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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **“Awakening Asia”: Korean Student Activists in Japan, *The Asia Kunglun*, and Asian Solidarity, 1910–1923**

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#### **Abstract**

The contributions of Korean and Taiwanese authors to the many and varied formulations of interwar pan-Asianism have so far remained a relatively unexplored subject of scholarly research, despite an unbroken interest in the trajectory of state-based Japanese pan-Asianism. Focusing on Korean students and independence activists, this article discusses alternative configurations of regional unity and solidarity that emanated from the interactions among Korean, Taiwanese, and other Asian actors who resided in Tokyo during the 1910s and 1920s. When the ethnic-nationalist interpretations of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination failed to materialize, a portion of anti-colonial activists in Asia began to emphasize the need for solidarity by drawing on what they perceived as traditional and shared “Asian” values. While challenging the Western-dominated international order of nation-states that perpetuated imperialism, such notions of Asian solidarity at the same time served as an ideology of liberation from Japanese imperialism. Examining journals published by Korean students and activists, including *The Asia Kunglun*, this article adds another layer to the history of pan-Asianism from below, a perspective that has often been neglected within the larger context of scholarship on pan-Asianism and Japanese imperialism in Asia.

Keywords: pan-Asianism, Korean independence movement, Taiwanese activism, self-determination, Japanese imperialism, anti-colonialism, *The Asia Kunglun*, Taishō liberalism

#### **Introduction**

During the interwar period, self-affirmative notions of an imminent awakening of Asia that would bring about regional solidarity in order to challenge the Eurocentric international order became increasingly popular across Asia. Yet historical research focuses almost exclusively on the study of Chinese pan-Asianism and state-based Japanese pan-Asianism, which eventually formed the ideological foundation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere during World War II (Hotta 2007; Saaler and Szpilman 2011a, 2011b). Consequently, scholarship on alternative approaches to Asian regional solidarity is quite scarce (Karl 1998). In particular, the question of what regional integration meant for Korean and Taiwanese intellectuals has been largely neglected by researchers, despite the centrality of East Asia in

early twentieth-century Korea's modernity discourse. In part, this is due to fears of "undermining the master narrative of a 'relentless national struggle' against the Japanese invaders" (Tikhonov 2002, 198–199). Nevertheless, seemingly conflicting ideas of anti-colonial nationalism and supranational connectedness of countries and people were characteristic for the interwar period in Asia (Huebner 2016, 5). As Korean student activists residing in Japan initiated an independence movement, their mobility also facilitated interaction with anti-colonial activists from China and Taiwan, as well as with Japanese intellectuals. An analysis of the intellectual space that resulted from the multiple transnational entanglements, interdependencies, and transfer processes of the Korean independence movement calls into question the narrative that has remained within the confines of the national history paradigm (Nishi 2007; Wells 1989).

Delving into the writings of Korean and Taiwanese students and activists who formulated alternative visions of "Asia" in the journal *The Asia Kunglun* (J: *Ajia Kōron*),<sup>1</sup> this article explores how pan-Asianism was used as a tool from below to denounce Japanese colonial rule in Asia during the early interwar period. Due to the suppression of the March First Movement in Korea and the failure of Western liberalism to grant Koreans self-determination, Korean students in Japan adopted new ideologies, including Marxism and pan-Asianism, while retaining their ultimate goal of national independence. Whereas the interactions between Japanese left-wing intellectuals and radical elements of Korean students in Japan are well known (Ono 2013, 103), efforts by diasporic writers in Japan to create a more egalitarian version of Asian solidarity have been less well documented by scholarship. This assertion also pertains to earlier attempts by Korean and Taiwanese students to harness early World War I intellectual and revolutionary energies to fight imperialism by inaugurating the New Asia Alliance (Shin'a Dōmeitō) with the aid of Chinese exiles in Japan. Furthermore, the movement for regional solidarity in Asia occurred within the broader context of emerging alternative conceptions of civilization, which was no longer simply regarded as a signifier of Euro-American superiority (Duara 2001, 101–102). By examining the continuities and discontinuities of the regional entanglements of Korean independence activism from 1910 to 1923, this study adds another layer to the prevailing nationalist narrative of the history of the Korean independence movement, as well as to the scholarship on pan-Asianism.

Faced with the double constraint of Western and Japanese imperialism, a significant portion of East Asian student activists viewed national liberation as inextricably tied to the

creation of a new international order within which Asia would assume cultural leadership. In their minds, the imagined cultural and political community of free Asian countries and peoples had the potential to replace the Eurocentric international system, which was designed to guarantee the acceptance of the “nation-state as the universally normal, legitimate form of the modern state” (Chatterjee 2012, 273). This imagined regional community was therefore an attempt to attain liberation from Japanese colonial rule by appealing to Asian commonalities and a shared (though rarely specified) set of values that refuted the selfish behavior of the Japanese. Asian solidarity was thus envisioned as a supranational community based on the independence and equality of the peoples of Asia and their civilizational superiority vis-à-vis Euro-American civilization.

Exploring alternative deliberations of Asian solidarity that Korean and Taiwanese students in Japan formulated during the 1910s and 1920s, this article is divided into four sections. After briefly discussing the historical trajectory of pan-Asianism in Japan, Korea, and China, the second section delineates the context of emerging networks between East Asian students and activists in Japan. The article then investigates how Korean activists in Japan alluded to Asian solidarity while challenging Japanese colonial rule during World War I. The last section discusses alternative concepts of Asia’s role within the international order by analyzing the journal *The Asia Kunlun*.

### **Pan-Asianism in East Asia from the 1880s to the 1920s**

The concept of “Asia” is of European origin and was first introduced to China by Jesuits during the seventeenth century. Initially functioning as a negative contradistinction to Europe, the West, or the Occident, categories like Asia, the East, or the Orient served, inter alia, to buttress the alleged superiority of European civilization (figure 1). Political scientist Benedict Anderson has aptly revealed the imaginary nature of national communities (Anderson 1996). However, similar mechanisms were at work in the construction of regions that might relate to or extend already existing structures, and sometimes even challenge them (Karl 1998, 1096; Saaler and Szpilman 2011a, 6). Partly drawing on early modern concepts of regional interaction such as the Sinocentric world order, Asian intellectuals began to formulate positive visions of Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to negative portrayals of the region. Increasing contact among Asian elites resulted in the ideology of pan-Asianism, which hinged on an understanding of a common destiny in an Asian struggle against Western imperialism. Consequently, culturist or racialist concepts

of Asian unity often encompassed a strong anti-Western component, particularly in Japan (Weber 2008; Duus 1971). Associated historically with Japanese expansion, to which it provided an ideological and propagandistic foundation, the prominence of Japanese state-centered pan-Asianism and its increased congruence with ultra-nationalism during the 1930s and 1940s have condemned alternative transnational approaches to Asian solidarity to relative obscurity (Hatsuse 1980; Hotta 2006, 117). Pan-Asianism was a broadly defined and by no means monolithic ideology, encompassing diverse strands of thought and ideas that viewed Asia as a cohesive body determined by geographic, linguistic, and racial or cultural communalities as the smallest common denominator (Saaler 2007, Saaler and Szpilman 2011a; Hotta 2007; Huebner 2016, 5).



