Special Feature

Negotiating Imagined Imperial Kinship: Affects and Comfort Letters of Korean Children

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The Review of Korean Studies Volume 17 Number 1 (June 2014): 93-113
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Introduction

On the eve of imperial surrender in December 1944, the Chosŏn-based Japanese settlers' association, The Green Flag Association (Ryokki renmei) utilized the precious resource of paper by publishing *To My Solider Brother* (*Chôhei no nîsan e* 徵兵の兄さんへ), a collection of letters written by Korean elementary school students—both boys and girls—addressed to an anonymous group of "Soldier Brothers." Given the dire conditions at the time, the Green Flag's decision to publish *To My Solider Brother*, a publication of nothing more than Korean children's letters, must have seemed an extravagant choice to some compatriots. The purpose of the volume, declared the volume's editor, was to "celebrate the promulgation of the splendid mandatory conscription system in Korea." The volume contains a total of eighty-six letters, each glorifying the imperial war effort through repeated expressions of two overwhelming sentiments—gratitude and admiration. Published in the midst of the intense war mobilization of *kŏminka*, or imperialization of colonial subjects, the 1944 collection is notable for the emotive use of *kokugo*, the national language on the part of school children and its pronounced propaganda objectives. One of the defining features of the *kŏminka* policies, the *kokugo* was far more than language education; the underpinning ideology of the *kokugo* was suffused with imperatives and strategies, primarily targeting the eradication of the Korean language and transforming Koreans into cooperative imperial subjects (Yi 1996, 294-98).

An archival source of this kind has not received significant scholarly attention within colonial studies, chiefly due to the inherent limitations in propaganda material and its overdetermined contents. Wartime children's writing, let alone Korean children's writing, was an outcome of a strategically orchestrated pedagogic effort; and children, as a category, had long been regarded as an object of education. While research on the *kokugo* education and literacy in colonial Korea has been prolific, little attention has been paid to the

* This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2008-361-A00003). The author would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and friends who generously provided valuable editorial and critical comments.

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products of *kokugo* writings by colonial youth in service to the empire. Focusing on writings by colonial youth in *To My Solider Brother*, this paper asks questions regarding the place of affect in *kŏminka* mobilization, and its relationship to both language and youth. What feelings, aspirations, and expectations were being fostered in the colonial youth at this specific moment of drastic change and what emotions reside within the regimented structure of the *kokugo*? How were those emotions directed to make something imaginable or attainable for the colonial youth? (Goodwin et al. 2001, 2-24). What do they tell us about the way in which the colonial youth registered their place, their dreams, and their futures within the empire?

Unlike previous generations, the Korean youth who enrolled in elementary school during the early 1940s had been born into a colonized Korea, and grew up in a cultural sphere where Korean would be spoken in the home and Japanese would be spoken as their *kokugo* at school. To this generation, coloniality was a natural social landscape, and so too was the necessity of switching between two languages and the straddling of two cultures. At home the children spoke in Korean with their illiterate parents, ate "pungent" Korean meals, and played only with Korean friends. At school they were relentlessly drilled in the virtues of the Empire's cultural values and inculcated about being loyal subjects of the Emperor. The *kokugo* proficiency for this particular generation of colonial youth are the byproducts of the *kŏminka*, and their compliance with curricular demands, such as writing letters, should not be judged as an expression of either docility or subversion. A more productive approach to archival sources such as the 1944 collection might be to investigate what penetrates the semantic surface of the highly prescribed language, or to examine how those "shimmering affects materialize or enlarge in creating potentials," such as in the ignition of colonial aspirations and ambitions, or ambivalence and dissimilation (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 20-21). Through the writing exercise, I argue, children were forced to negotiate with two conflicting realities—the imperatives of becoming Japanese and the impossibility of ever becoming Japanese. That is to say, the Korean children engaged in a cognitive exercise of placing themselves within the empire in a manner that departed sharply from the usual bodily practices such as singing military songs, doing calisthenics, and recitation of loyal pledges.

