

Article

Wrestling with Japan:  
The Colonial Legacy and  
the Construction of National Identity  
in Pak Kyongni's *Toji* (*Land*)

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## Introduction

This article examines Pak Kyongni's *Toji* (*Land*, 1969-1994, hereafter referred to as *Toji*), a multivolume, 6-million-word novel long touted by South Korean critics as the greatest work of modern Korean literature. Written by a novelist whom, prior to her death in 2008, many had considered to be the nation's most likely candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature, *Toji* marks the high point of the Korean *daeha soseol* (the "great river novel").<sup>1</sup> A Korean War widow who began her writing career to support her children and elderly mother, Pak Kyongni (1926-2008) rose to literary prominence in the 1950s. Throughout the next decade, she had become a leading voice in a growing body of women's fiction that flourished in the postwar era. In the late 1960s, Pak began to write what she claimed would be her "last work," a work for which, she stated, all previous works had been mere drafts. Part 1 of *Toji* (out of a total 5 parts) was published serially in a literary journal in 1969-1972. Pak worked on *Toji* for a period of 26 years (Part 5 was completed in 1994), during which time the work was hailed as a major event in modern Korean literature and received serious scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup>

*Toji* tells the story of several families from southeastern Korea against a sweeping panorama of Korean and northeast Asian history that spans half a century (1897-1945) and takes place in Korea, Manchuria, the Russian Far East, and Japan. It begins in the year 1897, a period when peasant uprisings (the Donghak movement of 1894), failed efforts at reform, the arrival of Western imperialism, and steady Japanese encroachment vis-à-vis Korea were all sounding the death knell of the Joseon dynasty. It follows the fate of Choe Seohui, the last heiress of the aristocratic (*yangban*) household of Choe, as she struggles to reclaim family land stolen by a scheming relative in a story that serves as an undisguised parallel to the national experience of Japanese colonial

rule. Describing Koreans of various walks of life as they live through the historical and social upheavals brought about by colonialism and modernization of the early twentieth century, Pak's grand narrative ends in 1945, frozen at the very moment when Seohui hears news of Japan's surrender and Korea's liberation. As this summary indicates, central to *Toji* are the painful legacy of colonialism and the question of Japan. This paper examines the representation and significance of Japan and the colonial past in *Toji*. The complex relationship of Korea and Japan lies at the heart of Pak's narrative of the modern Korean experience of the twentieth-century. That a work widely perceived to be a national epic *par excellence* should contain as a fundamental component the relationship of the former colonizer and colonized reveals the extent to which Pak's magnum opus is a literary testament to the inextricable connection between Japan and the construction of national identity in modern Korea. While this is no doubt true for Korean nationalist discourse as a whole, the depth, scope, and intensity with which Pak grapples with the impact of colonial rule in *Toji* are, in my view, unprecedented in post-liberation modern Korean literature and thus worth examining.

A household name in modern Korean literature, Pak is perhaps the least known and studied outside the country. Part of this is no doubt due to the sheer length of *Toji*, as well as Pak's general preference for longer prose (over short stories or poetry), which has made her work less accessible to translation.<sup>3</sup> Among Korean scholars, there is little argument concerning the fact that *Toji* is a nationalist work containing a prominent anti-Japanese theme. Pak's work has been described by the prominent literary critic Jeong Hyeonggi as being no less than a "theory of Japan in the form of a novel." According to Jeong (2001, 9), it is with *Toji* that "modern Korean literature brought its thinking of Japan, begun since the 1920s, at last to full completion." Such a bold statement, however, has rarely been the subject of a more thorough study or deeper analysis. In

1. For the transliteration of the author's name (McCune-Reischauer: Pak Kyōngni; Revised Romanization: Bak Gyeongni), I follow the author's preferred Romanized spelling, according to the Digital Library of Korean Literature of the Literature Translation Institute Korea (LTI Korea). See <http://library.klti.or.kr/writers-name-list?keys=pak+kyongni&type=writers-name-list&search-button=Search> (accessed July 22, 2018).

2. There are several published editions of *Toji*. The complete 5-part work was first published in 1994 in a 16-volume edition by the publisher Sol. For this article, I use the most recent 2012 edition published by Maroniebooks.

3. There is currently no complete English translation of *Toji*. An English translation of Part 1 by Agnita Tennant was published by Kegan Paul International (1996) and by Global Oriental (2011). For reviews of Tennant's translations, see Chun (1998, for the 1996 version) and Cho (2013, for the 2011 version). English-language material on *Toji* consists of mainly brief introductions and descriptions of the work included in the reviews of the Tennant translations such as the ones referenced above. For another introduction, see Tennant 2003, 698-700. See also Choe 2003, 485-86. Pak is conspicuously absent from anthologies of Korean fiction, even ones that focus on women writers. See Fultons 1997; Fulton and Kwon 2005; Kim 2010.

a cultural climate that has embraced Pak as a literary and national icon, her critique of Japan has been taken for granted and all too readily subsumed within the larger dominant discourse of anti-Japanese nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Pak's treatment of the colonial period indeed appeals to, and epitomizes, the conventional anti-Japanese nationalist discourse of post-liberation Korea. But at the same time, I argue that her engagement with Japan in *Toji* is too multilayered, complex, and passionate to be viewed as being simply and only anti-Japanese. It constitutes an exploration of the relationship of the two countries and their deeply intertwined histories in the twentieth century. Enmity and intimacy, hostility and solidarity, and postcolonial anger and universalist compassion are alternately expressed in the pages of *Toji*. I examine the diversity and complexity of Pak's ideas about Japan and the imperial and colonial impact on Korea. Lastly, I hope to show that her use of a Japanese character in *Toji* contains a self-reflexive dimension that suggests the *relational* nature of Japanese and Korean nationalisms, thereby shedding light on the logic and contradictions of Korean nationalism.