Figure 1. Eighteenth-century map by Jean Palairt showing the principal divisions of Asia. Note that Korea is depicted as part of the Chinese division. *Source:* Library of Congress, item 2006636642.

Emanating mainly from Japan and China, pan-Asianist ideas gained popularity among Asian intellectuals after the last decades of the nineteenth century. Whereas Japan's eminent liberal thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi (1860) had vehemently argued in 1885 for Japan to dissociate herself from Asia (*Datsu-A-ron*), Japanese art historian Okakura Tenshin drew a positive image of Asia by postulating that "Asia is one." In *The Ideals of the East* ([1903] 1905), Okakura reasoned that Indian and Chinese culture—i.e., Buddhism and Confucianism—had found their perfect realization in modern Japan. For both Fukuzawa and Okakura, "Asia" signified a cultural concept with Japan at its center, and thus one that did not necessarily entail the unyielding binary of East and West that is usually attributed to both authors (Zachmann 2007, 361). Tarui Tōkichi, another early pan-Asianist, promoted a close alliance between the countries of the East (*tōkoku*)—unified Japan and Korea would form a union with China—in his treatise *Daitō Gappōron*, published in 1893. Yet Tarui's proposal lacked any attempt to understand the perspective of Koreans, who were by then already under the regime of the unequal Treaty of Kanghwa (Kim KH 2011, 76). Eventually, Japan's pivot away from solidarity to domination unveiled the contradictions in the ideas of Okakura, Tarui, and other Japanese pan-Asianists.

The debate surrounding Asian unity was not limited to Japan. Russia's defeat at the hands of Japan kindled popular enthusiasm all across Asia. In China, nationalism developed simultaneously and in conjunction with a sense of the unity of Asia. Erudite classical scholar Zhang Binglin (Taiyan) epitomized this trend. After he fled to Japan in 1906, he connected with Indian, Filipino, Korean, and other Asian activists, including Japanese socialists, and assisted in organizing the Asian Solidarity Society (Karl 1998, 1111–1113). Combining a cultural-racial nationalism directed against the Manchu reign with an anti-imperialism founded in the concept of Asian solidarity deriving from racial similarity, Zhang's rhetoric contended with state-based visions of Asia as proposed by Sun Yat-sen (Karl 1998, 1097). During and immediately after World War I, pan-Asian agitation reached a peak in countries like Japan, China, and India; in India in particular, it possessed an antimodern tinge. Skeptical of materialist modern civilization, Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore argued for a spiritual Asian alternative to the secularized West. However, this did not resonate well with Japanese pan-Asianist circles that embraced imperialism and nationalism (Fischer-Tiné 2008, 23–25). Fueled by Europe's self-inflicted disaster of World War I and the racist anti-immigration laws enacted in the United States in 1924, Japanese authors like Kodera Kenkichi and Ōkawa Shūmei began to flesh out the political aims of pan-Asianism,

popularizing the terms “pan-Asianism,” “Greater Asianism,” or simply “Asianism” (Saaler 2007, 1281). The definitions of these terms remained in flux, usually signifying East Asia but occasionally also including India and Southeast Asia or European countries such as Poland or even Germany (Saaler and Szpilman 2011a, 241).

Whereas pan-Asianism became increasingly popular among Japanese, Chinese, and Indian ideologues in the early twentieth century, many Korean authors who were directly confronted with Japanese hegemony took a more cautionary stance. Before 1905, pan-Asianist ideas had initially been embraced by Koreans, especially by progressive reformers and newspapers like the *Hwangsong sinmun*. However, the establishment of the protectorate over Korea made the Japanese violation of Asian solidarity evident in the eyes of Korean intellectuals (Schmid 2002, 92–100). Faced with the looming annexation of his country, Korean nationalist historian Sin Ch’ae-ho wrote an ardent repudiation of “Easternism” (K: *Tongyangjuŭi*), which he denounced as a mere tool of Japanese expansion in the guise of Asian solidarity against Euro-America (Kim B. 2011, 191–193). His critique was aimed at pro-Japanese sympathizers (K: *ch’inilp’a*) like the leading members of the Ilchinhoe (Advance in unity society), which collaborated with the Japanese pan-Asianist society Kokuryūkai (Amur river society) that actively lobbied for annexation (Hatsuse 1980, 99–110). However, being an anti-Japanese nationalist and a pan-Asianist were not always mutually exclusive: charged with the assassination of Itō Hirobumi, the Japanese resident-general in Korea, in autumn 1909, An Chungkŭn drafted the introduction and the first chapter of the unfinished *Tongyang p’yŏnghwaron* (A discourse on peace in East Asia) while awaiting trial in prison. For An, Japan had jeopardized the security of Korea and the region by creating tension among Japan, Korea, and China, thereby betraying its position as the defender of the East following the Russo-Japanese War (Shin 2006, 31–35). The annexation of Korea by Japan in the name of regional stability as defined by Tokyo made it obvious that, in the minds of Japanese statesmen, there was no room for utopian ideas like An’s suggestion of a common East Asian currency.

Still, visions of a supranational region rooted in cultural communalities continued to unite increasing numbers of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist activists, who argued for the nation as the main reference for belonging during the interwar period (Huebner and Weber 2013, 12–13). A persistent sense of historical connectedness of East Asian peoples and anti-Westernism led thinkers like Li Dazhao, the co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, to envision an Asian federation based on national liberation and freed from Japanese domination

over Asian nations. Li advocated “New Asianism” in order to oppose Japanese “Greater Asianism”, which in his view was merely an excuse for Japanese expansion on the continent.