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To My Solider Brother and *Kŏminka*

The 1944 publication, *To My Solider Brother* illuminates the intersection of two of the most invested programs of the *kŏminka* movement of the late 1930s: imperial conscription and *kokugo* education. As the editor of the volume notes, the text stands at the confluence of promulgation of mandatory conscription in Korea and the Korean celebration of its implementation expressed in *kokugo*. If, hitherto, the writing assignments were demanded on clichéd topics such as pledging loyalty, the new topic on the mandatory draft was a change that could affect the imminent future of the colonial youth. Under the highly exaggerated and dauntingly prescribed expressions of gratitude and admiration, the letters index what I would like to call an *imagined imperial kinship* that is embraced and called on by the colonial youth in a characteristically emotive *kokugo*. If the intended end use of the volume was to promote colonial commitment to the politics of "Japan and Korea as One Body," what actually gets professed and negotiated on the part of school children is not only romanticization, but more importantly calculated action in exchange for worldly gains. While some writings, especially by younger students, do underscore vague excitement at the news of mandatory conscription, most children differentiated the subcategory of "brothers of the peninsula" from the "brothers of the empire." By answering the call to pledge loyalty to the emperor, the Korean school children first mobilized "brothers" of their ethnic, colonial kinship, and then took one step further to call on, or even make demands on "brothers" of the empire. In this process of calling "brothers" as a tiered operation of address, the colonial youth mobilized their ethnic kinship marked by the subcategory of "peninsular" and negotiated access to the greater imperial kinship through this very category.

Postcolonial scholar, Leo T. S. Ching (2001), sees *kŏminka* as neither a linear extension of earlier assimilation, or *dŏka* policies, nor as an intensification thereof; instead, he differentiates it as a colonial ideology that placed the onerous burden of "Japanization" on the colonized (91). Ching explains that while the goal of the earlier *dŏka* was for the colonized to become Japanese, the *kŏminka* required them to become good Japanese. In practice, it meant externalization and materialization of the *kŏminka* ideology, through its hallmark programs such as *kokugo* education, mandatory conscription and name changing. However, the ultimate manifestation of *kŏminka* ideology was to die for the Emperor, not to simply live as a Japanese, as previously prescribed under the

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dŏka policies (94).

At the time of its publication, while rampant shortages of all supplies plagued the empire, the Green Flag Association's investment in *To My Solider Brother* might have seemed a profligate extravagance to realists, but it could not have been more timely and appropriate to colonial authorities. The text itself was a testimony to the success of *kŏminka* ideology that externalized and materialized its core values; the colonial youth articulated their willingness to die for the Emperor in the prescribed *kokugo*. By writing the *imonbun*, or comfort letters, the colonial youth exhibited their material membership to the empire, and in turn, the *imonbun* writing exercise helped them learn the proper *kokugo*, reinforcing their Japanese-ness. The most priceless virtue of the 1944 publication is that it marked the pinnacle of the *kŏminka* by feeding and feeding-off of its underpinning ideology. While the frantic war was drawing to its end, the text showcased a new stock of Japanized colonial youth thoroughly indoctrinated and wholeheartedly committed to die as good Japanese. From the very first page in the publication, the Korean children's thorough Japanization is marked by their Japanized names, reflecting their compliance with *sŏshi kaimei*, the name change policy.

In the volume, children's writings are largely divided along gender lines. Boys actively related to the adult soldier-trainees or soldiers dispatched to the battlefield, on to whom they projected their imminent future. By writing letters, boys anticipated and internalized, even welcomed, their honorable fate to come by serving in the military. Girls, exempt from mandatory conscription and serving more or less as bystanders, either expressed frustration with their perceived incapacity, or adopted a tone of exhortation for the noble cause. To a great extent, the way in which these colonial youths see and think are confined to the scripted expressions permitted in their *kokugo* writings, and all of them trumpet the Korean excitement at the news of mandatory conscription. A closer textual analysis, however, opens up a reading that highlights affects residing within the prescribed set of language, revealing candid emotions of every sort. As the children witness military training or send off their beloved brothers, there emerge moments of mixed responses—a sense of wonder coupled with disbelief, assurance with skepticism, and determinism with diffidence. Most notably, the colonial youths register part of their identities which is not Japanese, and continuously calls on the "peninsula brothers" within the larger rubric of imperial kinship. Through the act of writing "comfort letters" demanded by

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the colonial government, the Korean children carved-out a discursive space in which they made declarations, requests, and demands vis-à-vis both "peninsula brothers" and imperial brothers, as they grappled with the task of finding a place within the empire; deciphering the meaning of becoming a soldier; and calculating the benefits of providing service for the emperor.