Before examining the theme of Japan, it will be necessary to provide some context on *Toji*. The earlier part of the article will address the role of nationalism in the reception and canonization of *Toji* and its creator in the Korean literary establishment. It will also briefly consider Pak's use of a unique genre (the *daeha soseol*) in her Japan discourse. The latter part presents an overview of the multiple and contending layers of Pak's discourse on Japan in the work, before focusing on a specific example: Pak's use in *Toji* of a main Japanese character, Ogata Jiro, through whom she incorporates not only a story of Korean-Japanese romance but also a discussion of Japanese proletarian literature. I argue that the significance of this Japanese character is twofold: on the one hand, the figure of Ogata Jiro and modern Japanese literature are used by Pak to not only reveal a shared experience of modernity and solidarity between Korea and Japan, but also to critique the ideology of emperor-worship Pak believes to have been essential to the shaping of the modern Japanese subject. On the other hand, the use of a Japanese character is brought to bear on Pak's own anxieties concerning

the construction of Korean national identity and *Toji's* status as a nationalist work. In depicting the cosmopolitan Ogata's struggle between his commitment to a universal humanism and his ties as a Japanese subject, Pak reveals a similar tension between universalism and nationalism at work in *Toji*.

### Nationalism as a Double-edged Sword in *Toji*

Nationalism not only constitutes a key dimension in *Toji*; it is also inseparably linked to the reception of the work and Pak's iconic status in Korean literature. Pak, who spent her formative years under colonial rule until the age of 20, wrote a substantial part of this massive work throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a period that witnessed the flourishing of *minjung* (the people's) culture and when the notion of *minjok munhak* (national literature) was the central concern of literary criticism. This is particularly the case of *Toji's* Part 4, whose serialization occurred between the wake of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and the 1988 Seoul Olympics. In my view, nationalism has been both a benefit and a liability for *Toji*. It at once contributes to, and detracts from, the literary significance and merit of the work. On the most basic level, *Toji* is an unabashed national allegory that has proven to be highly satisfying for the modern Korean readership in the context of nationalist discourse. It transforms the dark events of early-twentieth century history familiar to most Koreans into a triumphant retrospective narrative of, and literary monument to, the endurance of the Korean people and their eventual victory over colonialism. The work is a *tour de force* of the Korean language, a tapestry of dialects and sociolects encompassing various regions, class, and gender, as well as proverbs and idioms. Finally, by means of such rich language Pak articulates concepts closely associated with "Koreanness," such as *han*, within a nativist and organicist worldview that has been particularly appealing for readers exhausted by the relentless state-driven pursuit of industrialization of the 1960s and 1970s. In its reception, *Toji's* status as a national epic has given it immediate cultural legitimacy and earned it a hallowed place in the Korean literary canon.<sup>5</sup> In addition to winning critical

4. Although a few notable studies have focused on the problem of Japan in *Toji*, they hesitate to go beyond a descriptive treatment of the issue to address its more ambivalent or problematic aspects. Scholars' discomfort in delving into the issue suggests the degree to which the colonial past, even after seven decades after liberation, remains a sensitive and controversial issue in Korean culture. See Yi 1999, 2010; Bak 2008; Yi 2009.

5. Examples of the considerable Korean scholarship on Pak Kyongni and *Toji* include: Choe Yuchan (1996), Jeong Hyeonggi (1994), Yi Sangjin (1999), Cheon Idu, (1995), etc. Most of the Korean Studies on the author and *Toji* address a Korean audience. None are translated into English.

acclaim as early as the completion of Part 1 in 1972, the impact of Pak's work has grown beyond literature to develop into a veritable cultural institution and industry.<sup>6</sup> *Toji* has also earned Pak the unqualified respect of the male-dominated Korean literary establishment. In a gender-segregated field (at least before the 1990s) wherein women writers were frequently labeled and set apart as "female writers" (*yeoryu* or *yeoseong jakga*), Pak is known simply as *the* great writer of *Toji*.

And yet the nationalist dimension overpowers other significant narratives in *Toji* concerning gender or class; for example, although Part 1 begins with the dissolution of Confucian patriarchy in the Choe household and highlights the role of strong, fascinating female characters like Lady Yun and Choe Seohui, the focus on women's experiences under the double bind of patriarchy and colonialism is made to yield, from Part 2, to the male narrative of anti-Japanese resistance led by Seohui's husband Kim Gilsang and other male characters. Similarly, class conflicts deeply rooted in traditional society such as the treatment of *baekjeong* (butchers) are addressed, only to be subsumed into the collective nationalist project of resisting the Japanese. Especially problematic and worth exploring within the nationalist framework is *Toji's* engagement with Japan. More often than not, *Toji* follows a predictable anti-Japanese rhetoric in its absolute vilification of pro-Japanese Koreans, and at times is not above angry and bitter outbursts—via characters' speech or narratorial interjection—aimed at the historical colonizer and oppressor that may even strike a reader as being xenophobic.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to note that this anti-Japanese element is not unproblematically sustained in the work, but made to coexist and contend with an implicit and ambivalent narrative of the entangled modernities of Korea and Japan.

6. Pak received numerous awards for *Toji*, including the Weoltan Literature Award (1972), Woman of the Year Award (1994), and the Gold Crown Order of Cultural Merit (2008, posthumous). *Toji* has been made into a television drama series three times, in 1979-1980 (KBS), 1987-1988 (KBS), and 2004-2005 (SBS). The Toji Cultural Foundation and the Toji Cultural Center were established in 1996 and 1999. A Pak Kyongni Literary Park was founded in 1999. A "Toji Village" in Hadong, North Gyeongsang province, was developed as a tourist site in 2008. Since 2011 the Toji Cultural Foundation has hosted an international "Pak Kyongni Literary Prize" whose recipients include Liudmila Ulitskaya and A. S. Byatt. A 17-volume animated version of *Toji* was published in 2015.

7. At one point, Pak cannot resist the unfortunate temptation of retrospective historical judgment: in Part 4, in a scene where a group of Japanese intellectuals living in Manchukuo address the violence of the Nanjing massacre (1937), the narrator states that Japan will receive divine retribution in the form of the atomic bombings. See Pak 2012, 15:433-34.