While “Asia” in the Japanese perception became increasingly synonymous with empire, progressive non-state approaches to Asian solidarity lingered at the pan-Asiatic conferences in Nagasaki in 1926 and Shanghai in 1927, where Chinese and Korean delegates demanded that Japan abrogate its imperialist aspirations on the continent (Aydin 2007, 156–157). In many cases, such challenges to Japanese colonialism emerged from the interaction between various groups of Asian students and intellectuals who resided in the colonial capital, Tokyo. The formation of the aforementioned Asian Solidarity Society in 1907 is the most conspicuous example. Although the society was ephemeral and spawned few activities, its legacy lay in the emergence of alternative approaches to creating cultural regional unity that stood in contrast to state-sponsored nationalist concepts of Asian regionalism (Karl 1998, 1097, 1110–1117; Shiraishi 1982). Over the following two decades, Asian students and activists were involved in similar intellectual endeavors that attempted to formulate alternative visions of Asia and usually opposed Japanese imperialism in the region.

### **Korean Independence Activism and Regional Networks in Japan, 1910–1919**

After political resistance inside Korea had been stymied in a crackdown on the leading patriotic society Shinminhoe (New people’s association) and by the ensuing suppression of free speech, the center of Korean anti-colonial activism shifted outside of Korea. The Japanese capital, where thousands of overseas students from Asia resided, evolved into one of the epicenters of anti-colonial activism. Japan’s entry into the war on the side of the Entente, due to her conflict with Germany over Shandong, provided the stimulus for the Korean students’ independence movement and related “subversive activities” (Ishiguro 2004, 88). Despite the circulation of liberal ideas during the Taishō period, the legacy of the High Treason Incident at the beginning of the decade was still fresh and added to a general sense of caution among the foreign students.<sup>2</sup> Underneath its intellectual rhetoric, the Japanese state maintained tight control over public demonstrations such as the Rice Riots in 1918 (Choi 2015, 37). Nonetheless, the repercussions of the war in East Asia ignited Korean student activists’ zeal to conspire with Chinese and Taiwanese activists against Japanese imperialism in East Asia. In 1915, the Twenty-One Demands that Japan made on China were perceived as a paramount symbol of Japanese aggression in Asia. Japan’s hostile stance toward China, expanding bloodshed in Europe, and repression in the colonies became



recurring themes in the speeches and discussions of students at the Korean YMCA in Tokyo and the affiliated Yuhaksaeng Haguhoe (Fraternal association of Korean students in Japan), where students regularly held assemblies.

Within the context of heightened attentiveness toward Japan's imperial ambitions, the New Asia Alliance was an attempt to institutionalize cooperation among East Asian activists in Tokyo. The alliance's significance derives from the fact that Chinese and Korean student leaders—as well as two Taiwanese students, including independence activist Peng Huaying—were involved in its founding (Ogio 2004, 55). Some Chinese members of the alliance had actively participated in the Xinhai Revolution before they went to Japan to study (Ono 2013, 115). The nationalist resurgence among Chinese students was reinvigorated by the leadership of Guomindang exiles, many of whom fled to Japan to evade persecution by Yuan Shikai between 1913 and 1916 (Chow 1960, 35; Brown 2011). The Japanese authorities closely monitored the Chinese students because their sheer numbers harbored a significant potential for unrest (Sanetō 1960, 545). Apart from memoirs by former members and official reports compiled by the Japanese authorities for the purpose of surveillance, none of the alliance's publications have survived to bear witness to its activities (Ogio 2004). This is due to the secretive nature of the alliance, which operated in a climate of suspicion and intensified repression of alternative ideologies deemed subversive to colonial rule in the aftermath of the “Case of the One Hundred Five” against Shinminhoe members in Korea and the armed suppression of the millenarian “Ta-pa-ni Incident” in Taiwan (Katz 2005, 393). However, speeches at the Korean YMCA and articles written by Korean activists in journals like *Hakchikwang* (*Lux scientiae*), which the Korean student association Haguhoe published between 1914 and 1930, reflect the intellectual climate within which Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese activists interacted through the New Asia Alliance (Kim 2013, 179–183).

The motivation and main purpose of the alliance are elucidated by the recollections of its members: Kim Ch'ōlsu recalled that the group strove “to defeat Japanese imperialism and to build a new Asia” in order to achieve Korean independence. However, the aims of the alliance were not limited to the Korean problem; it fought for the liberation of all Japanese colonies, including Chōsen (Korea), Taiwan, and the semi-colony China (Ono 2013, 117). Upon hearing about the Twenty-One Demands, Chinese founding member Yao Jiannan expressed his concern that China could become a second Korea (Ono 2013, 113). Generally, the prevailing sentiment among Chinese students at the time was that China was on the verge of becoming a Japanese protectorate, a reasonable thought considering the content of the

demands. In addition to confirming Japan's seizure of all former German ports and concessions in Shandong Province, the list went far beyond earlier unequal treaties in that it demanded effective control over Fujian Province opposite the Japanese island colony of Taiwan, as well as additional concessions in Southern Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, and the Yangtze Basin (Dickinson 1999, 87–92; Luo 1993, 301).

The rhetoric of the student activists subsequently became more pugnacious. In January 1915, a group of four Koreans students met and discussed financial support for Germany. Others argued that if Japan were to declare war on China, it would be defeated because the United States, a country that had great sympathy for China, would enter the war on China's side (Naimushō 1975a, 51). News of the conflict with Germany over Shandong and the simmering conflict between China and Japan elicited similar reactions among Koreans in Chinese exile (Lee 1963, 101–102). Even before Woodrow Wilson expounded his Fourteen Points, the prospect of Japan going to war with China encouraged Korean activists to express hope that the United States would side with China in a war against Japan, thereby eventually enabling Korean independence. The Chinese question remained important to the Korean students even after the Chinese government had accepted a reduced set of demands when the Japanese government relinquished the most intrusive provisions. Even though the initial hopes for a direct alliance between the United States and China harbored by the Korean students were dashed by China's entry into the war against the German Empire in August 1917, student activists remained anxious about the situation in Asia. Japanese authorities cited an unidentified Korean who was reported commenting on the visit of Russian grand duke George Mikhailovich to Korea in early 1916 and predicting that

as the relationship between Japan and Russia grows more amicable, Japan will finally become the dominant power in China. Therefore, because this will bring about great hardship for the situation of the Korean nation, the question whether Japan and Russia shake hands will have no small influence on the people of our homeland. (Naimushō 1975a, 52)

In the minds of Korean activists, Korea's fate and the question of whether the country could become independent in the future were inextricably linked to the destiny of the whole region.

