

EDITORIAL

Editorial Foreword

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The first three articles in this issue of *The Journal of Asian Studies* focus on the legal, political, and literary histories of North and South Korea. Although these articles are concerned with questions involving the practice and implementation of law, the structure and legitimacy of political authority, and the relationship between literature and propaganda, each, in its own way, questions the structure of power within the bracket of seemingly deterministic state institutions.

Benoit Berthelier examines how the quality of literature is evaluated in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and how a structure for evaluation relates to authoritarian politics. By drawing attention to forms of originality and creativity within the purview of strict state regulation, he problematizes a simplistic understanding of propagandist literature. Although his article centers on the “economy of literary value” and valuation based on a quantitative analysis of objective measures applied to a sample of literature, Berthelier provides a valuable perspective on qualitative comparative literature as well.

Jungwon Kim is concerned with understanding the different ways in which individuals sought a redress of grievances in the context of the late Chosŏn state. Kim's analysis shows how an established and institutionalized system of law within a rigidly structured society does not proscribe singular strategies for rule-bound litigation, but rather creates alternative culturally coded strategies of appeal. By focusing attention on the ways in which individuals in local-level communities produce and use documents to make their case, Kim makes legible what is often rendered illegible in formalized court records: the interests and priorities of nonelites and marginalized people.

Kyung Min Yi's analysis of the constitutional crisis in South Korea turns on a question of broad significance in political philosophy: how arguments about the representational legitimacy of state and individual authority challenge the tenets of liberal democracy. Considering Han T'ae Yŏn's defense of Park Chung Hee's assumption of power in South Korea in 1961, Yi provides a critical assessment of Carl Schmitt's thesis on sovereignty, representation, and emergency power in the context of modern Korean political history and the institutionalization of liberal democracy in this context. In addition to shedding light on the history of politics and political philosophy in South Korea, Yi's interpretation of Han's Schmittian reasoning on the nature of sovereign power—and collective national interest in particular—brings to light the fragility of liberal democracy as a universal principle.

The three articles on Korea in this issue draw attention to the ways in which centralized law and politics are complicated by interpretive frames of reference that question the singularity of authority, jurisdiction, and propaganda and expand perspectives on government, legislation, and politicized creative literature.

Turning attention to the political history of modern China, Bin Chen focuses on the relationship among institutionalized education and the politics of ethnicity and religion on a frontier that had to be secured in order to maintain the consolidated legitimacy of the Nationalist government in Nanking. Through a detailed examination of the intricate logic of exceptions and special status granted to the Muslim Chengda Teachers School in the city of Jinan, Shandong Province, Chen shows how centralized legitimacy depends on pragmatic alliances, strategic compromise, and the useful ambiguity of identity at the intersection of ethnicity and religion on the frontier. At least in part, what makes a politics of exception work in this context is the way bureaucrats, administrators, and influential supporters of the school could all use the designation “Hui” to signify something different—a majority territory, a “people,” or a religious culture—while maintaining a sense that they were always talking about the same thing.

Whereas Chen highlights the importance of religion and ethnicity, Chunmei Du draws attention to gender and sexuality in the articulation of nationalist political discourse in post–World War II China. Much of the literature on the consolidation of nationalist interests in China, both within the ambit of the Guomindang and then the People’s Republic of China, has understandably been framed in terms of a consideration of vested political propaganda. Du demonstrates, however, the way that nationalistic sentiments took shape at a key point in time—1945 to 1949—with reference to the dynamics of sexual exploitation manifest in the gendered relationship between so-called Jeep girls and American GIs. Although women who established relationships with soldiers did so in ways that articulate the intersection of class, status, and mobility in modern China, the racialization of sexuality in the context of American occupation caricatured gendered autonomy at the discursive interface of hypernationalism, nervous masculinity, and imperious patriarchy.

The final article in this issue by Alice Bethany Susan Baldock takes questions of gender, embodied identity, and modern subjectivity as a frame of reference for understanding dance, dance performances, and the creativity of self-expression in postwar Japan. Baldock focuses on the creativity of two dancers, one in the tradition of Noh and the other butoh, to show how they both reinterpreted the meaning of movement, presence, and self-representation to challenge gendered norms. With nuance and sensitivity to the dynamics of the way institutionalized art forms can overwhelm and restrict interpretive frames, Baldock demonstrates that the true creativity of artists finds expression in the interpretive modernity of tradition—where the rupture of old and new is not as categorical as it might seem—and in the articulation of commonplace, compromised, everyday bodies against idealized and romanticized conceptions of gendered sexuality and desire.