Japanese School Children's *Kokugo* Education during Wartime Japan

For school children in wartime Japan, composition writing was restricted to the most rudimentary subjects, primarily centered on declaring allegiances of loyalty to the emperor. Kawamura Minato (2000) alerts us to how under such a militarized climate, composition education 綴り方, both at home and in colonial territories abroad was anchored to instructing school children serving as a disciplinary state apparatus of molding imperial subjects (96). In fact, what the state harbored was disclosed by the 1941 reform that renamed *shogakko* 小学校 as *kokumin gakko* 国民学校, meaning elementary school for national subjects, and stipulated that the primary objective of elementary education was the inculcation of basic skills to raise subjects of the emperor (87). More specifically, Kawamura examines the pedagogic guidelines released during this time, and points out how the primary objective for composition education was to instruct the way in which children see and think (90). Training children what to see and think by way of *kokugo* education, as Kawamura argues, translates into also coaching them what *not* to say or write. One of the underlying principles of composition education was not to teach fecundity in expressive mediums to maximize creativity or imagination, but rather to drum-in a language that molds and controls adolescent perception and expression.

Regimentation in the affective expression of everyday life by way of composition education became apparent in writings by school children. Take for example an essay entitled "Picking up Father's Bones," written by a second grade Japanese girl, Kimura Shŏko, which documents the return of her dead father's bones from the battlefield. Kawamura (2000) pays attention to two layers of suppressed emotions indicated by silence (96).

> Tears flowing from her eyes, Grandmother went close to Mother and said

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> something. Mother, too had a sorrowful look on her face. Mother stayed silent and did not utter a word to me. My eyes were welled up with tears but I restrained myself. (93-94)

Kimura Shŏko's essay only hints at the presence of emotions surrounding the ritual of receiving the bones, and does not document the feelings of the mourners exchanged privately among them. Reading into the affective exchanges of the mourners, Kawamura asserts that anti-war resentment is embedded in the silence standing in for the unspeakable emotions (96). Hence, he explains that Kimura Shŏko's restraining of her emotions, marked by a verb *kibatte iru*, or to restrain, should be understood as a conscious attempt at self-censorship.

Japanese children's composition would later become more directly involved in the war effort in a form called "comfort letters" (*imonbun* 慰問文). The character 慰 in the compound word, *imonbun* 慰問文, means "to comfort or to console." This same character is also used in *ianfu* 慰安婦 and usually translates as "comfort women" in English, a term that adds a euphemistic coating to what was essentially a system of forced sex-slavery provided for the benefit of the imperial army. The "comfort" provided by the imperial youth would be delivered in a much more innocuous operation of the imperial architects. Most conventional comfort letters would have been similar to the letters below, which are part of the archival collection at the City Museum of Tsuchiura.[1] Currently the Museum's collection holds comfort letters composed in 1942-1943 by the students at the Manabe Elementary School, and addressed to soldiers from their town. Only about twenty letters made the journey back home. The following letter by Owada Suzuko, a third-grader at the Manabe *kokumin gakko* in the city of Tsuchiura writes:

> Happy New Year. We had a very lively New Year's Day. I think it is a shame that we cannot play *Hanetsuki* with you, soldiers, because you have to be at work on the battleground. Please take care of yourself. We will, too. Good bye.

1. The Museum holds letters that were brought back home by soldiers who survived the war. I would like to thank Ms. Noda Reiko at the City Museum for sharing with me the archival collection.

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A third-grader Ryuzawa Chieko writes about the custom of throwing beans on *Setsubun* 節分 which marks the beginning of spring.

> Yesterday was *Setsubun*, and we threw beans and we each ate as many beans as our age.…Neri ate fifteen beans, I ate eleven beans, Mother ate thirty nine beans and Father ate forty two beans. It was fun…

Another letter by a sixth-grader writes:

> The rainy season has finally passed, and today it is a crisp sunny day. It's been three years since the war began, and you must be working in bloodstained conditions. Every day I hear the news on the radio or read about it in the paper, and think of you.…At school we pray for your safety and victory, so I hope you will crush the Americans and Brits.

Conventionally, in addition to expressing gratitude, children's comfort letters depict snapshots of the mundane life back home, reminiscent of adolescent diaries, and deliver "home life" to the battlefront. The comfort that children were expected to provide through letter writing was precisely the enduring everyday life for which soldiers had given themselves, and to which they wish to return. Tinged with familiarity, and also couched in the local communal life, the Manabe Elementary School students' letters satisfied the goal of delivering a slice of family life from home (Kawamura 2000, 97).