During the almost two years of its existence between late 1915 and September 1917, the New Asia Alliance was instrumental in forming far-reaching networks in Asia. Immediately after its inauguration, leading members began to connect with activists in Seoul. When Huang Jiemin, a Guomindang activist and member of the alliance, traveled from Seoul

to China to meet with Li Dazhao, the visit did not slip the attention of Japanese authorities (Ono 2013, 118). Within the wider context of these efforts, students also connected with Indian revolutionaries. During his first stay in Japan in 1916, Rabindranath Tagore received a visit from Korean and Chinese students who revealed to him the nature of Japanese imperialism in their home countries (Hay 1970, 318–319; Takagi 1976). In response to a Korean request, he presented the students with the poem “The Song of the Defeated,” which was later published in the Korean literary magazine *Ch’ōngch’un* (Youth) (Mizutani 2015). Although very brief, this episode vividly demonstrates how independence activists from all over Asia sought an active exchange of ideas and interaction with one another on which they would later be able to build.

### **World War I and the Korean Independence Movement in Japan**

On the eve of World War I, Korean student and independence activist Chang Tōksu (figure 2) published an article in Japanese titled “The Innermost Feelings of a Korean Youth” (*Chōsen seinen no chūjō*) in the Japanese journal *Daisan Teikoku* (The third empire). Edited by Ishida Tomoji and Kayahara Kazan, the journal spearheaded Taishō liberal thought and had a considerable impact on Chinese intellectuals, including Li Dazhao (Duara 2001, 113). Chang, who was involved in founding the New Asia Alliance, explained that “the problems between Korea and Japan are not confined to merely Korea and Japan. At the same time, these are also East Asian problems (*tōyō no mondai*) and international problems (*sekai no mondai*)” (Chang 1914, 17). Chang asked for a fair discussion between Koreans and Japanese and answered the question of whether Koreans should resist Japan by emphasizing that “we have to be determined to be East Asians.” Koreans should, in other words, earnestly reach out and shake hands with the Japanese from their hearts. However, Koreans did not wish to be enslaved (*dorei*). In order to lead a purposeful life, many Korean activists felt they should demand freedom and equality vis-à-vis the Japanese. Toward the end of his article, Chang changes tone and asks for what purpose the Japanese were assimilating the Koreans and why Koreans were suppressed and incarcerated under so-called military rule. He concludes by citing American revolutionary Patrick Henry: “Give me liberty, or give me death!” (Chang 1914, 17).

Chang’s article is remarkable with regard to a number of aspects. Not only is it one of the earliest public calls for independence for Korea, it is also one of the rare occasions prior to 1919 in which an opinion piece by a Korean student activist was published in a Japanese-

language paper. The journal *Daisan Teikoku*, first published in 1913, advocated *minponshugi* (imperial democracy) by calling on its readers to support the petition for universal suffrage (Fuke 2010, 23–34). The journal, which was discontinued in December 1915 due to disagreement between the two editors, possessed an overall ideological orientation comparable to that of the newspaper *Tōyō Keizai Shimpō* (Oriental economist), which endorsed democracy (*minshushugi*) domestically and anti-imperialism (*hai teikokushugi*) abroad (Matsuo 1974, 142–143). Moreover, during the Taishō period, Japanese liberal circles frequently interacted with Koreans and Chinese like the student group Shinjinkai (New man society), which experimented with Esperanto during discussions with Korean and Chinese students at the elite Law Department of Tokyo Imperial University (Rapley 2016, 82). Therefore, the editors of *Daisan Teikoku* were inclined to provide a platform for a Korean student leader and nationalist activist like Chang, who would go on to found the nationalist newspaper *Tonga Ilbo* and to lead the cultural movement in Korea after 1920. While lambasting the Japanese for their colonial policy in Korea in excoriating language, Chang framed his argument for independence through the suggestion of Asian communalities. This allowed the author to appeal to his mainly Japanese readership by alluding to ideas of solidarity that could only be attained if the relationship between Japan and Korea were based on equality and free will. Contradicting the popular idea of hegemonic pan-Asianism under Japanese leadership, in Chang’s eyes the Japanese abuse of her neighbors was aggravated by their shared ancestry.



Figure 2. Chang Tōksu later in life.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons



Figure 3. Yi Kwangsu in Tokyo, 1918.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Chang's public condemnation of colonial rule encouraged student activists to openly castigate Japan for Korea's misery. Yi Kwangsu (figure 3), a student at Waseda University, declared during a gathering at the Korean YMCA in 1916 that, although every human being had a right to lead his life freely, Japanese colonial rule deprived Koreans of this right: "The Japanese oppressed the Korean people and monopolized any profitable activities... and at the same time continued to deprive them of all freedom and power, claiming that its policies are beneficial." Yi concluded by asking, "Can we [continue to] tolerate this?" (Naimushō 1975a, 52). Directly confronting his audience with the injustice of Japanese colonial rule in Korea, Yi's open call for resistance alarmed the authorities (Ishiguro 2004, 88). Yi, who would soon establish his reputation as one of the pioneers of modern Korean literature by publishing the serialized novel *Mujōng* (The heartless) in 1917, also drafted the Declaration of Independence that was proclaimed by the students in Tokyo on February 8, 1919 (Shin 2000, 249).

Embroided in a devastating war, European civilization lost its appeal to Korean intellectuals like Yi who had initially tried to emulate Enlightenment modernism. Instead, neo-Kantian and anti-materialist ideas, as well as new theories such as Bertrand Russell's theory of social reconstruction, gained influence (Choi 2015, 37–40). The original emphasis on "civilization" and enlightenment thus slowly shifted toward an emphasis on "culture" (Shin 2000, 254). This was a general trend that was also noticeable in China at the time (Fung 2010, 72–76). Yi's contributions to the journal *Hakchikwang* exemplified this change. Featuring a range of diverse topics such as philosophy, ideology, literature, and religion, *Hakchikwang* circulated widely among the Korean students in Japan, and on occasion copies of the journal were clandestinely smuggled to Korea (Naimushō 1975b, 68). Drawing on earlier ideals of Enlightenment and national galvanization articulated by members of the Independence Club during the 1890s, the overall objective of the journal was to foster individualism and the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge in order for the Korean nation to become independent one day. It was occasionally banned by Japanese authorities for being critical of colonial rule in Korea (Kim 2013, 179–183).