Recent studies have underscored the failure of Korean anticolonialism to go beyond a simplistic vilification of the Japanese to truly question the morality or legitimacy of colonization itself (Schmid 2002, 36-38; Kwon 2014, 133-37). A Manichean binary of colonizer and colonized has taken the place of a full reckoning with the colonial past, all the while, as Nayoung A. Kwon (2014, 137) states, "the trauma of the colonial past still haunts society." Pak's striking engagement with Japan is, if not an important exception to the dominant tendency observed above, at the very least worth unpacking. Concerning her upbringing as a young colonial subject, Pak wrote:

I was born in 1926, during the period of Japanese colonial rule. In 1946, when I was 20 years old, the Japanese left this land. But having been reared in the Japanese language and in Japanese literature, it is true that, for a long time afterwards, I obtained my knowledge from Japanese books. I say this because my basic understanding of Japanese culture is similar to that of the sixty-something Japanese of today, and I examined myself lest I lose impartiality. There was even a wavering that made it difficult for me to be true to my perspective, judgment, and standards.<sup>8</sup> (2013, 60-61)

Here, the author acknowledges an indebtedness to the colonial period for her education and knowledge that many are loathe to remember, as well as a shared past and culture between Koreans and Japanese of her generation. Its lingering effects even after liberation have helped shape Pak as a writer. Pak's ambivalent words reflect her complex feelings towards the former colonizer and her struggle to maintain "impartiality" when confronting the colonial past.

## The Great River Novel

*Toji's* multilayered discourse on Japan is closely linked to Pak's use of a distinct form of historical fiction called the *dae-ha soseol*. A Korean transformation of the French *roman-fleuve* (river novel), the *dae-ha soseol* is a literary form whose prominence and popularity in the second half of the twentieth-century extends across the North-South divide, and whose expansive narrative structure has

8. All translations from the Korean in this article are my own.

been used to articulate the historical vicissitudes and national traumas of twentieth-century Korea.<sup>9</sup> In South Korea, *daeba soseol* became especially popular in the 1970s and 1980s, in the context of the country's economic take-off, struggle against military dictatorship, and the rise of *minjung* culture (Lee 2003, 478).

But while it engages with history, Pak's work is not historical fiction in the conventional sense. In the pages of *Toji*, the reader searches in vain for a vivid, stirring depiction of Korean history; for a carefully crafted fictional reenactment of major events in the style of Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), with its scene of the Battle of Waterloo, or the burning of Moscow in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865-1867). What we have instead, in nearly the entire course of the 20-volume novel, are memories, recollections, rumors, second-hand accounts, and, most of all, debate, reflection, and lamentation on history, repeated and recounted by various characters in countless moments of passionate dialogue and monologue. In place of the traditional novelistic elements of exposition, virtuosic description, and psychological insight, *Toji*, especially from Part 3 onwards, becomes increasingly inundated by dialogue, monologue, and narratorial interjection and digression. Here, Pak incorporates cultural forms such as the oral storytelling methods of *pansori*, traditional women's lament, and the Korean male culture of discussing state of affairs over drinks (*suljari sigukdam*). In *Toji*, Pak maximizes the capacity of the great river novel for digressive openness and its use of multiple narrative streams, thereby stretching the boundaries of the genre. In fact, her further transformation of the genre has led scholars to come to see *Toji* as an altogether new, or anomalous, form of the great river novel, clearly distinguished from more conventional

and straightforward examples of the genre, such as *Taebaek Mountain (Taebaek sanmaek, 1983-1989)* by Jo Jeongrae.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, unlike a conventional historical novel, Pak's transformation of the *daeba soseol* is able to accommodate the continuous shifts in her discourse on Japan by providing an open space where digressions and ideas can roam wild. The experience of colonialism and the complex relationship of Korea and Japan, it seems, cannot be told through traditional literature.

### *Toji's* Japan Discourse: An Outline

In an interview in 1987, Pak stated as follows:

Even after liberation, despite our constant talk of resisting Japan, it is no exaggeration to say that there has been no analysis whatsoever of what Japan really is...It may very well be that we, Koreans, know the Japanese the best (*Ilbon-e gwanhaeseoneun uri minjok i gajang jal al kkeoyo*). We experienced ruthless colonial rule, and many Koreans studied in Tokyo. And yet it is strange that there have been no studies of Japan after liberation.

Pak's words reveal the enmity and intimacy that simultaneously inform the colonial relationship by claiming that through the experience of colonization, the colonized have gained privileged knowledge of the colonizer. They also hint at the myopic nature of Korean anti-Japanese nationalism: despite (or because of) their very zeal in fighting Japan, Koreans have been blinded from using this knowledge to truly confront and examine the colonial past. As this statement shows, Japan was a major preoccupation for Pak in her later period. From the late 1980s until her death in 2008, she wrote 20 essays, published in newspapers and magazines, critiquing Japanese culture and politics.<sup>11</sup> More broadly, the ideas on Japan are closely linked to an organicist and universal worldview scholars

9. It is noteworthy that writers in both North and South engaged with the form of the great river novel and contributed to its twentieth-century canon. The prototype of the genre, written during the colonial period, was Hong Myeonghui's *Im Kkeokjeong* (1928-1940). While works such as An Sugil's *North Kando* (1959-1967), *Toji* (1969-1994), Hong Seongweon's *South and North* (1970-1975), Hwang Seokyoung's *Jang Gilsan* (1974-1984), and Jo Jeongrae's *Taebaek Mountain* (1983-1989) have appeared in the South, Yi Kiyeong's *Tuman River* (1954-1961) and Pak Taewon's *Peasant Wars of the Year 1894* (1977-1986) were literary products of the North. Following the 1988 lifting of the ban on North Korean literature and under the influence of the *minjung* (people's) movement, great river novels by *weolbuk* ("gone north") writers were quickly published in the South. This is the case of the aforementioned Hong Myeonghui, who moved north in 1948 to become a leading politician in the DPRK (*Im Kkeokjeong* was published in the South in 1985), as well as the representative KAPF writer Yi Kiyeong and modernist-turned-historical writer Pak Taewon (their great river novels were published in the South in 1988-1989).

10. Pak's transformation of the genre has even led scholars like Kim Jinseok to argue that the very appellation of the "great river novel" may have in itself become a bias in understanding *Toji*. According to Kim, whereas the great river novel suggests a single river or flow under which the various streams are united, there is no single dominant narrative in *Toji*. Because the work consists of multiple streams that do not necessarily come together, Kim (1995, 235-89) has suggested calling *Toji* a "multi-river novel" (*daba soseol*) rather than a "great river novel" (*daeba soseol*).