Comfort Letters 慰問文 by Korean Children in *To My Soldier Brother* (*Chôhei no nîsan e*)

The Korean children's letters anthologized in *Chôhei no nîsan e* mimics the *imonbun* 慰問文 written by their Japanese counterparts, as part of the state-mandated curricular activity that belonged to a much larger *imon* campaign launched in the late 1930s in Korea. The *imon* campaign basically mobilized leading intellectuals and artists of the era by sending them to tour the frontlines of the Sino-Japanese war. A scholar of colonialism Chŏn Ponggwan (2005) examines the 1939 *imon* tour of three selected Korean writers to northern China. Examining the poems composed while en-route by one of the attendees named Im Haksu, Chŏn argues how Im Haksu and his cohorts, during their

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sojourn, carved out a place in the empire. One of the observations that Chŏn makes is the stance of Im Haksu who speaks not as a colonial other, but as one that identified with the Japanese vis-à-vis the Chinese other (315-47).[2] His work further asserts how a strategic alignment with Japan emerges in Im Haksu's poetry collection, *Chŏnsŏn sijip*. Although the poetry collection offers no explicit glorification or promotion of the imperial army, Chŏn Ponggwan pays attention to the emergence of identified position with imperial army, hence Japan's war against China in the collection emerges as "our" war rather than "their" war. Whether willing or unwilling, the colonized adults and youth participated in the sweeping scale of the *imon* campaign that brought the distant war to the close quarters of everyday life. It is this intimate intertwining of the battlefield (*senjŏ*) to the everyday (*nichijŏ*) that comprised the essence of the total mobilization of *kŏminka* (Ching 2001, 90).

The 1944 task of writing *imonbun* in *kokugo* should be understood as part of the *imon* campaign from earlier years, but marked this time with a goal of delivering family support to "Soldier Brothers" already at the battlefront or those waiting to depart (Kawamura 2000, 97). In comparison with its Japanese counterpart, the *kokugo* education in colonial Korea posed additional challenges of replacing the language used in the home. At school, learning Japanese in the name of *kokugo* was already a coercive practice wedded to willful use of penalizing measures (Lee 2010, 7-25). Rhee Young Hee, a scholar born in 1929, recalls in his memoir how he was forced to write a comfort letter to Japanese soldiers fighting the Sino-Japanese War, and mechanically mimicked the clichéd *kokugo* phrases such as "for the honor of the Emperor" (Rhee 1988, 19). The imperial pedagogic efforts were met with even more recalcitrant responses by the bottom rung of society: the unruly, impoverished colonial youths that the colonial education system failed to recruit into the classrooms. A diary by a 21 year old Japanese woman, Asano Shigeo documents how uncooperative and unwilling her tutees were at Yamatojuku, the Yamato School that administered *kokugo* education for Korean children (Lee 2013, 73-93). In its pages, Asano recalls how her students would say, "Sensei, I can't. I can't write a letter," or they would return the paper she had given out to write letters (87).

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2. Emergence of alignment in the volume, not to insist that Koreans shared this view. In fact, Koreans felt otherwise. Noted in Miyada Setsuko's work and others.

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By highlighting the overwhelming gratitude of the Korean youth, the 1944 publication *Chôhei no nîsan e* attempts to suture the tensions inherent in the *imonbun* writing and imperial conscription, funneling attention to celebration of the colonial youth. Perennially treated as a second-tier population in the empire, Korean males were never to be trusted with rifles on the imperial front. In the very last year of the war effort, however, the imperial government changed its policy. Historian Takashi Fujitani (2011) explains how the shortages of manpower in the imperial army, especially after the Pearl Harbor attack, compelled the state to include Korean males in order to maximize the Foucaudian sense of bio-power. Consequently, mandatory conscription in Korea began in 1944 (35-77). Equality for the colonized in the legal sense seemed more realistic, and the culmination of the family state ideology with the Emperor as the absolute patriarch was within arm's reach (46-47). Against this rosy imperial fantasy, the work of Miyada Setsuko (1997) presents a rather conflicting portrayal of how a low literacy rate persisted among the voluntary Korean soldiers who entered the Japanese military for financial reasons in the late 1930s (36-50). By 1944, when all eligible Korean males were drafted, the high rate of illiteracy in *kokugo* would remain unimproved. Mitsui Takashi (2013), a scholar of colonial language education, describes a comical scene at a military physical examination in 1944, which was recorded by Yoshida Toshikuma, a conscription military officer in colonial Korea. The officer could not communicate with the Korean examinees, so he resorted to using body language; when that failed, he had to call for a Korean interpreter to instruct them (83). Such scenes were not uncommon in 1944. While their adult contemporaries demonstrated a bleak, troubling state of *kŏminka* to colonial authorities, *To My Solider Brother* flaunts the acquired literacy of the next generation of Koreans, signaling the rise of a new generation of literate human resources.

