

Postscript

Contemporary Urban Life in Seoul and Taipei

Pak Wansö's *Mother's Stake* and Zhu Tianxin's *The Old Capital* are two contemporary novellas by female authors which probe and trace the urban histories of colonial Seoul and Taipei respectively from postcolonial temporalities and spaces. These two works critique the contemporary conditions of the city and the nationalist versus antinationalist histories that have left people more isolated from their pasts and displaced from a sense of belonging in the present. In both novellas, the female narrators come to this critique through remembering and tracing the urban spatial histories of the city under Japanese colonial rule. Interestingly, these two novellas transport both female narrators/protagonists back in time and space to show the contradicting experiences of colonialism and modernity by inscribing their experiences onto the city. While on the surface both narratives appear to recall the past uncritically and even nostalgically, they both embed a pointed critique of the standard binary historical narratives of resistance versus submission and nationalist versus antinationalist espoused in characterizing colonial and postcolonial Korea and Taiwan. More importantly, both narratives look back to the past as a means to critique conditions in the present that do not allow for heterogeneous spaces, histories, and voices to coexist. In fact, they present a subtle yet powerful critique of post-martial law and postcolonial societies that purport themselves to have progressed, overcome colonialism, and to have become democracies but, in reality, have not yet arrived there.

In many ways, Pak's and Zhu's postcolonial novellas pointedly question how to make sense of the Japanese colonial presence in the putatively postcolonial while also challenging the applicability of the very idea of the postcolonial in contemporary Seoul and Taipei. In this way, Ann Stoler's reconceptualization of empire as imperial formations is more befitting here because it underscores the "ongoing quality of processes of decimation, displacement, and reclamation" and because "imperial formations are relations of force."¹ Similarly, Stuart Hall calls attention to the complexities of the "post-" not simply as the passage of time or "two successive regimes but the simultaneous presence of a *regime and its after-effects*."² In this way, the two novellas that I will analyze in this postscript engage with the effects, mutations, and, evolutions of the colonial

1 Ann Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23.2 (2008): 193.

2 Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 22.

past as it still powerfully lives on in the urban landscapes, institutions, discourses, and cultural productions.

1 Remembering and Tracing Urban Histories

In Pak's *Mother's Stake*,³ the first-person narrator ("I") looks back at her childhood when her widowed mother moved the family from a rural village outside of Songdo (otherwise known as Kaesŏng), a city in current day North Korea, to Seoul to help her only son become successful. The mother had recognized that for her son to become successful, they needed to leave behind the feudalistic countryside for a modern city, thus seeing the city, especially Seoul, as a space of modernity and possibility. When the story begins, the narrator's mother returns to the village home of her in-laws in order to take the daughter, who had been staying with her elderly grandparents, to Seoul. The mother also desires to transform her into a New Woman, and as so she tells the daughter:

Just because you live in Seoul, you don't automatically become a modern woman. Only after you learn a lot do you become one. Once you become a modern woman, you have a modern hairstyle, a bob, not chignon like mine. You wear a straight black skirt which shows your calves, and high-heeled shoes, and you carry a purse.⁴

The mother, however, also realizes that the only way for her daughter to become a modern woman is for her to live in the city. The mother here, therefore, is an instrumental figure who situates modernity's future possibilities within the city. Non-diegetically, the readers realize that by the time the mother returns to fetch the narrator, the mother would have already experienced the hardships of living in Seoul. Despite it all, the mother takes her daughter to Seoul.

3 *Mother's Stake* is Pak's (1931–2011) semiautobiographical novel published separately in three parts in 1980, 1981 (both in *Munhak sasang*), and 1991 (in *Chakka segye*), and brought together in volume 7 of her collected works published a decade later: *Ömma üi malttuk* (Seoul: Segyesa, 2002) The first part of the trilogy is set during the colonial period around 1937–1938 when the narrator, the daughter in the text, is entering primary school. All three parts are translated in English and published as "Momma's Stake" (1, 2, 3) in Pak Wansö, *A Sketch of the Fading Sun*, trans. Hyun-Jae Yee Sallee (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 1999). Pak debuted as a novelist with her first novel *The Naked Tree* (*Namok*, 1970), which is also semiautobiographical, and since then has published numerous award-winning novels and short stories.

4 Pak, *Sketch of the Fading Sun*, 105.