In an article entitled "Our Ideals" (K: *Uri ūi isang*), Yi suggested that "because this major European war exposed certain defects of modern civilization, there will occur tremendous confusion and significant reforms in modern civilization when this war ends" (Shin 2000, 254). Yi continued: "While Westerners only entirely understand Western

civilization [*sōyang munmyōng*], they have to acknowledge the respectable values of Oriental civilization, which has its roots in India and China. Ever since Schopenhauer and Bergson, the tendency to include Eastern thinking [*tongyang sasang*] into Western civilization had become obvious” (Yi 1917, 5). In the same article, Yi declares that it is the duty of intellectuals to establish a “new culture” (*sin munhwa*) (1917, 4). Although Yi never clearly elaborates the differences between culture (*munhwa*) and civilization (*munmyōng*), in his usage culture refers only to the four areas of philosophy, literature, religion, and art, whereas civilization encompasses everything from literature and art to industry, commerce, and politics (Shin 2000, 254). Korean intellectuals like Yi expected the existing order to fall apart once the war in Europe was over. This led them to conclude that the concept of cultural rather than political prosperity was more important for the strength and the future of a nation. The Great War in Europe demonstrated that the European nations had exhausted their capability for cultural development. For Yi it had therefore fallen to the “Oriental civilization” (*tongyang munmyōng*) to nurture modern culture (Choi 2015; Shin 2000, 254–255).



Figure 4. Peaceful demonstration in Seoul in March, 1919. *Source*: Bureau d’Information Coréen (1919).

The earlier confidence that Korean activists had had in Western civilization further deteriorated when the Allied Powers failed to guarantee independence from colonial rule for Korea and other non-European nations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Initially, the Korean independence activists in Japan had set high hopes in Wilson's principle of self-determination (Manela 2007, 119); they believed that if the American president "guaranteed the freedom, life and property of weak and small countries," the United States would also make an effort to secure Korea's freedom (Ono 2013, 124). In the end, the attempt to avail Korea of the opportunity that arose during the "Wilsonian moment" and bring the country within the purview of the deliberations at the conferences in Paris and Washington failed (Wells 1989, 8). Inspired by the Korean movement (figure 4), the recognition of Japan's strategic interests, and the transfer of former German concessions to Japan by the Allies served as catalysts for the protests on May 4, 1919, in China. Yet the emerging international world order that placed the sovereign nation-state at its core—while concomitantly reifying Japan's colonial rule in Korea and Taiwan, as well as its imperial policies directed at China—stimulated pan-Asian activists in Japan to seek alternative visions of world order centered in Asia.

### **Asia in a New International Order: East Asian Intellectuals and *The Asia Kunlun***

The lingering skepticism toward Western civilization reverberated through the interwar period in the thinking and writing of intellectuals from various countries in Asia. Following the subdual of the independence movements in Asia and the resulting frustration over the double standards of Western democracies, particularly the United States and its discriminatory immigration policy toward Asians, disillusioned Korean intellectuals realized that Korean independence could not be accomplished without support from Japanese sympathizers. A growing fascination with the Russian Revolution led to increased cooperation with Japanese left-wing intellectuals and Chinese and Korean Communists in Manchuria and China (Scalapino and Lee 1960; Ishiguro 2004, 96–97). It should be noted that the Soviet Union was the only country responsive to Korean nationalists' requests for financial aid (Kang 2016, 385). At a time when a clear division between Korean nationalists and socialists had yet to occur, a number of Korean students reached out to intellectuals who proposed Asian solidarity in their search for an ideological alternative to Wilsonian idealism. These Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese Pan-Asianist activists intellectually challenged the conception of international society as an arrangement of sovereign nation-states in the

interwar era by proposing culturally defined regions as important building blocks of a new world order.

In this respect, the first publication of *The Asia Kunlun* in May 1922 was an extraordinary endeavor that created an intellectual forum for colonized Asian people and sympathetic Japanese.<sup>3</sup> The new monthly journal was the brainchild of a Korean named Yu T'aekyōng, whose background remains rather obscure (Bae 2013, 93).<sup>4</sup> From what is known, Yu had been an exchange student to Japan in 1907 for some time. In 1912, he relocated to China after he was forced to leave Korea due to his participation in the independence movement. He continued his studies at Qingdao University and, after the outbreak of World War I, at Beijing University. In 1919, Yu served time in prison for conspiring against the Japanese colonial authorities in Manchuria. After his release he went to Tokyo, where he proceeded to publish *The Asia Kunlun* (Bae 2013, 97; Gōtō 2009, 149). The magazine produced nine issues through January 1923, despite regular interference by the authorities and the Home Ministry. Its successor, *The Orient Review* (*Tōa Kōron*), was banned and discontinued after the release of only one issue, published in July 1923 (Gōtō 2009, 151–152).

*The Asia Kunlun's* ideological aims went beyond advertising righteousness and humanitarianism as the philosophical basis of Asian solidarity. An editorial, likely authored by Yu and entitled “The Purpose of the Release of this Journal,” stated that the journal’s goal was to “root out the different kinds of negative effects that come from the notion of racist discrimination in many countries of Asia and to encourage a consciousness of universal love of mankind [*sekaiteki jinruiai*] toward the people of all countries” (Bae 2013, 96). While the editorial acknowledged the existence of many journals and magazines that were addressing the “Oriental Problem” or the “Asian Problem,” it asked,

How many are there that impartially speak about how in reality a certain country continues to oppress Asia, and how many are published on the basis of human righteousness and humanitarianism? It is safe to say that except for this publication there is no other that focuses particularly on the Korea problem, an issue of critical importance to Japan and Korea, and formulates impartial critique. (Bae 2013, 96)

*The Asia Kunlun* invoked the Confucian principle of righteousness and humanitarianism to articulate criticism of Japanese suppression of Asian countries (figure 5). In doing so, the editor of the journal pursued clearly defined political and anti-colonial objectives.

Although the majority of its articles were written in Japanese, *The Asia Kunlun* frequently included pieces in Chinese and Korean as well. Moreover, many of the Japanese



intellectuals contributing to *The Asia Kunlun* were affiliated with the Shinjinkai or Waseda University, as were many of the contributing foreign Asian students and intellectuals (Chi 2012, 319). The periodical featured a ream of articles penned by renowned proponents of Taishō liberalism, such as Ōyama Ikuo, Yoshino Sakuzō, and postwar prime minister Ishibashi Tanzan, as well as early writings by the Korean writer Hwang Sōku (Kwon 2014). The resulting multiplicity of ideological beliefs and approaches to Asia underscore *The Asia Kunlun*'s importance for Taishō liberalism, despite the fact that it was only published for less than a year (Bae 2013, 93).

