

# On the Question of Collaboration in South Korea

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### Collaboration in War and Memory in East Asia: A Symposium

This article is a contribution to a symposium on collaboration in East Asia during the Asia-Pacific War and its aftermath, which addresses some of the most fraught issues in historiography, historical remembrance, and contemporary politics. It also reflects on occupation states in Europe and postwar East Asia, while casting important light on contemporary issues of collaboration globally. How are we to assess occupation regimes that emerged in each East and Southeast Asian nation during the Pacific War, as well as in postwar nations including those occupied by the United States or other occupiers. Issues of collaboration in a post-colonial world may be equally salient in reflecting on the experiences of newly independent nations? The issues are closely intertwined with dominant nationalist ideologies that have characteristically obfuscated and dismissed collaborationist politics while establishing their own legitimacy, or what Timothy Brook calls their “untouchability”. In the post Cold War milieu, and at a time when politicians on both sides of the Taiwan straits, and across the 38th parallel that divides North and South Korea, are redefining their relationships, it becomes possible to revisit the history of war, revolution, occupation and collaboration.

This symposium on war and collaboration in

East Asia and globally features contributions by Timothy Brook, Prasenjit Duara, Suk-Jung Han, Heonik Kwon, a response by Brook and a further response by Margherita Zanasi. The authors examine war and collaboration in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Manchukuo, in history and memory and in comparative perspective. The symposium includes the following articles:

1. Timothy Brook, [Collaboration in the History of Wartime East Asia](#)
2. Prasenjit Duara, [Collaboration and the Politics of the Twentieth Century](#)
3. Suk-Jung Han, [On the Question of Collaboration in South Korea](#)
4. Heonik Kwon, [Excavating the History of Collaboration](#)
5. Timothy Brook, [Collaboration in the Postwar](#)
6. Margherita Zanasi, [New Perspectives on Chinese Collaboration](#)

Japan Focus anticipates and welcomes responses to the symposium. These will be published in future issues. MS

During the Cold War era, some people in Milyang (a city in southeastern Korea) used to whisper of their pride in the legendary anarchist terrorist, Kim Won Bong:

Kim won fame for bravely plotting the assassinations of several Japanese big shots in Korea and China. When he returned home after liberation, he was welcomed as a national hero. But in the tumultuous postliberation politics he was labeled a communist (a world from which

he had long distanced himself) and was hunted again, this time, by Roh Duk Sul, the notorious Korean torturer of the Japanese colonial police who had tracked him earlier. On learning this, Kim went over to North Korea after crying day and night for three days.”

Kim’s nemesis, Roh, according to the story, had escaped to a remote village immediately after liberation, fearful of the revenge of his compatriots. But he soon found shelter in the newly founded Korean police. This time, he tracked the “communists” (who were largely indistinguishable from nationalists, or those who fought the Japanese and pro-Japanese collaborators of the earlier epoch). Roh survived in South Korea. So did most Koreans who had loyally served the Japanese empire (or “pro-Japanese collaborators” as they came to be called by Korean nationalists). Indeed, with few exceptions, they passed smoothly into the higher echelons of the new US-controlled South Korea.

Tim Brook’s recent work [1] illuminates the world of collaboration, a largely unexplored venue in historical research. It is, for the most part, a space in which nationalist verdicts have prevailed and in which the voice of collaborators has hitherto been suppressed, whether that of Wang Jingwei (president of the Nanjing government after 1937), Zhang Jinghui (prime minister of Manchukuo, after 1934), Li Kwang Soo, Choi Nam Sun (emblematic pro-Japanese writers in Korean literature), or the citizens of Vichy, Nanjing, Changchun, or Seoul who maintained ordinary lives or filled the sizeable ranks of the colonial (or puppet) state apparatus. By looking beyond the dominant grand narrative, Brook offers a wider view of Japanese colonialism and the societies that it ruled and shaped. His might be considered a microscopic approach that seeks to probe the situation, psychology, calculation, and results of the choices and acts of collaboration on the ground.

