’s levels of engagement in public life, their fashion choices and consumptive habits, their interactions with men and expectations of marriage, and their personal aspirations all indicated how advanced or behind Korea and other colonies were compared to their imperial masters, but also how far removed they had become from still-cherished ancestral beliefs and customs that were the very foundations of national identity and cultural integrity. High-profile ‘new women’ who put their Western education and expertise to work managing households and raising children were hailed for their contribution to the ‘revitalization of the nation’; those who expressed ‘intellectual, artistic, or sensual desires’, questioned the virtue of chastity, publicly divorced their husbands, spent money frivolously on cosmetics and imported luxury goods, or otherwise led ‘scandalous lives’ became ‘objects of caricature and derision’ (Yoo 2008: 58–59; Choi 2009: 21–23; Lee 2011: 98–100; Min 2013: 495, 507–508). This is not to say that men were exempt from scrutiny and controversy—in 1927, one writer defined a ‘modern boy’ as a man ‘whose facial complexion is more like a woman’s’ (quoted in Choi 2013: 76)—but Korean men donned Western apparel and cut their long hair decades before women followed suit, and with more official approval. Although hardly immune from criticism, men had greater latitude when ‘going modern’ than women did (Min 2013: 511–513).

In public spaces, modernity was visually and aurally conspicuous: wires (electrical, telegraph, and telephone), railways and paved roads, newspapers and magazines, automobiles, brick and stone buildings, street lights and neon signs, train whistles, radios, machinery, and other noises all signified the progress required for civilisation. ‘The noises of the city were those of civilization. A nation prospered the louder those noises were’, Yi Kwang-su mused wryly in The Heartless. ‘The sounds of wagon wheels, and steam and electric-powered engines combined to give rise to civilization in all its brilliance. Modern civilization was a civilization of noise. There was not yet enough noise in Seoul’ (300).

But the domestic sphere, the private space that a family inhabited, and the relationships within it could indicate modernity as well. Private life was subject to public scrutiny and discussion; nutrition, childrearing, budgeting, furnishing, hygiene, marital and parental relations were measured by the yardstick of progress. Nationalist intellectuals in Korea, as in Bengal, Egypt, and elsewhere in the colonial world, believed nation-building began at home: ‘the domestic [was] an inseparable part of the national’, and ‘proper management’ of the household according to best practices of ‘domestic science’ was thus an essential endeavour (Chakrabarty 1993: 5–7; Lagrange: 2009, 242–243; Yoo 2008: 85–94 ; Choi 2009: 10–11; Lee 2011). In an influential 1930 editorial, Kang Kyŏng-nae (1906–44) wrote, ‘child-rearing and food preparation are not
simply an important issue for the home but can also be socially pertinent. In this sense, then, the domestic and the social together make up one large cohesive body’ (quoted in Hanscom, et al., 2013: 136).

Although care for elderly parents remained a social virtue, and multigenerational households an economic necessity, the focus of modern domesticity was the conjugal household—sans concubines—consisting of a wife and husband with ‘modern consciousness’, who raised children in a deliberate, earnest manner for future service to the nation (minjok). As prescribed in Korean and Japanese print media in the 1920s and 1930s, such modern households were marked by monogamous, companionate marriages between consenting adults, frugal budgeting, industriousness, nutritious homemade meals, social awareness, and diligent schooling. Wives were paradoxically admonished to be both spendthrifts and consumers of a dizzying array of new products to promote the health, wealth, and hygiene of their families. Though still outranking their spouses in the household hierarchy, husbands were to respect their wives’ intellects and opinions and to observe sexual discipline, eschewing secondary marriages and dalliances with kisaeng.

As Ji-Eun Lee (2011) notes, however, a perusal of mass media from this era can be misleading: there was a basic incongruence between such ambitious discourse and the socioeconomic realities of most Korean families. In this respect, ‘new women’, ‘modern boys’, and ‘modern families’ reflected Korean colonial modernity more generally. ‘Japan ran a deeply penetrating and meticulously controlled colonial governing system’, Lee continues, ‘which rendered a colonial culture that appeared similar to that of the empire; the resemblance is striking when compared to British or French colonies. But inwardly, colonial space was enormously complex and uneven, with poignant differences between Japanese and Koreans, and between Korean people themselves’ (114–116).

In a critique of colonial modernity historiography, political scientist Hong-Yung Lee claims that it ‘appears to make the same intellectual mistake attributed to the Korean nationalist discourse, namely extrapolating the implications of findings beyond what the findings warrant. . . . Being able to detect the subtleties, gray areas, and contradictions of the period, while not losing overall perspective of the basic nature of colonialism is what is required for good scholarship’ (26–27). Specifically, Hong takes exception to studies that claim the economic growth and prosperity in the Republic of Korea in the last quarter of the twentieth century was a beneficial outcome or legacy of the Japanese colonial occupation. Although I am unaware of any reputable scholar who would argue openly that Japanese colonial rule was good for Korea (Japanese right-wing revisionists hardly qualify as ‘reputable’), it is perhaps fair to say that in their zeal to correct the excesses of Korean nationalist historiography and be provocative, some historians who have embraced the colonial modernity framework have understated the ‘colonial’ aspects of their subject matter (Do 2004). Hong is surely right when he states, ‘The political cost of Korea’s colonial experience was too high compared with its speculative advantages’ (25). The most conspicuous evidence of this ‘political cost’ is the persistent ‘one nation, two states’ arrangement on the Korean peninsula, a direct consequence of the schism within the colonial-era nationalist movement between socialist revolutionaries and moderate ‘cultural nationalists’ (Robinson 1988). ‘In calling for reforms within the confines of colonization’, Ellie Choi (in Hanscom et al. 2013) writes, ‘moderates like Yi Kwang-su were criticized by more radical nationalists for ignoring their colonized status and seeking sanctuary in the realm of culture. For Korean bourgeois intellectuals, this retreat to culture (culturalism) was motivated by . . . the desire to avoid politics altogether, to work within the parameters of the colonial state, and to avoid interruption of their work by being arrested’ (2–3). Like a scar, the 38th parallel bears witness to this colonial-era disagreement on the future of the Korean nation.
To some degree the colonial modernity debate is a matter of emphasis: whereas some scholars focus on the empowerment, emancipation, and opportunities modernity offered to Koreans (glass half full), others stress the discrimination, injustice, and cruelty colonialism inflicted on them (glass half empty). As heated as the discussion about colonial modernity in Korea has been, if it results in fuller, more nuanced and sensitive histories of the period and its people, and in more dialogue and collaboration between Korean and non-Korean scholars, it will have been productive.

Note
1 Colonial modernity is a rare example of a theoretical stance that originated among historians of East Asia and was subsequently adopted by historians in other fields.

References