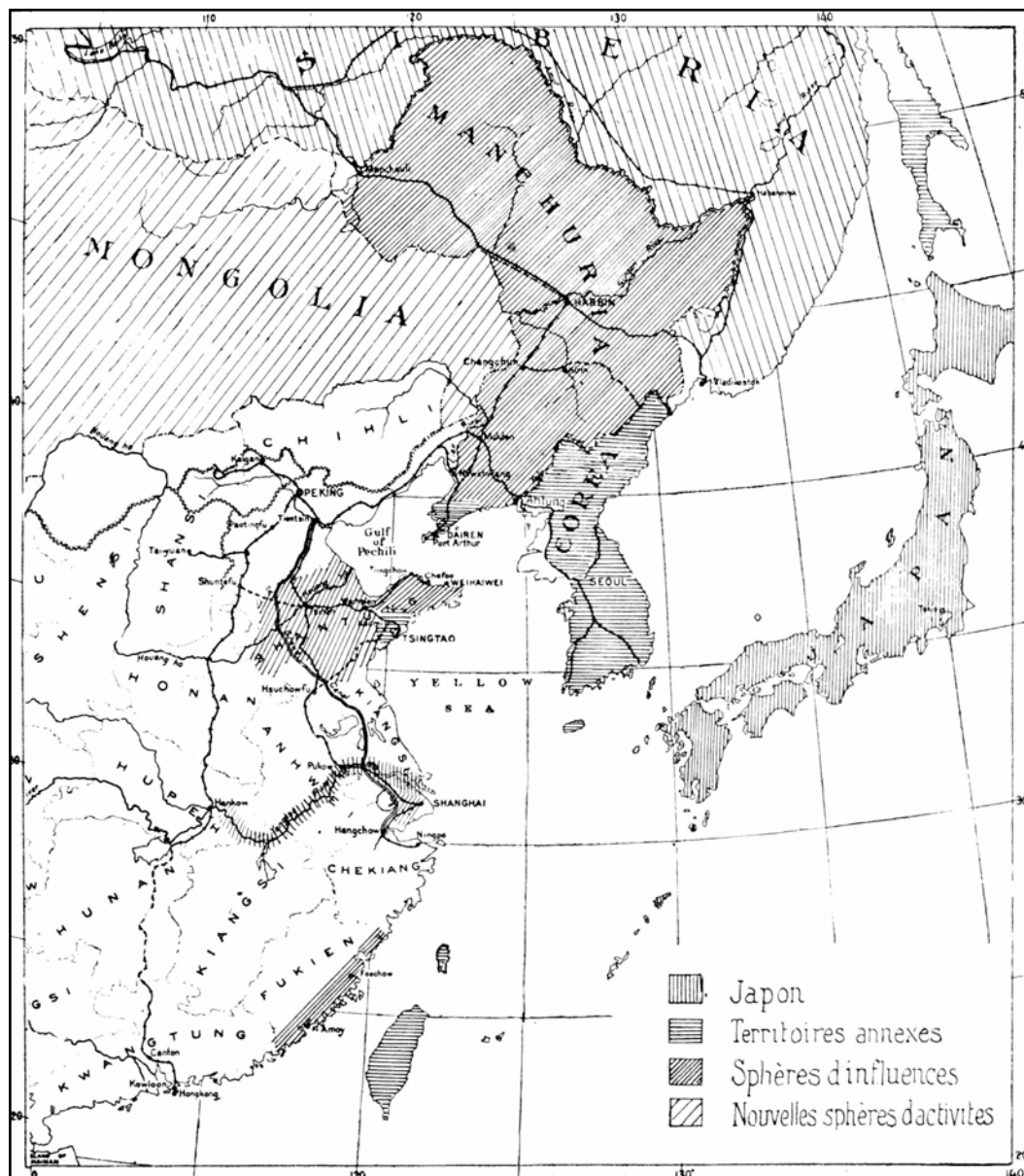


Figure 5. Japanese expansion in East Asia in 1919. *Source:* Bureau d'Information Coréen (1919).

Embracing the diversity of Asia, the *The Asia Kunlun* connected the imaginations of Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese, and Japanese students and intellectuals who envisioned a new world order based on Asia's awakening. Generally, *The Asia Kunlun* sought to enhance a new Asian civilization based on humanism (*jinrui shugi*) and righteous humanitarianism (*seigi jindō*) by implementing universal love of mankind (*jinruiai*), freedom (*jiyū*), and equality (*byōdo*) (Bae 2013, 93; Gōtō 2009, 151). Although the contributors did not unanimously agree on the question of how this new concept of Asia should take shape, the journal's historical significance derives from its Korean and Taiwanese authors' unequivocal repudiation of Japan's policy toward Asia and its collusion with imperialist Euro-American powers. Notwithstanding its critical stance toward Japanese dominance in Asia, the publication of the first issue of *The Asia Kunlun* caused a stir that was covered by the *Tōkyō Asahi Shimbun* (Gōtō 2009, 150). Remarkably, the journal's editors received congratulatory notes from Japanese members of Parliament, as well as from such enigmatic figures as Tōyama Mitsuru, the right-wing power broker and godfather of Japanese ultra-nationalism, despite their explicit criticism of Japan's oppressive policy toward adjacent countries in Asia (Gōtō 2009, 152).

Anti-colonial critiques voiced by Koreans, Taiwanese, and Chinese generally concurred with Japanese pan-Asianism in reproaching Euro-American colonial powers, which many of them had hailed as guarantors of liberation from colonial rule in Asia prior to 1919. The English-language newspaper *Japan Times* captured this sentiment in February 1919 in a report about "a meeting of Japanese, Chinese and Korean Students... held at the Y.M.C.A Hall yesterday afternoon." According to the article, the participants were discussing anti-racial discrimination and speakers "complained that the white race is trying to dominate the world." A "professor of Keiō University" was quoted as saying that "anti-racialism must be removed in Japan and discrimination against Koreans, Formosans and Chinese stopped" (*Japan Times* 1919). After its founding in 1906, the Korean YMCA emerged as a hotbed of the student movement of the 1910s and, for a time after 1919, it retained its leading role as an important space to mediate the interactions between Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese (Neuhaus 2016, 624–625). Yet the assertions of anti-racialist codes and practices voiced by Japanese intellectuals like Yoshino Sakuzō must not be misunderstood as fundamental and essential critiques of empire. In fact, such criticism was almost exclusively directed toward the repressive style of military rule in the Japanese colonies of Korea and Taiwan (Han 2012, 105–111). It thus paved the way for the co-optation of colonial elites. The subsequent

transition of Japanese rule in Korea and Taiwan from “military” to “cultural” policy merely replaced outright repression with subtler forms of assimilation by granting certain liberties to the colonial subjects. In retrospect, this strategy of assimilation proved more effective than the preceding “military rule” (Robinson 2007, 49).