11. For a list of Pak's writings on Japan, see Yi 2010, 427.

have come to call Pak's *saengmyeong sasang* (philosophy of life). Regarded as the cornerstone of her thought and work, and reflecting notions from Shamanic and Buddhist cosmology, *saengmyeong sasang* upholds the dignity and equality of all living beings whose existence is maintained and balanced by an eternal and immutable order. Key to Pak's thought is the concept of *han*, which is commonly explained as a peculiarly "Korean" feeling of resentment caused by a national experience of social or historical oppression. In contrast, Pak's understanding of *han* goes beyond the social and historical to encompass the existential, and its affect is perhaps closer to compassion than resentment. For Pak, the inevitability of suffering and death makes *han* a fundamental part of all life in the human and natural world. Realizing and embracing this universal nature of *han* brings forth compassion for all living beings. Pak once described *Toji* as "a vessel containing all life (*saengmyeong*) existing in space and time, the images of those living and struggling in the world of *han*" (1994). *Saengmyeong sasang* bestows an ontological and moral dimension to Pak's critique of Japan. In her essays as in *Toji*, Japan's blind pursuit of material progress and its will to conquer its Asian neighbors are perceived as violating the dignity of life.

From the beginning of *Toji* to its end, Japan is present in multiple levels, including plot, historical and spatial setting, characters, and discourse. Pak Sangmin (2008, 255-56) has calculated that the word "Japan" (Ilbon) is the third most frequently occurring word in *Toji*, appearing a total of 2,200 times in the work, following the names of the two main characters "Choe Seohui" (2,361 times) and "Kim Gilsang" (2,285 times). The Japan theme is perhaps most organically interwoven in Part 1, which details the demise of the Confucian patriarchal and agrarian order, symbolized by the village of Hadong and its reigning landlords, the Choe family. The murder of the patriarch Choe Chisu and the breakdown of the taboos of class and gender are made to closely parallel the process of Japan's takeover of Korea in the period leading up to 1910. Notable here is the demonization of pro-Japanese Koreans (*chirilpa*), which follows the logic of traditional *gwonseonjingak* (reward good and punish evil) narratives. In Parts 2 and 3, the narrative of the Choe household, so dramatically established in the first part, anticlimactically fades away, as Pak's focus shifts to the anticolonial struggle represented by two groups during the 1910s and 1920s: in Korea, the remnants of the Donghak movement active in Jiri Mountain, and, abroad, activists in Manchuria and the Russian Far East.

Pak's treatment of Japan and the colonial past become most challenging and problematic in Parts 4 and 5, when the setting moves to the 1930s and 1940s, the period of wartime mobilization based on the ideology of *kōminka* (imperialization; *hwangminhwa* in Korean). This is also the period of the author's youth. Here, almost as if desiring to shake off the pretenses of literary narrative in order to get to the heart of the matter, she unleashes a discourse on Japan, conveyed through characters' dialogue and narratorial digression, which encompass the historico-political, cultural, and ethical. It is here that the ideas and images concerning Japan become bewilderingly diverse. On the one hand, echoing the ideas in the writer's nonfiction, Part 4 launches, through the mouths of various characters, a scathing critique of Japan, wherein its material and military superiority in the modern period is seen as masking a cultural and spiritual inferiority. As I will examine later, Pak also embarks on a point-blank condemnation of what she believes is at the root of the modern imperial state and its war machine: the ideology and institution of emperor worship. On the other hand, the use of a Japanese main character and the story of a Korean-Japanese romance, told with pathos, bring the more gray areas of colonial intimacy to the fore in the second half of *Toji*. Furthermore, Pak's surprising engagement with Japanese proletarian literature, sympathetic and detailed, addresses issues of transcolonial exchange and solidarity. Stories of minor characters in *Toji*, which reveal the human costs of wartime mobilization for Koreans as for Japanese, question the logic of imperialism through an appeal to common humanity. Through having these various discourses and narratives coexist and contend with one another, *Toji* illuminates diverse and contradictory aspects of the colonial encounter, providing the reader with multiple angles from which to examine the experience of colonization.

### Between Humanism and Nationalism: Ogata Jiro and Transcolonial Romance

Situated at the crossroads of these competing narratives on Japan, imperialism, and nation is the character of the internationalist Ogata Jiro. Introduced in Part 3, Ogata is the only main Japanese character out of the approximately fifty Japanese Pak features in *Toji*. First of all, Ogata is the male protagonist of the interethnic romance, whose emergence is also connected to the Great

Kanto earthquake (September 1, 1923).<sup>12</sup> Ogata's appearance is preceded by, and prepared for, a scene in a train of two young Koreans returning home from Tokyo in the winter of 1923, a few months after the earthquake: Seonu Sin, a student of "Y" University studying English literature, and Seo Uidon, an aristocrat turned socialist. Although inevitably shaken by what they have witnessed in the colonial metropolis, the Koreans have nonetheless safely escaped. As it does with so many of the historical events, *Toji* bypasses a direct description of the earthquake and the atrocities against Koreans committed in its wake, attempting instead to convey its horrific impact through narratorial commentary and dialogue between the intellectuals. We are told by the narrator: "If the pandemonium of the terrible event was a nightmare for the Japanese, for the Korean residents it was a living hell. It was a scene of the slaughter of the Joseon people, which one cannot forget, and which should not be forgotten" (*Toji* 10:264).<sup>13</sup> Noteworthy here is *Toji's* focus on an emerging, more ambiguous, group: students and intellectuals, sons and daughters of the middle and upper classes, freshly returned from the metropolis, having attained the fruits of "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*). In contrast to the peasants and Donghak followers of the earlier parts, the shift to the members of this class, who owe their education and modernization to Japan, muddies *Toji's* hitherto clear-cut narrative of anti-Japanese resistance. Although treated with a level of sympathy, they are on the whole portrayed as an impotent group characterized by self-disgust and empty talk. The fruits of modern knowledge acquired in the metropolis—shown in Seonu Sin's admiration for Shakespeare and the novelist Natsume Soseki—are presented as an escapist indulgence irrelevant to the sufferings of the people (*baekseong*) (*Toji* 10:274-75). He and the socialist Seo Uidon emphasize the utter helplessness of colonial elites to even know how to respond to the 1923 event: still in shock, the best they can muster is to spit on the ground, curse the Japanese perpetrators ("sons of bitches!" or *gaesaekkideul*), and escape (*Toji* 10:265).

Once the train arrives in Seoul, Ogata is introduced, almost like a character emerging out of the painful aftermath of the earthquake and the men's anguished dialogue:

"Sin-san! Sin-san!"

