Paper Title: The Ex-Colony Anomaly: Black Markets in 1940s Japan

Joel Matthews
New York University

Abstract

On top of years of institutionalized colonial discrimination and the horrors of total wartime mobilization, the emperor’s August 15 announcement of defeat left Japan’s Korean and Taiwanese soon to be ex-colonial subjects with fewer means for survival than their Japanese counterparts. Yet against all odds, it would be in the black markets of 1940s Japan that these ex-colonials take root and flourish, gaining a political, economic and social foothold in a land now forcibly divorced from their homelands by the victorious Allies. I title this presentation an anomaly not only because I am interested in the ways in which the contours of Japan's ex-colonial minorities deviates from what might be expected (itself open to discussion), but also because the unique and contentious geopolitical and jurisprudential environment of the late 1940s greatly shaped their postwar livelihood. I choose to focus on the postwar black markets because it is within these markets that ex-colonial Korean identity comes to be defined by nascent legal categories, geopolitical and jurisdictional opportunities, Cold War-infused ideological affiliations and assumptions of malice and deceit. The social and economic realignment of ex-colonial livelihood that took place in the immediate postwar can be traced through their initial involvement in the black markets and the onset of Cold War ideological exigencies that increasingly impinged on the advantages these minorities had acquired. The black markets of the 1940s by their very extralegal and porous nature offer a site to examine both processes and flows (as opposed to national categorizations such as “Japan” and “Korea”) in the postwar political environment. In particular, this presentation will examine one of the principle objectives of this research project, that being an attempt to incorporate the social, political and economic conditions in the US-occupied areas of southern Korea into Japanese postwar/occupation historiography. This is partially achieved by emphasizing the dynamic between not only the US-administered SCAP (Tokyo) and USAMGK (Seoul – and those on the ground in Busan overseeing the return of Koreans to Korea), but also the BCOF (British Commonwealth Occupation Forces—Australia, New Zealand, Canada and India who at their peak constituted 25% of Allied forces in Japan) who were instrumental in administering the repatriation and enforcement of SCAP policy vis-à-vis the Koreans in Western Japan. I believe
the incorporation of southern Korea into a discussion of 1940s Japanese black markets facilitates the way in which the flood of repatriates (in both directions) created opportunities for the smuggling of people and goods to reestablish trading relationships that had been (or attempted to be) dismantled with the collapse of the regional Japanese imperial economy. In this sense, repatriation and decolonization had the short-term effects of enabling further economic opportunity to ex-colonials in Western Japan and beyond in the immediate years after 1945. The longer-term effects of continued cross-strait economic, political and interpersonal interactions provide for the larger dimensions of this research project.