The disillusionment produced by the self-destruction of Europe in World War I coupled with the disappointment that the principle of self-determination promoted by Wilson was applied only in Europe invigorated intellectual efforts to forge regional solidarity in order to overthrow the Eurocentric international order. Many Japanese right-wing proponents of anti-Westernism and pan-Asianism like Tōyama Mitsuru and Ōkawa Shūmei conceived of these positions as tools for stabilizing Japanese supremacy in Asia by adopting a vision of Asia that was entrenched in the belief in irreconcilable antagonism between East and West. The non-Japanese contributors to *The Asia Kunlun* did not unanimously share this perception and proposed a more egalitarian alternative to the existing international order of the Washington-Versailles system, one that would originate from Eastern culture. In fact, the journal explicitly distanced itself from what it considered “militarism.” Responding to an apparent critique of the emphasis on Asia in the journal’s designation as “militarist” (*gunkokushugisha*)—i.e., promoting Japanese imperialism—a section of the inaugural issue featured a prize contest in search of a more fitting label and clarified the objectives of the publication: “*The Asia Kunlun (Ajia Kōron)* is not such a narrow-minded [*kechikusai*] idea as a union [*danketsu*] or the unification [*tōitsu*] of the Asian peoples.... [T]he happiness of mankind is the happiness of all peoples.” In order to achieve world peace, the text continued, it was therefore imperative for Asia to compare favorably in terms of character with Euro-Americans [*ōbeijin*]. “As a first step Asia must awake [*kakusei*]!” (“‘Shidai’ Kenshō Boshū” 1922). Unlike the English name of the magazine, its Chinese-character title did not change before the last issue of the successor journal, *The Orient Review (Tōa Kōron)*.

“Dawn of East Asia” (*Tōa no Akebono*), an article by Korean author Ch’oe Ungpong that appeared in *The Asia Kunlun*, epitomized the idea of the awakening of Asia (Ch’oe 1922). Ch’oe declared that the “whites” (*hakujin*) advocated the equality of men and universal brotherhood (*shikai dōhō*), but pointed to the obvious discrepancy between words and deeds (*genkō fuitchi*). Ch’oe highlighted Western hypocrisy by reminding his audience that Asians were banned from migrating to the United States and that even the white people of Ireland were suppressed. However, Japan had abandoned her fellow yellow race and colluded with the white race by forging an alliance with England (Ch’oe 1922, 50).

Debunking the Japanese rhetoric of uniting the peoples of Asia to oppose Euro-American world domination, Yu T'aekyōng in a similar fashion alleged that “some unrestrained [*rōnin*] scholars and politicians who were intoxicated by militarism” simply wanted to usurp hegemonic leadership [*meishu*] in Asia (Yu 1922, 109). The familiar topos of Japanese betrayal in pursuit of her own imperial gain to the detriment of neighboring Asian countries harked back to An Chungkūn. Coupled with the accusation of collaboration with Euro-American powers, Japan's treachery was attributable to the acceptance and adoption of an international system created and imposed by Euro-America in order to consolidate global dominance.

As an alternative to the existing international system and Euro-American hegemony, Ch'oe invoked the concepts of righteousness and humanitarianism (*seigi jindō*) that “sustained freedom and equality.” On the basis of the Confucian and Buddhist principles of kindheartedness (*jijin*) and benevolence (*jihī*), people should create peace and guarantee the independence of the nation and freedom of humanity (Ch'oe 1922, 50–51). Ch'oe's opinion was representative of the main thrust of the journal: after European civilization had brought disaster on itself, it was up to Asians to form a new world civilization founded on righteousness and humanitarianism as well as love of mankind. According to the article's author, this would ensure stability and peace throughout the world. The treatise “Dawn of the East” constitutes a salient example of *The Asia Kunglun*'s intellectual challenge to Euro-American and Japanese imperialism. Yet Ch'oe and other contributors never clearly articulated how the alternative world order could materialize under the given conditions.

The relevance of *The Asia Kunglun* for pan-Asian thought is further emphasized by the fact that it assembled contributors from different parts of the Japanese Empire. Taiwanese intellectual and political activist Cai Peihuo concurred with the critiques of the Korean authors Yu and Ch'oe. Cai was the publisher of the first Taiwanese journal in Tokyo, *The Tāi Oān Chheng Liān* (Taiwan youth), and he had devised a Romanized written Taiwanese vernacular (Yokoji 2014, 166). In his article “How to Reach Peace in the Far East?” (*Kyokutō no heiwa hatashite ikan?*), Cai attached great importance to the awakening of the peoples of the Far East in order to combine forces and establish basic peace (Cai 1922, 24). Yet Cai's assertion that the “Far East is for the Far Eastern people” did not imply the same elements of xenophobia that the Japan-centered version of an Asian Monroe Doctrine contained (Chi 2012, 261; Pierson [1980] 2014, 368–389). In fact, criticizing the outcome of the 1921 Washington Naval Conference, Cai must have been aware of the idea of the

Japanese Monroe Doctrine for Asia, a recurring theme in Japanese writing, as he explicitly distanced himself from its main proponent, Tokutomi Sōhō (Cai 1922, 24; Hotta 2007, 95–97). Using excoriating language, Cai decried Japanese rule in Taiwan and Korea as “an act of absolutely tyrannical and egoistic government policy under which colonial subjects are barred from education and free development. While obedience is demanded from them, they do not possess the smallest amount of legal freedom.” He continued:

As a first step toward peace building in the Far East, the peoples of the Far East have to first sort out the bad sentiments toward one another. Here, I propose that Japan establishes a China policy of good faith and in particular fundamentally reforms her policy toward Korea and Taiwan to demonstrate true great spirit of coexistence and commonness. (Cai 1922, 27)

Confined by political subjugation to Japan and influenced by the cultural dominance of China, Cai in his later work *Son of East Asia* sought to construct East Asia as a space that transcended colonial Japaneseness and national communities alike (Chi 2012, 262). In his lengthy contribution to *The Asia Kunlun*, Cai already envisioned East Asian unity and cooperation as an instrument not only to guarantee peace and stability, but also to overcome the unjust rule of Japan in Taiwan and Korea.