A man wearing glasses and in a grey overcoat, holding a bag, was walking hurriedly towards them and calling them. Behind him, a woman, with a nervous expression, followed hesitantly. Although she was a grown woman, she appeared at first glance to be a student of barely seventeen or eighteen years of age. Her big eyes, reflecting suffering, revealed her older age.

"Sin-san!"

Seonu Sin turns in surprise. The approaching fellow beamed at them. It was a captivating smile, too captivating, perhaps, for a man. His head was rather small. Taller than average and thin. Other than the charming smile, he gave off a scholarly impression.

"Isn't this Ogata-san?" (*Toji* 10:279-80)

The young woman returning with Ogata, and the object of his love, is Yu Insil, the daughter of a middle-class family studying at a women's university in Tokyo. Yu Insil is the only female character in *Toji* who actively participates in the anti-Japanese movement, as well as the only woman whom Pak uses, later in Part 4, as a mouthpiece for a full-blown critique of Japanese culture. Fiercely dedicated to the national cause, Yu Insil is shown to be struggling between national loyalty and her feelings for Ogata. Distressed and humiliated at having been seen with Ogata by male acquaintances, she stands, like "a snail wishing to crawl back into its shell," "her gaze gloomily lowered onto the ground" (*Toji* 10:283).

Meanwhile, introducing Ogata to a dubious Seo Uidon, Seonu Sin stresses that he is an "internationalist" rather than a Japanese, to which Ogata eagerly and awkwardly adds: "Yes, I am a human (*ingan*)" (*Toji* 10:281). After the couple leaves, Seo Uidon chides Yu Insil for coming with a *waenom* (derogatory term for Japanese). Seonu Sin, however, defends Ogata, saying that he is "different." He tells Seo Uidon how Ogata helped the Koreans during the earthquake:

He's a good person. A fellow told me he had been deeply touched by his help. When I joked that he shouldn't become a pro-Japanese so easily, he said that it didn't apply here. Burst into the boarding house, face pale as a sheet, drenched with sweat, shouting "Kin-san, hurry! Follow me!" With Ogata, you couldn't possibly hold a grudge. (*Toji* 10:284)

This romantic portrayal of Ogata as a humanist seeking to transcend the boundary of nation to help Koreans in the earthquake—told in a curiously jumbled and second hand manner—is noteworthy. The juxtaposition of the

12. For a discussion of the Kanto earthquake and Koreans in colonial Japan, see Ryang 2003.

13. Henceforth, all citations from *Toji* are from the 2012 Maronibooks edition (20 volumes). The volume number is followed by the page number.

trauma of the victimized Koreans with a sympathetic Japanese character is strategic on the part of Pak, reflecting her contrasting desires to expose the atrocities of the Japanese without, at the same time, replicating nationalist hatred.

In presenting a Korean-Japanese romance as a main narrative of the later part of *Toji*, Pak taps into a tradition of literary representation of transcolonial romance and intermarriage dating back to the 1910s.<sup>14</sup> But whereas stories of romance or intermarriage by colonial-era writers like I Gwangsu often reflected their desire to become imperial subjects and the difficulties of attaining that goal, Pak's postcolonial treatment of the same topic is marked by a different kind of anxiety and prudishness. A pure and martyr-like figure, Yu Insil is reminiscent of the March First independence fighter Yu Gwansun (1902-1920), and her character as a woman and individual is never allowed to develop beyond the mandate of nation. While Ogata is portrayed as a love-struck hero constantly expressing his desire for Yu Insil and Korea, her inverse longing for him is rarely shown. Rather, almost as an act of atonement for her guilt over her desire for a Japanese man, Insil delivers, in Part 4, a passionate, hypernationalist speech addressed to Ogata critiquing Japanese culture. Unbeknown to him, Insil gives birth to their son in Tokyo, leaving the infant in the care of another family and departing for Manchuria to continue her anticolonial struggle.

## Japanese Proletarian Literature

Ogata Jiro's significance in *Toji* is, above all, found in his connection to modern Japanese literature. In Parts 4 and 5, Pak carries out a discussion of Japanese proletarian literature of the 1920s and 1930s, which is not seen in her essays and which contrasts interestingly with her otherwise negative appraisal of Japanese culture. In her essays, Pak unequivocally categorized Japanese culture as a life-negating culture that worshipped the sword and aestheticized violence and death.<sup>15</sup> Given this clear stance in her nonfiction, and considering, also, the fact that Pak was not a leftist writer, as well as the censoring of proletarian literature

in effect until the late 1980s, the sympathetic highlighting of Japanese socialist literature, unique to *Toji*, forms an interesting aspect of Pak's Japan discourse. It becomes increasingly apparent, in fact, that the character of Ogata is a composite of various Japanese socialist writers, including Ōsugi Sakae (1885-1923), Kotoku Shusui (1871-1911), Arishima Takeo (1878-1923), Kobayashi Takiji (1903-1933), Nakano Shigeharu (1902-1979), and others. It is not hard to tell at a glance that these were writers and intellectuals who resisted the Japanese state.<sup>16</sup> A theme of solidarity was suggested earlier in the scene of the Kanto earthquake, where, in addition to the character of Ogata, the narrator had aligned Koreans and Japanese socialists by presenting them as fellow victims of the mass hysteria manipulated by the authorities.

In Parts 4 and 5, Pak devotes particular attention to writers who were persecuted and martyred for their fierce resistance against the state. The writer Kobayashi Takiji, for example, is referenced in a scene wherein Ogata, together with a group of Japanese intellectuals living in Manchukuo, confront the atrocities of Nanjing. Kobayashi's story "The Fifteenth of March, 1928" (1928), depicting the brutal crackdown on socialists that took place that year, and the writer's eventual death by torture, are highlighted by (Japanese) themselves to reveal the extent of state oppression (*Toji* 14:414; 15:459). Another proletarian writer singled out for praise is the playwright Kubo Sakae, who is mentioned in Part 5 by Ogata and Inshil's son Shoji, an eager student of literature and ideological successor of his father's idealism and cosmopolitanism. The teen-aged Shoji has recently become enamored of Kubo's *Land of Volcanic Ash* (1937), and the narrator uses the occasion to embark on an enthusiastic explanation of Kubo's pioneering play, the first performance (1937-1938) of which became an act of antiwar protest against the background of Japan's invasion of China and fearsome state censorship (*Toji* 19:179-82).