To My Soldier Brother, the Text

The writings by colonial youth in *To My Solider Brother* would serve as hard evidence of the existence of a growing reservoir of thoroughly imperialized subjects, only a few years shy of full maturation into mobilizable adulthood. Some of the boys' pledges of loyalty we will examine below might have seemed

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especially reassuring as dusk was falling on the Empire. A typical letter, and one of the most ideal (from the perspective of colonial authorities) expressed the boy's dreams of heroic feats in the imperial army. For these schoolboys the military drills of soldier-trainees simply came across as a heroic, adventurous pursuit, devoid of any consequence or relevance to their own fate.[3] A second-grader, Harimoto, thus writes in vague excitement:

> I want to grow up fast and become a soldier. Those of us who are born in Japan are the happiest. We are the happiest. Because when we grow up we can become soldiers. (GFA 1944, 32-33)

A fifth-grader, Kaneyama, also shares Harimoto's excitement by writing,

> When I heard that beginning in 1944, the mandatory conscription will be done in Korea as well, and we, the peninsula people can also fight the enemy, just like the *naichi* people, I was so happy that I thought I could reach the sky! (84)

These two letters convey colonial servitude and willingness by virtually lip-synching the propaganda objectives of the publication. Although regurgitating scripted expressions, the next letter adds an interesting twist. Under the heading, *Kesshin*, or Determination, a fourth-grader Hanayama Hisshŏ declares to himself,

> "I will become a splendid soldier, study harder to become fluent in Japanese and teach my family members Japanese until I leave for the military. Unless I am capable of living the life of a *naichijin*, even if I become a soldier, I cannot be a good soldier." (62)

Compared to other boys who robotically want to become soldiers, Hanayama, a shrewd fourth-grader, is fully aware of what is at stake. He knows that thorough Japanization is a prerequisite for conscription, and that the perks

3. The school boys in *kokumin gakko* were presented with ample opportunities to see for themselves ad-ult Korean males in military training. In the early phase of training Koreans, due to a lack of facilities, the colonial government used elementary schools as training centers, or *renseijo*. See Miyada 1997, 141.

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will be extended only to those soldiers who fully assimilate into Japanese culture. Becoming an exemplary soldier, in his view, is synonymous with cultural competence in performing all things Japanese. So he ambitiously declares that he will teach his family members the *kokugo.*

Pledges of loyalty combined with mastery in the *kokugo*, however, did not guarantee Koreans a coveted status of Japanese in Japanese proper (*naichijin*). Takamoto Motokiwa, a fourth grader boy states that mandatory conscription is the pride of the peninsula people, *ware ware hantŏjin no hokorida* (GFA 1944, 64). Impressed by the hard working trainees who commute to the training camp established at his school, he is mesmerized by the mighty presence of the uncles and brothers [of the peninsula] who will soon join the imperial army. In the same breath, he announces that he, too, "will become a splendid soldier who will match the soldiers of *naichi*" (65). Takamoto's letter draws boundaries between peninsula (*hantŏ*) and mainland Japan (*naichi*), and expresses rivalry against the soldiers of *naichi*. Thus he announces that he "will not lose," alluding to a plausible competition for recognition between Korean and Japanese soldiers. Instead of wanting to blend in as "Japanese," the young Korean wanted first to establish his prowess as a *hantŏjin*, a peninsular person, and then become *naichijin*. This mediated membership, as is seen in other letters, would be reiterated and reaffirmed by most Korean youth.

Mandatory conscription would have had more direct consequences on the colonial youth who were about to be separated from their beloved older brothers. The three letters written by younger kin of those already drafted document the phases of passing physical exams, training, and serving on active duty. As eyewitnesses to the onerous burdens placed upon their older brothers, their letters capture complex emotions that are neither entirely empowering nor altogether disempowering. At their best, the writings reveal colonial interstices between two categories of membership, the *hantŏ* brothers and imperial brothers. And the colonial youth secures a language through which to call on, or converse with, the adult males of the empire.

Recorded by a second-grader, Ishiyama Eiko, the scene below forcefully illustrates his parents' mixed responses to the news of his older brother's passing of the physical (GFA 1944, 26-27). The child notes that his older brother is a sophomore at Meiji University, but has returned home [from Japan] for the military physical examination.

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> I asked my brother, "Did you pass [the physical]?" And he responded, "Yes, safely." I ran to my mother and said, "Mother, he says he passed." With a happy look on her face, Mother stopped work and remarked, "That is… That is…(*Soreha Soreha*)" and went out to the garden. (27)

The point of interest in the scene is not the seemingly "happy" response of the mother, but the muted emotions embedded in "soreha." The child records the act of his mother going out to the garden immediately after hearing the news. His excitement is not reciprocated by the mother, but is undercut by her exit from the scene, and the child's observing eye follows her stopping of work and going out to garden. Here the question arises—upon seeing his mother's response, what was detected and felt by the child? Although the mother's approving response is evidenced by her facial expression, her utterance of "soreha" and her actions do not necessarily comport with her "happy look."

