

Imperial Genus: The Formation and Limits of the Human in Modern Korea and Japan, by Travis Workman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015, 324 pp., US\$33.49, ISBN: 978-0520289598 (paperback)

Travis Workman's *Imperial Genus* reveals the global dimension of East Asian modern discourses with profound insight and critical discernment, examining an intersection of German, Japanese, and Korean discourses and narratives about the idea of the "generally human." The intersection is more precisely the result of translating neo-Kantianism first in Japan and later in Korea. Workman masterfully analyzes the ways that the translation practice involved the process of exposing limits of neo-Kantianism, rather than simply transmitting knowledge to others using different languages. Neo-Kantianism built on the noumena-phenomena divide provides the Japanese with effective conceptual tools to reduce the Orientalist condemnation of Japan to merely a phenomenal view, far from universal knowledge. Japan's strategy of turning to neo-Kantian universalism to counter Eurocentrism shows the ways in which Japan uses the Western thought in order to challenge the West. Workman offers exceptionally rich and erudite explications of the ways in which conceptual ideas and narratives thereof shaped and reshaped people's lives as much as material conditions determined by capitalism and natural science in modern East Asia.

Imperial Genus tracks how the Japanese empire coopted neo-Kantian insights to provincialize the West, yet foreclosed the same appropriation by its own colonized people, stressing the dual role of the concept "genus-being" in mediating the universal and the particular. Furthermore, this book compellingly shows that Marxism, imperial nationalism, and culturalism as hegemonic ideologies from the 1920s to the 1940s converge toward a key concept bridging the noumena and the phenomena, seen in productive labor, nation-state subjectivity, and self-legislated morality, respectively. Rather than foreground the notion of class or national identity, which previous studies on colonial East Asia heavily relied on, Workman's analysis focuses on the idea of the "generally human" to illuminate previously under-theorized aspects of colonial Japanese and Korean literature following World War I. As Harry Harootunian's study has demonstrated, the triangulation of the worldviews of the Reformation, the Renaissance, and natural science in the early modern period had propelled

intellectuals to rethink the status of the human in the world.¹ The call for “culturalism” was neo-Kantians’ counter-strategy upholding “human value” against natural scientists privileging “objective truths.” The humanists of the time rested on the terrain of “culture” to oppose the hegemony of “objective truth” that natural science put forward. Against the hegemony of natural science, culturalism argues that there is another realm of the noumena beyond this world—that the knowledge of natural science fails to grasp. Furthermore, the U.S.-led world economy following World War I conceived a capitalist market driven by desire, rather than value, to reverse the economic decline in the years following World War I. Thus, to endorse the value of the human and culture at the time was a gesture of struggling against the rising power of natural science and capitalism. Built on these findings of previous studies, *Imperial Genus* shows that the neo-Kantian rethinking of humanity lies at the heart of Japan’s imperialist strategy.

Imperial Genus ultimately shows that the empire-to-colony relations from the 1920s onward was far from one clearly bounded country’s exploitation of another or simply a matter of reclaiming national sovereignty. On the contrary, the Japanese imperialist project sought to build a moral cosmopolitan community blurring clear boundaries amongst nations and states within the empire, powerfully deconstructing the colonized/colonizer divide. In so doing, this book unveils the imperialist ideologies underpinning cosmopolitanism, which many of existing works on cosmopolitan culture, European and Asian, have overlooked. Amongst numerous recent works on colonial East Asian culture, *Workmans’ Imperial Genus* truly stands out in the depth of its analysis of intra-regional and inter-regional currents of philosophical and literary discourses and narratives in the first half of the twentieth century. This groundbreaking book indeed opens up an entirely new hermeneutical horizon for East Asian intellectual histories, colonial cultural studies, empire studies, and comparative colonial literary studies and undoubtedly will be an indispensable text for students and scholars in Korean and Japanese studies across different disciplines.

1. In the Reformation paradigm, the human is still subordinated to God; in the Renaissance, the human is elevated to the center of the world; finally, in natural science, the human is simply one of many objects to be studied and analyzed. For more details, see Harry 2000, Ch. 2.

Reference

Harootunian, Harry. 2000. *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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