## Nakano Shigeharu and the Limits of Japanese Radicalism

Of the several Japanese writers mentioned in *Toji*, Ogata is most closely linked to Nakano Shigeharu, the leading Marxist poet and novelist known for his

14. For discussions of Korean-Japanese romance/intermarriage and the issue of colonial intimacy, see Kim 2009 and Kwon 2015.

15. For example, Pak viewed the cultural trend of *ero guro nansensu*, or the suicide of writers like Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, as modern manifestations of this spirit. See Pak 1995; 2013, 54.

16. This point is also made by Yi Sangjin (2010, 432).

special connection to Korea. As scholars have pointed out, Nakano stands out among Japanese proletarian writers for his life-long interest in Korea and his collaboration with Korean writers (Bowen-Struyk 2007; Floyd 2011). In particular, Nakano's 1929 poem, "Ame no furu shinagawa eki" (Shinagawa Station in the Rain), is a work that is considered to be an example of Japanese-Korean solidarity, "the greatest expression of compassion for Korean comrades in the history of Japanese proletarian literature" (Floyd 2011, 145). Here, the poetic "I" bids farewell to his Korean comrades who have been expelled from Japan and are returning to Korea. Nakano's poem is based on the real-life expulsion of his Korean colleagues, which took place in 1928, as part of the state's reinforced crackdown on anticolonial and socialist groups in anticipation of the ceremonies marking Hirohito's ascension to the throne that year.

In *Toji*, Nakano and his poem are brought in at a point of growing inner turmoil for Ogata, as his Korean friends increasingly challenge him on his dual allegiance as a Japanese subject and socialist internationalist. Ogata first mentions the Marxist poet, as well as the first lines of "Shinagawa Station in the Rain," in an exchange with his Korean friend Jo Chanha, an aristocrat who anguishes over his family's pro-Japanese connections:

Jo Chanha: [...] Japan will never change. Even among radicals who support the abolition of the imperial throne, there are very few who speak of the independence of Joseon.

Ogata: Don't say that. I'm here.

Ogata hurriedly pointed to his heart. The two laughed.

Ogata: There's also Nakano Shigeharu. "Shinagawa Station in the Rain."  
*Good-bye, Shin. Good-bye, Kim. You board the train at Shinagawa Station in the rain.* Nakano Shigeharu who wrote that poem. (*Toji* 14:411)

This is followed by the narrator's explanation of the poem: "Shinagawa Station in the Rain' is a poem that showed fervent support for Joseon's freedom and the independence movement" (*Toji* 14:411).

Ever since its first publication under harrowing circumstances, Nakano's poem has been the subject of much debate among scholars over the question of whether it truly expresses Korean-Japanese solidarity. Scholars have in particular problematized the last section of the poem, in which the Japanese speaker calls the Koreans "the front and rear shield of the Japanese proletariat." Furthermore, he bids their rapid return back to Japan, in order to fulfill what he believes is the

ultimate mission of the *Koreans* (rather than the Japanese): to kill the Japanese emperor. Interestingly, the poem's strongest critic has been Nakano who, in his postwar writings of the 1970s, faulted himself for having been unable to shake off traces of "ethnic egoism" (*minzoku egoizumu*) even in the writing of this supposedly pro-Korean poem.<sup>17</sup>

## Nakano, Pak Kyongni, and the Emperor Question

In *Toji*, Pak is not critical of Nakano's poem, and even—perhaps wishfully—misreads "Shinagawa" as a poem devoted to Korean independence. Nakano is moreover romanticized by Ogata, who states that "a person like Nakano is rare" and sees in his poem a "humanity" that expresses "sorrow for another" (*daesang e daehan seulpeum*), a "beauty that is pure and true." "Shinagawa," Ogata insists to Jo Chanha, is proof that this kind of humanity is also present in the Japanese (*Toji* 14:416). I argue that, rather than focusing on the specific power dynamics of Korean-Japanese solidarity in "Shinagawa" as Nakano's critics have done, in *Toji* Pak engages with Nakano in another way, by problematizing, through the character of Ogata, Japanese radicals' position vis-à-vis the ideology and the system of symbolism upholding the imperial state. Here, Pak spotlights the idea of emperor worship, which in *Toji* is also called by its Japanese term *arabito-gami* (deity in human form; *hyeoinsin* in Korean) (*Toji* 14:271). The mid-1930s witnessed stepped-up-efforts at imperial indoctrination, as ideologues sought to formulate an official ideology, embodied in the concept of *kokutai* (national body or essence), for dissemination throughout the empire as it prepared for total war.<sup>18</sup> In *Toji*, the emperor system and the notion of *arabito-gami* are stressed as lying at the core of not only *kokutai* but of modern Japanese thought as a whole.

17. The last section of the poem has subsequently been both defended and criticized by scholars. There are critics who, despite Nakano's own admission, argue that the poem is an expression of true Korean and Japanese solidarity, notwithstanding the problematic section. Yet others, following Nakano, have taken issue with the phrase "the front and rear shield of the Japanese proletariat," arguing that the poem places the Koreans in a subsidiary position vis-à-vis a Japanese proletarian vanguard, therefore failing to show true solidarity or equality between the two. On Nakano's self-critique, see Sin 2005, 108; Floyd 2011, 145-46; 181-84.

18. On the notion of *kokutai*, see de Bary, Gluck, and Tiedemann 2005, 968-69; 975.

Several times in the work, Ogata is confronted with this issue. The question of the emperor is first raised in Part 4, when a minor Korean character takes issue with the Japanese title for emperor: *cheonhwang* (*tennō* in Japanese) (*Toji* 14:274). Comparing the various titles used by states to name their sovereigns, he argues that even a vast power like China calls its emperor by a lesser-sounding name (*cheonja* or Son of Heaven; *tian zi* in Chinese). He ridicules, to an embarrassed but silent Ogata, the pretentious sham of a title that combines the characters “cheon” (heaven) and “hwang” (sovereign or emperor). Later, Ogata is questioned by Jo Chanha:

Jo Chanha: Ogata-san, I believe in your friendship and your desire for Joseon's independence. But what do you think? You who profess to progressive ideas, can you deny the emperor?

Ogata is taken aback.

