

Response to “Discursive Formation around ‘Shinto’ in Colonial Korea”

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The latter half of the 1990s in Korea saw epochal changes in scholarship on the Korean colonial experience. It was not until then that the conventional treatment of the subject, that is the simplifying paradigm of "Japanese Imperial oppression and the Korean people's resistance to it," was challenged by a new approach to the elucidation of the process of ‘modernization’ in Korea based on a more balanced, comprehensive analysis of the multi-layered, complicated relationship between colonial governance and the everyday life of the colonized. When we consider that we cannot understand the almost forty year period of colonial control and the history of ‘post-liberation’ Korea, which could not be freed from that legacy using the dichotomizing schema of “resistance vs. collaboration,” which in turn has practically become an orthodoxy, this change in direction in colonial studies is a very welcome development.

However, in spite of a noteworthy body of colonial research, there remain many areas that have not received sufficient treatment. Among such areas, studies such as this one by Isomae Jun'ichi on the topic of the status of religion, and of Shinto in particular, in colonial Korea are woefully inadequate. Examples of repressive colonial control under Japanese imperialism, in which Koreans are well versed, are forced worship at Shinto shrines, being coerced to adopt Japanese names, the prohibition on the use of the Korean language, and forced mobilization during the war. However, interest within Korea regarding Shinto and worship at Shinto shrines goes no further than how they (Koreans) maintained their original beliefs (or submitted to these religions) while being forced by colonial authorities to worship Shinto. The situation in academia is the same. There has been very little in-depth research into the motives behind Shinto worship policies during the colonial period, how those policies were implemented, or what the results were (fortunately, however, several noteworthy articles on this subject have recently been published).

In this context, Isomae's research is extremely significant. As I understand it, his exhaustive and vibrant research on this topic is not limited to the simple

yes-or-no question of whether to define Shinto as a religion or as a mode of national morality (national ritual), which has been the traditional approach. Rather, his approach is concentrated on a reading of the issue based on the question of responsibility for the war under the modern Japanese Emperor system. Therefore, the main task for him is not to answer the question of whether Shinto is a religion or not, but to analyze and elucidate the historical and political implications of that question.

This article is an extension of his previous research and offers an extremely fresh and, at the same time, controversial perspective on the reaction of Koreans to coerced Shinto worship. The traditional understanding of this issue has explained the Korean attitude toward worship at Shinto shrines from the perspective of religion. Put another way, the question of whether Koreans were going to reject or accept worship at Shinto shrines was traditionally understood as being determined by whether this worship was seen as a religious act (rejection) or an act of national morality promoted by the Government-General (acceptance). However, in this article Isomae explains that underlying the acceptance of Shinto worship was the understanding of Shinto as a universal religion, a theory put forth by Katsuhiko Kakei of Tokyo Imperial University. Simply put, by perceiving of Shinto as a universal religion, Koreans were able to discover a logic of acceptance.

Isomae's assertion is very subversive of the conventional and longstanding "myth" that Koreans were able to resist the coercion to worship Shinto shrines due to their own religious beliefs. This point is what makes Isomae's assertions so interesting and controversial. However, what interests me is not this point only. He has provided an extremely compelling example of how the colonized appropriate the logic of the colonizer, and, ultimately overturn it. In my opinion, this is the most noteworthy aspect of this article.

Isomae explains this appropriation and overturning through the work of Choe Nam-seon, one of the most controversial figures in the history of Korea's modern thought. According to Isomae, Choe's attempt "transformed the Japanese meaning of Shinto within the Korean context in at least two ways." The first was that through the worship of Shinto, Koreans were able to worship local gods that had been expelled from the Japanese mainland. The second was that this made a

reunification of Shinto with Shamanism possible. Thus, Isomae makes this assertion: "consequently, Shinto shrines in Japan had lost their sense of religious passion; but in Korea it became possible for them to regain religious attribution."

Under the nationalistic dichotomy of "resistance vs. collaboration," it is impossible to discover a way to perceive the colonized as a subjective entity. One of the most important tasks facing the scholar dealing with colonial issues is how to overcome this dichotomy and reorganize the subjectivity of the colonized within the spatio-temporal realities of the colony that consisted of a complicated intersection of the intentions and desires of the colonizer and the colonized. In this context, this appropriation issue that surrounded the expropriation of Shinto in the colonial Korea that Isomae has shown us is extremely interesting and worthy of attention.

Of course this discussion needs to be further developed. In my view, Isomae has merely shown us the tip of the iceberg. Needless to say, based on what he has done, this topic requires more in-depth, detailed discussion. I fundamentally agree with Isomae's assertions; however, for the sake of promoting a productive dialogue on this issue, I would like to pose a question. According to Isomae's analysis, "The original intention of Choe's theory in the 1920s was to shift the discourse from Shinto, centered around Japan, toward something like Shamanism, whose center was in Korea in North Asia. But in the second half of the 1930s, his theory also became absorbed in the worship of the Japanese emperor." This statement is factually accurate. However, I must voice some reservations about Isomae defining this shift by Choe in terms of "resistance/defeat." Does not such a definition once again reduce all issues to the simple dichotomy of "resistance vs. collaboration"? Naturally, I do not believe this was Isomae's intention. I merely wish to emphasize that, in the effort to liberate ourselves from the oppression of the modern nation that attempts to homogenize and classify all lives, we cannot afford to lower our guard even for a moment when it comes to the longstanding theoretical basis of such oppression, that is, this very dichotomized schema I have just mentioned.