It would be meaningful to objectively analyze the roles, logic and impact of pro-Japanese collaborators in post-colonial South Korea, a nation that has been and continues to be haunted by the issue of collaboration. I want to point out that many who have been labeled collaborators possessed a certain human capital that proved useful to the rulers of the new state-formation. In considering their role and their achievements in South Korea, however, we wish to call attention to something big (the so-called structural factor). That is the question of U.S. hegemony in the Cold war era.

### Manchurians as the ultimate victors

The most dramatic case of the rise of a former collaborator in South Korea is that of general and ex-president Park Chung Hee who is widely credited with leading its startling economic surge in the 1960s. He attended military academy in both Manchukuo and Japan, and became a low ranking officer in the Manchukuo Army. After liberation, he joined the newly founded Korean Army and his 1961 coup d’état inaugurated a nearly two decade long reign. Park thus reenacted in South Korea two historical events witnessed earlier in Manchukuo: military revolt followed by state-led industrialization. Park was not alone. His rise in South Korea went hand in hand with the rise of others who served in Manchuria (now Northeast China where Japan’s Kwantung Army founded the puppet state of Manchukuo from 1932-45).



**Park Chung Hee, left, in 1961**

Until the 1960s, numerous South Korean politicians claimed to have fought the Japanese in Manchuria. Manchuria was a mythic land in which people freely drew their own self-portrait. Even those who had never been there did so. For instance, the Nobel laureate ex-president Kim Dae Jung falsely claimed during his 1971 presidential election that he had attended Jianguo University in Manchuria. Regardless of their past, a number of Koreans who had been in Manchuria during the colonial period, after returning home, transformed themselves into anti-Japanese fighters. Actually, there had been an exodus of some 700,000 Koreans to Manchuria on the initiative of the colonial government in the 1930s. The number of Koreans in Manchuria exceeded two million by 1945. Manchuria became their El Dorado while grappling with the harsh conditions on a new frontier. Many rose to prominence in postliberation Korea. In particular, those who had studied at flagship military academies and colleges in Manchukuo would lead South Korea’s industrialization and urbanization drives in the 1960s.

In numerous Western colonies, native agents of the state who mastered the master language were among the first to be exposed to the winds of colonial modernity. They were schooled in such ingredients of modernity as punctuality, monthly salary, bureaucratic skill, as well as military skills of drill, firearms, even counter-insurgency. Colonial armies, in particular, were their school.

Koreans gained valuable technical and managerial experience in government, army, the Kyowakai (the fascist party aspiring to link government and people), and police, as well as in the hospitals and factories of Manchukuo. This differs greatly from the experience of most of the Koreans who migrated to (or studied in) Japan during the colonial period, the majority of whom were confined to jobs as manual

workers there. Manchukuo was a land of opportunity not only for Japanese but also for Koreans. These “Manchurians” possessed comparative advantages in the quest for power and position in postliberation Korea, where a power vacuum emerged following the departure of Japanese rulers.

**U.S. hegemony**

The necessary condition for the employment of their talent was U.S. hegemony, which was established in South Korea after liberation. [2] South Korea was very different from North Korea, where landlords and pro-Japanese collaborators were eradicated or fled to the South. Nationalists, particularly those who emerged from the anti-Japanese resistance, were not welcomed into the South Korean administration, Army, or police force built by the occupying U.S. forces. A special committee set up under the new Korean congress in 1948 to investigate the activities of those who had worked for the Japanese empire was suppressed by the U.S.-backed Syngman Rhee government, particularly by the Korean police whose higher echelons were largely staffed with ex-colonial police. It was disbanded within half a year. [3]



**Rhee and Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Korea**

Koreans who had been trained by and served in Japanese forces in Manchuria were favored in the Korean Army. Former officers of the Manchukuo Army attained recognition for suppressing the revolutionary guerrillas in “bandit” suppression campaigns in Manchukuo. Later they became the main pillar of Park’s regime, which confronted the North Korean state that was built on the foundations of the anti-Japanese guerilla movement on the Manchukuo-Korean border.

The “Manchurians” led several realms in Park’s modernization project, including the formulation of the military nationalist hwarang ideology. Even in the music world, they led the way, organizing the Korean Navy Orchestra and Army Orchestra, producing numerous songs that served the regime during important moments of state-building as well as in the dispatch of Korean forces to participate in the Vietnam war.