Ogata: Truthfully speaking, I... I..., no, I've never really thought of it... It's of course a difficult matter. (*Toji* 14:413).

The emperor question is thus shown to be the main question holding Ogata back, despite his love for Insil and his socialist internationalism. In *Toji*, the limits of Japanese radicalism—observed by scholars in Nakano's poem in the failure to achieve true solidarity—is critiqued through the evolution of Ogata's character vis-à-vis the idea of the emperor.

In the end, Ogata discovers that he has had a son with Insil. United with Shoji, father and son travel to Manchuria. Made at last, through his time with Shoji and their travels throughout the vast expanse of the Asian continent, to come to terms with the futility of the Japanese dream of conquest, Ogata eventually denies the emperor system and the *kokutai* (*Toji* 19:208-10). Back in Tokyo, he tells his shocked brother-in-law Yoshie: “So long as the blind worship of the sword and *arabito-gami* do not disappear, the hearts of the Japanese will remain icy cold” (*Toji* 19:160). Of Ogata's change, Pak Sangmin (2008, 278-84) rightfully notes that “Ogata's transformation is incorporated into a self-contained structure wherein *Toji*'s discourse on Japan is legitimized through the mouth of a Japanese character.” He does not, however, take up this point any further and quickly concludes that such a strategy is used by the author to prove that *Toji*'s Japan discourse is not xenophobic nationalism. Pak's use of Ogata obviously serves her critique of Japan. But as I hope to show later,

the implications of her Japan discourse are deeper, in that it is also reflexive in relation to Korean nationalism. This is because Ogata's conflict between universal humanism and nationalism serves as none other than a mirror of Pak's own dilemma as she writes the national allegory that is *Toji*.

Although Pak is not critical of Nakano's poem per se, I argue that, in *Toji*—through the self-enclosed structure involving Ogata—she engages in a dialogue with Nakano in a different, and perhaps more fundamental, way. The question of the emperor was also a main issue that Nakano struggled with in the postwar period.<sup>19</sup> The image of the emperor is at the center of the last section of “Shinagawa,” where the Japanese “I” urges his Korean comrades to return soon and assassinate the emperor. In grisly detail, he instructs them to “thrust the blade into [the emperor's] chest” and “bathe in his splashing blood.”<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, in considering these climactic lines in retrospect in 1977, Nakano wondered why he had not imagined the act of regicide as a task of the *Japanese*, assigning it instead to the *Koreans*, “the ones whose country had been taken from them.” His answer was that he, Nakano, despite his socialist ideals, belonged, after all, to “those who had taken away the country” (Sin 2005, 110; Floyd 2011, 187). His relegating of the Koreans to the role of secondary shock troops was, Nakano reflected, a sign of his “ethnic egoism” (Floyd 2011, 145).

In Ogata, Pak provides an answer of sorts to Nakano's postwar self-questioning by bringing the burden of responsibility of the emperor system from the Koreans back onto a Japanese character. Ogata's inability to confront the emperor system and his eventual confrontation with and denial of it in the end achieve what the Japanese poet could not do in 1929, and could only ask himself in the 1970s, by putting the accountability concerning the emperor back onto the Japanese. Taken together, then, Nakano's postwar reflections and Pak's Japan discourse in *Toji*, centered on the heavily veiled and rarely discussed emperor system, constitute a meaningful dialogue on the colonial past. Such Korean-Japanese discourse that directly and honestly examines the ideology and mechanics of imperial power have, unfortunately, been extremely rare. But it should be noted that in distinction to Nakano, who highlights the physical assassination of the emperor in “Shinagawa,” or contemporary historians

19. For a discussion of Nakano and the emperor question, see Sin 2005.

20. I have consulted the English translations of Nakano's poem in Karen Thornber (2009, 760-61) and Nikki Floyd (2011, 184-85).

like Herbert Bix (2008), who focuses on the personal actions and decisions of Hirohito in the context of war responsibility, Pak stresses the symbolic, unconscious, and ideological aspects of the emperor system. As shown in Ogata, she views it as a seductive notion permeating the thought of the modern Japanese subject.

In addition to Ogata, *Toji* presents wartime stories involving minor Japanese characters. Ogata's sister Yukiko, whose two sons and son-in-law were conscripted, receives news of her younger son's death. Another passing character, a young Korean man, relates the story of how he, in escaping from forced labor in a Hokkaido mine, was helped by a Japanese woman whose sons were all in the war front. Recalling how this woman had protected him like a son, he marvels at how her face, as she had bid him good-bye, "looked exactly like the face of the Buddha" (*Toji* 20:151). Although minor, Pak attempts to show through such stories the costs of empire and war mobilization on all imperial subjects, as well as the shared humanity of Koreans and Japanese.

### Nationalism as Strabismus: The Wanpaoshan Incident in *Toji*

Curiously, at the same time as it engages with modern Japanese literature, *Toji* is conspicuously silent on modern Korean literature.<sup>21</sup> Such silence may be related to Pak's cynicism toward colonial elites and the colonial origins of modern Korean knowledge and literature (seen earlier in the portrayal of the intellectuals and the Kanto earthquake). It also suggests a broader ambivalence regarding the formation of modern Korean identity and its dominant paradigm, Korean nationalism. Clearly, Pak's use of Ogata serves her critique of Japan. But

perhaps just as noteworthy is to see how this discourse on Japan is never free from the problems of Korean nationalism. A few scholars have addressed the issue of nationalism in *Toji*. Pak Sangmin (2008, 270), for example, expressed his discomfort with "the narrator's frequent emotional outbursts," in relation to Japan, concerned that this might lead readers to misunderstand *Toji*'s Japan discourse as a product of reactionary nationalism. The scholar who has paid the most attention to the issue of nationalism has been Yi Sangjin, who points out the "fissure" (*gyunyeol*) and "ambivalence" (*yanggaseong*) in Pak's anti-Japanese discourse. She also notes how *Toji*'s portrayal of the Korean peasants and their collectivism reveal, in addition to the "evils of Japanese fascism," the "frightening violence lurking inside us [Koreans]" (Yi 1999, 77-78; 81). But both Pak and Yi stop short of problematizing the issue any further.