The inability to speak Japanese is a recurring uneasiness for older generations that highlight the limited success of *kŏminka* among Koreans. The healthy adult males who passed the physical exam, including Ishiyama's brother, were required to complete basic military training. Ishiyama's brother, a student who attended university in Japan, was unique compared to the vast majority of uneducated Korean men who had to learn basic Japanese at the military training camps. Typically, Korean conscripts were more like Yi Sŏ-u's older brother. A second-grader at Sekijŏ public elementary school, Yi Sŏ-u, describes his older brother as a twenty year old man with a "tall, meaty (*niku ga gacchiri to tsuita*) and healthy body" who will become a soldier a year later (GFA 1944, 25). One disturbing concern the second-grader expresses is that his brother cannot speak *kokugo*, and has recently developed the habit of saying "I'm in trouble, I'm in trouble." To his relief, beginning in April (1944), they set up training centers for those waiting to enter the military the next year, and his brother commutes there twice a week to learn basic military drills and *kokugo*. Like a first-grader in elementary school, his older brother is learning basic words such as *left* and *right*, and although sometimes he is laughed at by everyone, he does not seem bothered in the least and declares "I am going to be a solider next year!" The child notes the older brother's marvelous physical traits juxtaposed to his disturbing illiteracy. In fact, this concern is accentuated by the older brother's habitual saying of "I'm in trouble." His willingness to enter the military is undercut, even questioned, by his ineptitude and unreadiness as an

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imperial soldier. Although the older brother's entry into the imperial army had been decided, perhaps largely based on his physical attributes, what is implied by the young second-grader is the lack of his older brother's preparation, who is so un-Japanese, so completely illiterate in the *kokugo* as to not even know *left* from *right*. While praising his adult brother's effort, the child does not forget to pen the humiliating experiences of his illiterate adult brother.[4]

From passing the physical to the completion of mandatory military training (accompanied by the *kokugo* instruction), the requirements for joining the imperial army continuously placed the burden of becoming Japanese on the Koreans. Did the plight of the Korean soldiers improve once they were admitted to the military system? A fourth-grader Tsuruta Gakuhan writes to his brother who is already a soldier:

> "My loving brother, at last, you became a soldier. The first of January was such a happy day! All peninsula young men's blood boiled up (*waku*) and their bodies danced (*odoru*)….Brother, my Japanese Soldier Brother, Do not forget the joy of that day and the words of Parents. 'You are not our child anymore, but a sacred body we have given to the Emperor.' Brother, fight bravely and wipe out evil Americans and Brits. And prove the sincere devotion (*magokoro*) of the peninsula young men. (GFA 1944, 73-74)

Tsuruta's letter speaks to the colonial desire of wishing for full membership, instead of half status, in the empire. The fourth-grader recognizes that the boundaries of a Japanese and a *hantŏjin* are not coterminous, and that the only way to achieve full membership is by proving *magokoro*, or sincere heart, of a *hantŏjin*. For *hantŏjin* soldiers, full membership in the empire was not attainable simply through enlistment in the imperial army; the only path to imperial recognition was to prove the *magokoro* of a *hantŏjin*. How was this to be done? Ultimately, the *magokoro* of a *hantŏ* soldier could only be demonstrated by his death, a wholehearted, selfless sacrifice for the glory of the Emperor. For those born *hantŏjin*, this half status could only be upgraded at the expense of one's life.

If the boys' writings celebrated the possibility of full membership into the empire through military service, responses by girls exposed frustration with their

4. This disturbingly low rate of literacy among the Korean soldiers in the eyes of the imperial state has been addressed by scholars such as Miyada Setsuko and Mitsui Takashi.