Interestingly, those who had been high officials of the colonial state in South Korea were overshadowed in the 1960s, their positions largely secured by the “Manchurians” who spearheaded the competition with the northern regime throughout the Cold War era. With often only the slightest change of ideas, plans, institutes, even the very words employed in Manchukuo were subsequently revived by them in South Korea. The focus was on transforming South Korea into an industrial warrior nation capable not only of competing with North Korea, but also ultimately of climbing the ladder of the capitalist world system.

The rise of “Manchurians” was facilitated by the Korean-Japanese normalization of 1965 masterminded by the U.S., which was a kind of reunion of Manchurians on both sides. Ex-Japanese prime minister Kishi Nobusuke and his right hand man Shiina Etsaburo who had run the control economy of Manchukuo, were behind the normalization.

## The issue of collaboration in South Korea

Until recently, collaboration has rarely been mentioned in South Korea given the sensitivity of the issues. A very few academic works appeared, characterized by fierce nationalism. Their moralist approaches were preoccupied with the past, overlooking issues of North-South relations and international competition and ignoring the implications of collaboration for the future of Korea and other post-colonial societies. In fact, questions of colonial collaboration have been important in the postliberation experience of numerous East Asian countries. Simply recall the fact that Indonesia’s Sukarno and Suharto, Burma’s Aung San, and Park and an entire generation of Korean military leaders, to name a few, were trained in Japanese schools, military academies, mass organizations or government offices. [4]

Secondly, airing of the issue has been blocked by regimes functioning under U.S. hegemony (and later as a result of Japanese influence) as well as by still powerful inheritors of those who rose high after liberation. After the Korean War, it was almost impossible to reveal the sensitive contemporary history given the hegemonic bloc in the police, army, business, and main stream news media who rose on the orthodoxy of South Korean anti-communism. Should one venture to do so, one could easily be labeled a communist. It was not until the late 1960s that pro-Japanese figures were satirized, but only in a limited circle, namely, literature. [5]

In order to “leave a lesson for the future,” [6] South Korea’s Roh Moo Hyun government belatedly launched a special committee in 2005 to investigate collaboration, reminiscent of the disbanded committee of 1948. The legislation was sharply opposed and the range of the investigation was narrowed by the conservative opposition party led by Park Kun Hye, the daughter of Park Chung Hee. The investigation



of collaboration, however, is a far less serious issue in contemporary Korea than it was at the time of the original investigation and in the early Cold War years when North-South Korean peaked. Today, economic success, whether led by a collaborator or a dictator, seems more important to many South Koreans, compared with the extreme poverty of a North Korea led by nationalist fighters. South Korean society seems poised to enter the global era by forgetting collaboration or belated attempts by nationalists to punish collaborators. Many South Koreans, perhaps a majority, are turning away from the (moderately) progressive Roh Moo Hyun government imbued with Korean nationalism and critical of the role of collaborators. In the coming presidential election, there is a strong possibility of a conservative party victory. In this campaign, Park's daughter, who lost the opposition party nomination by a narrow margin, still enjoys great popularity. Candidates in the conservative bloc compete with one another to bow to Park's portrait in his old house, which continues to be maintained like a shrine.

## Notes

[1] Tim Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 1-13, 240-48.

[2] On the background of U.S. state-making in

South Korea, see Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), part II.

[3] Yi Kang Soo, *Banmin'tukwi yongu* (A study of the Special Committee to Investigate Anti-compatriot Crimes) (Seoul: Nanam press, 2003), chs. 3, 4.

[4] For discussion of a range of Southeast Asian cases, see Joyce Lebra, *Japanese-trained Armies in Southeast Asia* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1977).

[5] See Lim Jong Kuk's monumental work in Korean literature, *Ch'in'il munhak'ron* (The Thesis on Pro-Japanese Literature) (*P'yŏnghwa ch'ulpansa*, 1966).

[6] *Ch'in'il banminjok'haeng'wi chinsang kyumyŏng wiwŏnhoe* (The Investigatory Committee on Pro-Japanese Anti-compatriot Activities), Chosabogoso (report) I (Presidential Office of Korea, 2006), preface.

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