While a common theme of the journal was stressing the Asian capability for replacing the Western-dominated system, not all authors unequivocally rejected Japanese imperial policy. For instance, Indian revolutionary Rash Behari Bose, who had fled to Japan in 1915 after the Ghadar conspiracy to end the British Raj had failed, contributed to the journal. In the *Orient Review* he postulated that Asia was the cradle of civilization: “In the past Asia had given true civilization and religion to Europe under much sacrifice. Even Europeans today have to acknowledge the fact, that Asia was the mother of world civilization” (Bose 1923, 53). Like others, Bose argued that the war in Europe had destroyed European civilization and culture, which it was now unable to reconstruct: “As a result of Europe’s self-inflicted politics many young people have died in the war and that’s why Europe is no longer able to rebuild civilization. As in the past, the onus was on Asia to generate a new civilization and true religion to help Europe” (Bose 1923, 53–54). Given his anti-British background, Bose’s contributions to the journal reiterated his hypothesis about the spiritual superiority of India and her strong ties with Japan by referring to a glorified past. Influenced by Okakura’s works, this sentiment was generally shared by Japanese right-wing agitators like Ōkawa Shūmei or Kita Ikki, who envisioned a more egalitarian alternative to the existing Western-centered

international order (Hotta 2006, 120–121). While Ch'oe, Cai, and Yu combined their critiques of the international system with an attack on Japanese colonial rule in East Asia, Bose was extremely reticent about Japan's failure to live up to the rhetoric of Asian solidarity.

Although the contributors to *The Asia Kunlun* criticized the prevailing international order dominated by Euro-American powers, their critiques did not lure them into assuming a leading role for Japan in their conception of Asia. Instead, the overall vision of Asia advocated by *The Asia Kunlun* was grounded in the belief in equality, humanitarianism, and righteousness, values based on centuries-old, but vague, Asian values. Early Japanese pan-Asianists like Okakura or Tarui also proposed a union of Asian countries but under the leadership of Japan. They thus laid the groundwork for a state-based Japanese pan-Asianism that legitimized imperial dominance in Asia. The main thrust of *The Asia Kunlun's* idea of "Asia" was directed against exactly this "Greater Asianism." This approach was rather akin to Li Dazhao's "New Asianism," An Chungkūn's visions of an Asian union, and Rabindranath Tagore's Asia as a spiritual counter-narrative to Europe. Bose's standpoint, on the other hand, while certainly not unaware of Tagore, was fiercely anti-British, a stance that eventually ensnared him in the alluring anti-Western narrative of Japanese fascism fighting British and American imperialism in Asia during the 1940s.

## Conclusion

The intellectual space created by the presence and interaction of significant numbers of East Asian students, intellectuals, and independence activists during the first half of the twentieth century made the Japanese capital an important center of anti-colonial movements. Favored by the liberal climate of the Taishō period, Korean and Chinese students in Japan began to cooperate with Japanese liberals and Chinese activists to form associations in order to advance their anti-colonial endeavor. Against this backdrop, Korean activists like Chang Tōksu drew on emerging visions of East Asian communality to openly challenge Japanese dominance in Korea and Asia. Yet the disillusionment with Wilson's United States, which failed to grant independence to Korea and guarantee Chinese sovereignty over former German possessions, developed into profound distrust in the Western-dominated international order after the pivotal year 1919. Moreover, a general shift from Western civilization to Eastern culture is already discernible in the writings of Yi Kwangsu during the war. The alleged cultural and spiritual superiority of "Asia" over the "West" in the post-Versailles era therefore served not only to decry the global dominance of Euro-America but also to rebuke

Japan's subjugation of Asia. Despite the rhetoric of common ancestry and culture (*dōbun dōshu*), Japan had betrayed her fellow Asian brethren and joined the ranks of the imperialist powers.

The contributions of renowned proponents of Taishō liberalism, such as Ishibashi Tanzan, who favored a policy of “Small Japan” (*Shōnihonshugi*) in Asia, or Yoshino Sakuzō, who critically engaged with Japanese policy in the colonies, underscore the significance of journals like *Daisan Teikoku* and *The Asia Kunghun* for the history of interwar political thought. Despite being short-lived, these journals offered East Asian intellectuals a unique forum for fecund debates on the situation in Asia, thereby enabling them to formulate strategies of resistance to Japanese colonial rule that transcended the nation-state. This, furthermore, clearly illustrates how colonial authors were participating in the formation of Taishō liberalism. After all, national independence remained the ultimate goal of authors like Yu, Ch'oe, Cai, and Bose, even though the nation-state system as solidified by Versailles and Washington had also reified Japanese colonial rule over Korea and Taiwan. Arguing for the “awakening” of Asia, this brand of pan-Asianism invoked Asian solidarity and cooperation on the grounds of an alleged cultural superiority in order to establish an alternative model to the Western-dominated world of antagonizing nation-states. Exhibiting an incipient global consciousness, Korean and Taiwanese students and intellectuals sought to replace the existing international order with their own, equitable vision of an Asia that could overcome the discrimination in colonial East Asia by both Japan and the Euro-American powers. For the contributors to *The Asia Kunghun*, stressing cooperative solidarity among Asian peoples was therefore also an ideology of liberation. As Bose believed that Japan could become a more “benign” defender of Asia against Western encroachment, he inadvertently ran into the danger of justifying the allegedly preordained hegemony of Japan over her neighbors. Others, like Yu and Cai, advocated a utopian construct of Asia that hinged on an international reality that faced the problem of imperialist encroachment and thus lacked political clout.

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## Notes

- 1 *The Asia Kunlun* must not be confused with the *Kokuryūkai*'s (Amur river society) English-language journal *Asia Jiron*, which was published between 1917 and 1921 and was known in English as *The Asian Review*.
- 2 During the High Treason Incident (Taigyaku jiken), the police uncovered an apparent conspiracy to assassinate the Meiji Emperor, which led to a mass arrest of Japanese socialist and anarchist dissidents. During the ensuing trial, twelve alleged conspirators, including Kōtoku Shūsui and Kanno Sugako, were sentenced to death and subsequently executed in 1911. The incident also provided the stimulus for the expansion of the Special Higher Police (Tokubetsu kōtō keisatsu), also known as the “thought police” (*shisō keisatsu*).
- 3 The English name of the journal changed from *The Asia Kunlun* to *The Asia Review* in the fifth issue. .
- 4 Yu T'aekyōng is sometimes romanized in Japanese works as Ryu T'aekyōng, since both *yu* and *ryu* are possible readings for the Chinese character 柳. However, Korean language scholarship transliterates the last name into Yu (유). On the alien registration card issued by the city of Chongqing in 1945, the name is transliterated into English as Jai Kyoung Lew. Moreover, some of Yu's contributions to *The Asia Kunlun* were made under the pseudonyms Yu Such'ōn or Su Ch'ōnsaeng (Bae 2013, 99). After the discontinuation of *The Orient Review*, Yu immigrated to the United States to study at Susquehanna University. He returned to Korea in 1930, was abducted during the Korean War by a North Korean covert operation unit, and subsequently vanished without a trace (Kwon 2014, 100).

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