Significantly, Pak herself expressed anxiety over the nationalist impulse. Comparing the narrow outlook induced by nationalism to a state of strabismus (crossed eyes), she wrote: "Were I to suffer from strabismus, I would lose the right to speak of the tremendous strabismus of Japan" (Pak 2013, 60-61). Her words reflect an awareness of the fact that Korean nationalism may fall victim to the same logic of self-superiority and xenophobia as Japan's imperial hubris. Indeed, in the course of the massive novel, there are moments when the writer seems to be weary of the burden of national allegory she has placed on herself. That *Toji*'s anti-Japanese discourse increasingly turns in on itself to self-reflect on the limits of Korean nationalism is shown in the prominent place Pak gives to the Wanpaoshan Incident (1931) in Part 4. The event refers to a dispute over an irrigation ditch between Koreans and Chinese in Wanpaoshan (Manbosan in Korean), a village in Manchuria, which—fanned by sensationalized reports by the Japanese and Korean press claiming Chinese persecution of Japan's Korean subjects—escalated into a series of anti-Chinese riots in major cities in Korea. Part of the Sino-Japanese tensions that prepared the ground for the Japanese takeover of Manchuria in the 1930s, Wanpaoshan demonstrated, for Pak, the extent to which Koreans' nationalist passions and anticolonial desperation were energies that could all too easily be exploited by the Japanese authorities.

In *Toji*, the narrator bemoans the unwitting Korean role in the chain of events that led to the Japanese invasion; she bemoans the fact that Korean nationalism, morphing into a form of collective egoism, played into the hands of an "expertly planned Japanese script" (*Toji* 15:171). The event also looms large in the consciousness of the Korean intellectuals, as they confront the

21. In an essay, Pak expressed anger over the marginal treatment allotted to Korean literature by a Japanese dictionary of world literature, published in 1950. She points out that in the reference's Asian section, 26 pages were dedicated to Japanese literature, 12 pages to Chinese, and 5 pages to Indian literature. The literature of Joseon was treated in half a page, grouped with other literature considered peripheral, such as Ainu and Taiwanese literature. Pak (2013, 14) drily notes that no mention was made of even Yi Gwangsu, who had collaborated so actively with the Japanese. Pak's critique of the Japanese marginalization of Korean literature, then, stands in interesting comparison to her own silence on Korean literature in *Toji*. In *Toji*, with the exception of Yi Gwangsu and Yi Injik (both of whom Pak is critical), no mention is made of any other Korean writer, much less writers of KAPF (Esperanto: Korea Artista Proleta Federacio) or other leftist figures who were closely connected to the Japanese proletarian movement.

mass hysteria and violence unleashed against the Chinese residents of Korea. Looking back on his 1929 poem “Shinagawa Station in the Rain,” Nakano had confessed to having been guilty of “ethnic egoism” in his unwitting marginalization of the Koreans. We glimpse a similar moment of self-reflection in *Toji* when, speaking of the Wanpaoshan Incident, one intellectual remarks on the dangers of nationalism motivated by collective egoism. He states: “Society itself is a big lump of egoism. This type of sentimentalism is very dangerous. Especially for those who brandish nationalism...” (*Toji* 15:152). It tempts another character, Jo Chanha, to deconstruct the very concept of nation as he is forced to recognize the mass hysteria exhibited by Japanese and Koreans alike, in the Kanto earthquake as in Wanpaoshan:

Just what is a nation (*minjok*)? There’s a good measure of ostentation here; a selfishness that loves only the self. Whether it’s the invading side, or the invaded side. But what am I saying? A nation is...isn’t it but a mere collective, gathered together based on need, like animals hunched together for survival?...A group made up of unstable human beings, the rope of so-called blood-relations tied around them, a stake driven into the ground which is called nation, a one-way street.<sup>22</sup> (*Toji* 15:84)

Jo’s provocative questioning of the idea of nation is not explored any further in *Toji*, its disquieting note drowned out by the dominant chorus of national liberation as Pak’s work, chronicling the period of war mobilization, nears its triumphant finale. And yet the presence of more critical reflections in a work perceived to be a great national epic is noteworthy, inviting us to rethink the question of Korean nationalism in *Toji*.

The Japanese cosmopolitan Ogata’s conflict between nationalism and universal humanism points to a similar tension characterizing Pak’s work, making *Toji* highly relevant to an age in which the categories of nation and ethnicity are being increasingly questioned and dismantled as contemporary Korean literature takes a “postnational turn” (Hwang 2010), at the same time as the specter of the colonial past still dominates Korea’s relations with Japan. Ultimately, what emerges from *Toji*’s representation of Japan and the colonial

legacy is not so much a definitive, final judgment concerning the former colonizer as a continuous, open-ended process of exploring and wrestling with the meaning of Japan, and, above all, the impact of the colonial past on the construction of modern Korean identity. Beyond its canonization and monumentalization by Korean critics and readers, much more work is needed to shed light on the complex and multiple aspects of Pak’s great river novel, including, but not limited to, its discourse on Japan and problems of national identity. Examining them helps us to not merely feed on, but to reflect on and critique, the dominant tendencies of Korean nationalism and ideas about Koreans’ place in the world.

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22. In a travelogue Pak (1990, 8-10; 12-16) wrote following a trip to China in 1989, the writer also spoke of “our national guilt over the Wanpaoshan Incident” as she recalled her childhood impressions of the Chinese residents living in Korea in the 1930s.

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## Abstract

Pak Kyongni's *Toji* (*Land*, 1969-1994) is a multivolume, 6-million-word novel long touted by South Korean critics as the greatest work of modern Korean literature. This paper examines the representation and significance of Japan and the colonial past in *Toji*. That a work widely perceived to be a national epic *par excellence* should contain as a fundamental component the relationship of the former colonizer and colonized reveals the extent to which Pak's magnum opus is a literary testament to the inextricable connection between Japan and the construction of national identity in modern Korea. Pak's treatment of the colonial period indeed appeals to, and epitomizes, the conventional anti-Japanese nationalist discourse of post-liberation Korea. But at the same time, I argue that her engagement with Japan in *Toji* is too multilayered, complex, and passionate to be viewed as being simply and only anti-Japanese. Focusing on Parts 4 and 5 and Pak's use of a main Japanese character, I examine the diversity and complexity of Pak's ideas about Japan and the imperial and colonial impact on Korea in *Toji*.

**Keywords:** Pak Kyongni, *Toji*, Korea, Japan, imperialism, colonialism