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Propaganda Art From Colonial Korea

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by Park Chung-a

[The year 2005 offers reminders of numerous historical anniversaries of Japan and Korea's torturously entwined twentieth century, including Japan's usurpation of Korea's foreign affairs in 1905, Korean's liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, and the resumption of diplomatic relations between Tokyo and Seoul in 1965. Which will hold center stage, and how each will be portrayed, is presently being contested in both countries.

Many are hailing 2005 as a successful demonstration of a new era of cultural sharing, a term introduced by Kim Dae Jung and Obuchi Keizo in 1999 and reiterated during the Japan-Korea joint sponsorship of the World Cup in 2002. A cornucopia of artistic exhibitions, musical performances and athletic competitions give weight to this claim. It is one given special emphasis by the recent frenzy among many Japanese over the South Korean TV mini-series, "Winter Sonata," whose unprecedented popularity led to overbooked flights between Japan and South Korea through the recent New Year's travel season.

Yet it is worth recalling that the term "cultural" was used once before in twentieth century Japanese-Korean relations, specifically in the wake of the colonial government's brutal crackdown against Korea's 1919 Independence Movement. With the 1920s to 1940s as an already lived measure of "cultural sharing," one notable for the imposition of Japanese cultural norms on Koreans, one wonders whether displays of purposeful "friendship" may divert our gaze from other histories in the making. How, for example, will this celebration of friendship accommodate current revelations of LDP officials' involvement in censoring a 2001 NHK documentary mentioning the Japanese government's association with the wartime sexual enslavement of scores of thousands of Korean women? And what will be the consequences of the recent campaign in South Korea to reexamine the role of collaborators in the period of Japanese colonial rule, whose numbers extend, of course, to many of Korea's post-independence dictators. The bonds of official friendship may be able to withstand only so much lived pressure. Japan Focus]

Korea and Japan are enjoying a better relationship than ever before, with Korean entertainers sweeping Japan and the number of travelers visiting each other's country topping 10,000 a day. This year has also been set as the "Year of Korea-Japan Friendship" by both governments, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations. However, this year is also one that marks the 100th year since Korea's annexation by Japan and the 60th year since Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule. While the two countries' cultural exchanges are becoming increasingly active, Japanese politicians' periodic denials of their misdeeds during the colonial period still offend Koreans, indicating that Korea still has a long way to go to completely rectify its tragic past.

Against the backdrop of this complex relationship, a book on pro-Japanese art works has been published by the Institute for Research in Collaborationist Activities, an

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organization working on nation-related issues in Korea's modern history and putting forth the correct history by illuminating Koreans' pro-Japanese activities during the Japanese occupation.

The book is composed of a collection of art works that have been on display in a pro-Japanese arts exhibition that has been touring the nation since last October under the title "Choson in the Japanese Colonial Period and War Art" and features war footage and the difficult lives of Choson people at that time.

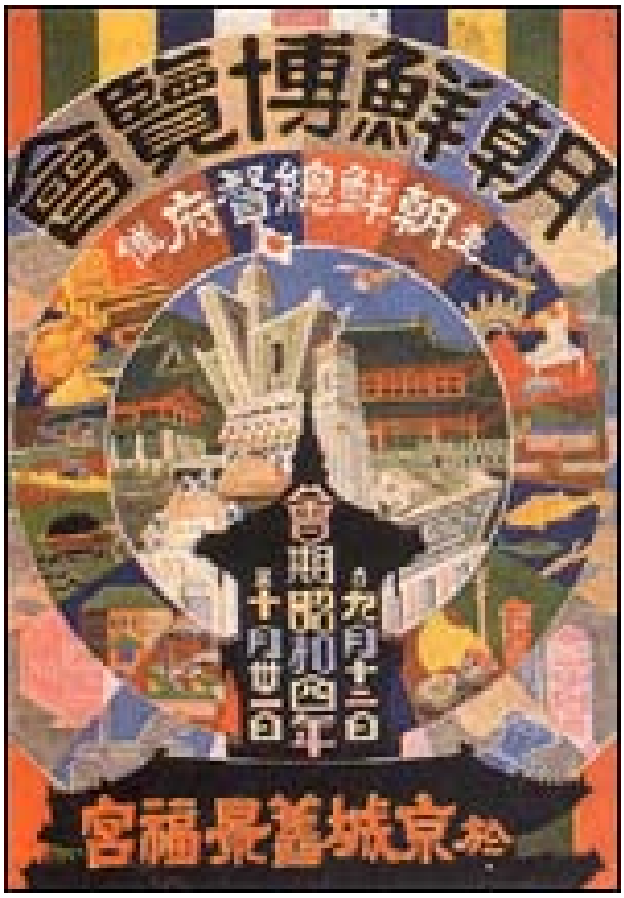


A postcard from the early 20th century urges Koreans to save money in order to support the Japanese military.

Publication of the book is part of efforts to expose Korean's pro-Japanese deeds during the Japanese invasion, which have become more active these days. Since former President Rhee Syngman in 1949 forcefully disorganized "Panmintukwee (Special Committee for Investigating Pro-Japanese Collaborators)," aimed at punishing those who collaborated during the Japanese occupation, the issue had long been banned from public discussion, both under the dictatorial government and amidst the undemocratic environment.

"I hope this book will be a stepping stone for showing Korea's tragic past during the Japanese colonial period. The book will provide readers with a chance to look back and think about the injustice of imperialistic invasion during the 20th century war's cruelty and misdeeds of pro-Japanese Koreans, showing the existence of fascism within ourselves," said Lim Hon-yong, chairman of the Institute for Research in Collaborationist Activities.

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A poster promoting the Choson Exposition, an event organized by the Japanese government in Kyongbok Palace in 1929.

"I hope the book and exhibition will ultimately help our nation to erect its history in the right way," he added.

The book affords readers a close look at the genre of "fascist art" in times of war and activities of Pro-Japanese artists, including Koreans, in the years 1937-1945, a time of Japan's total mobilization of the Korean people and when the cruelty of colonial rule was at its peak.

Four-hundred pictures, including art works, visual images and various propaganda of the Japanese regime, depict the lives of Korean people who had to put up with the plundering and exploitation of manpower as well as resources through conscription of labor, the draft, and the forced mobilization of comfort women. The book also enables readers to witness pro-Japanese activities of representative Korean painters such as Kim Eun-ho, Kim Ki-chang, Kim Kyong-seung and Shim Hyung-gu whose work beautified and praised Japanese invaders at that time.

Park Chung-a is a staff reporter for The Korea Times.

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