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limited capacity as they were placed in the position of mere bystanders. For girls, becoming "good Japanese" was an unrealistic dream, a dream denied simply because of their gender. The shared frustration (*kuyashii*) in girls' writings was directed at, and also stemmed from, the negation of their worth as potentially full-fledged members in the empire. While the boys were permitted to dream of their full membership, the girls were shepherded to face their ineligibility, which resulted in a frantic search for ways to overcome their deficiencies. As if to make up for this rejection based on their gender, the emotive *kokugo* characteristic in the volume is noticeably heightened in girls' writings. One example is the writing by a more mature student, Takamoto Shŏko, a seventh year elementary school student,[5] who writes of her heartfelt gratitude and excitement:

> When our *hantŏjin* brothers join the naichi brothers in the battlefield and happily die out of loyalty for the emperor our *hantŏ* parents will be awakened. In this view, the role of those *hantŏ* brothers who have risen [to serve] is immeasurably big. And, the role of us, girls, will also grow. With our awareness, will and action, we, the young [Koreans] should awaken two hundred fifty million [Koreans]. (GFA 1944, 178)

Takamoto's letter calls for ennobling the mission of the hantŏ soldiers by invoking the concept of *magokoro*, a sincere heart, and urges her peninsula brothers to die happily for the Emperor. Even when dying, one should not simply die, but die happily in order to prove one's *magokoro*. Another level of frustration emerges in her words directed at *hantŏ* parents who were not sufficiently stirred by the proposed imperial mission. To colonial authorities, a colonial youth such as Takamoto was truly a valuable human stock in reserve and a future generation of the empire, precisely for the way she so earnestly tries to make up for her shortcomings and fulfill the *kŏminka* mission placed upon her shoulder.

Girls' search for redemption often centered on service to the empire, the nature of which was closely associated with motherhood. Kaneda Masako, a sixth-grader from Asahi Elementary in Chinhŭng, at the news of the draft, professes her disappointment of having been born a girl and writes how she is

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5. The elementary school curriculum during this time was divided into six years of lower curriculum and two years of upper curriculum of total eight years.

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envious of her three little brothers who can serve in the military. Her school teacher encourages girls by saying that she, too, can serve the Emperor by becoming mothers.

> I came home and delivered the news to my mother and grandmother, but they did not understand my excitement. During dinner only father shared my excitement. I was saddened that my mother and grandmother could not appreciate my excitement…When I read in the paper that we, the peninsula people, too, would be drafted by the imperial army without having to apply, I jumped around the room exclaiming Banzai Banzai. I will take care of the home front as a peninsular woman, and as a Japanese woman in combat. (GFA 1944, 143-45)

Kaneda Masako's frustration with her gender is shared by other girls, including a sixth-grader, Seiyama Keiko, who simply writes, *kuyashii*, or frustrating (GFA 1944, 171). Another sixth-grade girl, Kanei Haruko, finds a different response. Instead of writing about her regret of having been born a girl, she calls on Korean Soldier Brothers *Onīsan kata*, in a double honorific, and claims it is an honor that they can serve in the Emperor's army, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with *Naichi no onīsan kata*, Soldier Brothers of the Naichi. She even goes as far as to urge every last one of Peninsular Brothers of eligible age to enter the military (147).

As revealed in the words of Kaneda Masako's teacher, the only path to full membership for girls was through motherhood (Lee 2013, 73-93). The empire blatantly preyed on the healthy offspring of colonial subjects; fertile, child-rearing mothers were pivotal instruments to this end. Still too young to bear children themselves, some girls adopted a maternal tone and engaged in role-play. A third-grade child, Tsu Yoshiko, wrote a heartfelt letter to Japanese soldiers, yet in a motherly tone, asking them to take care of her older brother.

> To the gallant Japanese soldiers,
> How are you? With an appreciation for your hard work we are becoming good citizens of Japan by following the good teachings of our teachers. Please do not worry. We will become good children to match the mighty soldiers.

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> In my family there are four of us, father, mother, an older brother and myself. We live a happy life. One day, my older brother came home from work and, with a happy look on his face, said to me, "I am going to be a soldier next year." "For real [*uso desho*], brother?" I asked. Angrily, my brother responded with a determined face, "You idiot, you think it's a lie? I am going to become a soldier and pledge my allegiance to the emperor." Mother also said to my brother, "If you go do not worry about home." I thought to myself that I, too, will fill in for my brother and make a happy home. Dear Soldiers, when my brother joins you in the battlefield, please look upon him favorably. My brother sleeps in till late in the mornings. Please help him get up early in the morning. When I grow up I will visit you and thank you in person. [Until I become an adult] Please wait for me. (GFA 1944, 41-42)

A third-grader, probably ten years old, assumed a motherly persona for her older brother who was at least nineteen years old. Her endearment and affection for the older brother is illuminated by her worries and appeals. She makes a plea to the imperial soldiers for generosity towards her brother, and promises to repay their generosity. As was for Tsu Yoshiko and most schoolgirls, entry to motherhood was years away, but it was the only officially sanctioned pathway for imperial acceptance and recognition of their worth. What we see in the girls' writings, besides their frustration, is their mimicry of maternal roles vis-à-vis the solider brothers.

The volume makes an interesting juxtaposition between girls who have thoroughly internalized the *kŏminka* ideology and their ignorant mothers. Mothers do appear in several writings, but most of them are depicted as uninformed adults who are either reluctant to send off their sons, or cannot fully understand the benefits of mandatory conscription. The girls, on the other hand, try to wind forward their biological clocks and mimic motherly roles, all in the name of becoming good Japanese. In the excerpts above, Kanei Haruko calls on all peninsula brothers to enter the military. Takamoto Shŏko tells peninsula brothers to die happily on the battlefield. Tsu Yoshiko, in her letter, goes one step further by using the tone of a mother entrusting someone with her beloved son, and calls on Japanese soldiers to look after her older brother. Though naïve and premature, the subjective emotional experiences shared by many girls converge on their readiness to embrace and perform motherhood

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(An 2006, 155-62).[6] For mothers in the empire, both in Japan and Korea, the rhetoric of equality was deployed to recruit them into offering their sons (158). It was a duty, privilege, and honor of Korean mothers to give up their sons for a noble cause. Motherhood was upheld as the only legitimate passage through which the schoolgirls' *kuyashii*, or frustration, could be compensated, and the girls' writings indicate how they were co-opted by the *kŏminka* ideology in giving up their brothers, or recruiting brothers on their own, no less. What sets girls' writings apart from those by boys in the 1944 volume is the sentiment of *kuyashii* that generated a set of extremely heightened emotive *kokugo*, pleading their collective desire to be redeemed. If the boys' eligibility opened up a way for them to imagine their full membership in the empire and forcefully bring to the fore their variegated, mixed emotions, the girls' writings centered on overcoming their ineligibility caused by their gender.

Conclusion

During the height of wartime mobilization under *kŏminka* ideology, the 1944 publication, *To My Soldier Brother* was published to showcase the epitome of imperialization through the *imonbun* composed by colonial youth who played the tunes and sung the lyrics of the imperial curriculum. The *kokugo* they wrote could not have been more prescribed and scripted. What they wrote was precisely what they were taught to say. Boys' pledges of loyalty to the Emperor, even at the cost of their lives, could not have been more genuine and sincere. They just wished to enter the imperial army to prove their *magokoro* of the *hantŏ* soldiers. Girls sought alternative paths for imperial recognition by mimicking maternal roles. *To My Soldier Brother* has all the ingredients of an exemplary propaganda text of the *kŏminka* ideology.

In this paper, I have offered a close reading of *To My Soldier Brother* in order to shed light on this understudied wartime propaganda, to reveal the multivalent and multifaceted emotions of colonial youth that were at times ambivalent and perplexing. Most importantly, I have argued how Korean school

6. An emphasizes how the colonial government mobilized the rhetoric of equality between Japanese and Korean mothers in their duty to send off their sons in service for the Emperor.

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children, by writing *imonbun*, collectively registered part of their identities that were deeply rooted in their *hantŏ* origins, and developed a rhetorical strategy of calling upon their *hantŏ* brothers, an ethnic category through which they move on to call on their imperial brothers. Becoming good Japanese for Korean colonial youth was not a leap of faith. The onerous burden of becoming good Japanese ironically required Korean youth to reinforce the very category they wished to be dissociated with: the colonial kinship of *hantŏ* brothers. By fully accepting and mobilizing this colonial kinship could the imperial kinship become imaginable and tangible for the colonized.

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Abstract

This paper examines the 1944 publication, *To My Soldier Brother* 徴兵の兄さんへ, a collection of "comfort letters" written by Korean elementary school students addressed to an anonymous group of "Soldier Brothers." Like shrine visits and memorization of military songs, letter-writing was a performance of allegiance demanded upon the colonized that revealed imperial investment in articulating an imagined kinship between Korean subjects and imperial soldiers. Through a close reading of its highly prescribed contents that converge on the Korean pledge of loyalty to and overflowing gratitude for the Emperor, this paper shows how Korean children negotiated their membership in the empire and what emotions were generated in their writings. Although their ultimate goal was full membership within the imperial kinship, the Korean children wholly recognized and registered their place in the empire as *hantŏjin* first, and then expressed their desire to become Japanese, *naichijin*.

Keywords: *kŏminka*, Korean children's *kokugo* writing, *imonbun*, imperial kinship, gendered membership, affect

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Submission: 2014. 4. 27. Referee/Revision: 2014. 5. 22. Confirm: 2014. 5. 26.