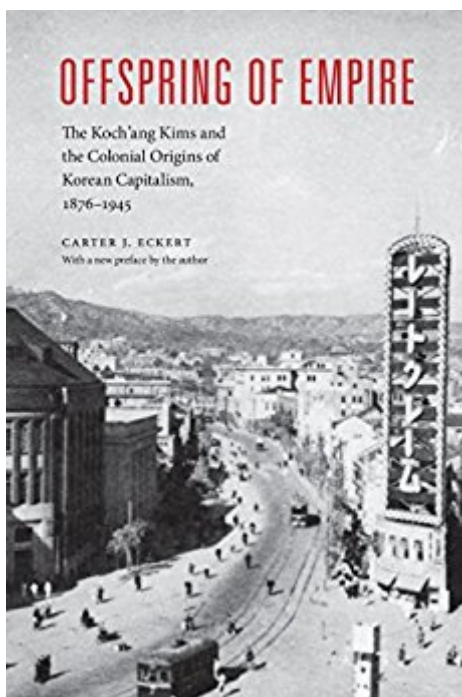


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# Offspring Of Empire: The Koch'ang Kims And The Colonial Origins Of Korean Capitalism, 1876-1945 (Korean Studies Of The Henry M. Jackson School Of International Studies)



## Synopsis

According to conventional interpretations, the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 destroyed a budding native capitalist economy on the peninsula and blocked the development of a Korean capitalist class until 1945. In this expansive and provocative study, now available in paperback, Carter J. Eckert challenges the standard view and argues that Japanese imperialism, while politically oppressive, was also the catalyst and cradle of modern Korean industrial development. Ancient ties to China were replaced by new ones to Japan - ties that have continued to shape the South Korean political economy down to the present day. Eckert explores a wide range of themes, including the roots of capitalist development in Korea, the origins of the modern business elite, the nature of Japanese colonial policy and the Japanese colonial state, the relationship between the colonial government and the Korean economic elite, and the nature of Korean collaboration. He conveys a clear sense of the human complexity, archival richness, and intellectual challenge of the historical period. His documentation is thorough; his arguments are compelling and often strikingly innovative.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Good outlook, but so many notes on almost every page. That's beyond my expectations. But no trouble in reading. Anyway thanks.

Offspring of Empire traces the origins of Korean capitalism through the history of a large-scale industrial enterprise, the Kyongsong Spinning and Weaving Company or Kyongbang. In the introduction, the author notes that the interest in South Korea development has grown much more rapidly in the last twenty years than the broader field of Korean studies. As a result, the empirical base of English-language works for developing theories or narratives of Korea's industrial emergence remains thin, and many books rely on ideological misconceptions or factual errors. This book's first objective is to strengthen the historical knowledge base in the study of Korean capitalism through a contribution to business history. Its second goal is to set the historiographical record straight and to correct some of the myths or false beliefs regarding capitalist development in Korea. One such myth was that capitalism predates Japanese colonization and is discernible in "sprouts" burgeoning during the Yi dynasty that would have flowered even without foreign disruption. Prior to the forced opening of the country in 1879 and its annexation by Japan in 1910, Korea indeed witnessed the rise of a new merchant class oriented toward the market, some of them beginning to invest their profits in the production process itself. Some scholars have suggested that many of the key elements in the process of development toward Western industrial capitalism first delineated by Marx and Weber could be found simultaneously in traditional Korea in embryonic form. But in spite of the enthusiasm of Korean scholars for the topic, the actual evidence presented thus far does not suggest a scale of commercialization in Yi Korea comparable, for example, to that seen in Tokugawa Japan, let alone in preindustrial Europe. In any case, the merchants and landlords who benefited from the opening of the country after 1876 mostly invested the proceeds of the rice trade back into land or real estate. The Koch'ang Kims, whose rise to eminence as industrial entrepreneurs during the colonial period is the main focus of this book, belong to a different era, when Korea was fully under the yoke of Japanese imperialism. Another myth is that some industrial groups that developed after 1919 remained free of Japanese interference and developed their activities based on homegrown capital, technology, and labor. The Kyongbang textile group is a key example in this argument. Not only was Kyongbang the first Korean-owned and managed large-scale industrial enterprise in the country's history; its growth and expansion during the colonial period was short of remarkable. The managers of Kyongbang liked to stress the Korean character of the company and, from the beginning, they made use of nationalist themes in their advertising. In

a period when the national movement was severely repressed and the Koreans hung to their identity, buying textiles from Kyongbang was a patriotic thing to do. Kyongbang became a prime example of homegrown capitalist development. The majority of its shareholders were Koreans. So were its managers, its employees, and the bulk of its customers. The myth of Korean "national capital" also holds that Kyongbang relied entirely on Korean technology for its operation and development. Of course, it wasn't true. In addition to relying on basic Japanese machinery, the company also depended on Japan for nearly all of its accessories and spare parts. Its technicians were sent to Japan for on-the-job training, and a few Japanese managers made coordination easier with Japanese suppliers and clients. Kyongbang depended on Japan not only for capital and technologies, but also for raw materials and markets secured by Japan's military expansion on the Asian continent. The cloth produced in Korea was distributed by a Japanese trading company, C. Itoh, with a vast network of subsidiaries in the empire. Even the preference of Korean consumers for national products could not be taken for granted. Although Kyongbang's cloth was somewhat less expensive, at first many Korean consumers preferred Japanese products that offered better quality and a famous brand name. The corporate history of the Kyongsong Spinning and Weaving Company illustrates the high level of dependency of the Korean colonial periphery from the Japanese imperial center. Stemming from a Kaesong merchant family, the founders, the two Kim brothers, had been born and raised after the opening of the ports in 1876 and at a time when Japanese influence was reaching its preannexation peak. They seem to have been generally sympathetic to the goals of the Enlightenment party, which in many ways looked to Meiji Japan as a model for Korean national development. Historians have shown that much of what the Koreans came to consider "modern" between 1876 and 1919 was actually to a large extent Japanese in origin. Western civilization filtered through a Meiji or Taisho prism. The two brothers studied at Waseda and Kyoto Imperial university, and came back to Korea in order to participate in the modernization of their country by applying the knowledge and methods learned in Japan. Originally the colonial government established in Seoul in 1910 had adopted a policy of maintaining Korea as a simple agricultural colony and market for Japanese manufactured products, including cotton textiles. In 1919 however, there was a change in colonial policy. On the economic side, the First World War vastly expanded the demand for Japanese manufactured goods and created a wealth of surplus industrial capital that needed to be invested. Tariffs between Korea and Japan were abolished, permitting the free flow into Korea of the Japanese capital goods so essential to the establishment of modern machine factories. On the political front, the Korean March First Movement of 1919 sent a signal to colonial authorities about the need for reforms. While the

Government-General after 1919 never hesitated to apply force whenever other means of persuasion failed, the basic method of rule, at least in regard to the bourgeoisie, shifted from coercive to a more subtle strategy of co-optation. As a result, the 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie that used opportunities provided by colonial authorities in order to accumulate wealth and power. The Japanese authorities were anxious to cultivate this Korean business elite whose class interests were in harmony with Japanese imperial goals. In its early years of existence, Kyongbang benefited from government protection and subsidies to help it survive the competition from Japanese imports. The government also channelled cheap loans through the Bank of Chŏngch'ŏn and the Chŏngch'ŏn Industrial Bank. Even with official help, the company operated at a loss until 1925, and its financial position wasn't stabilized until the 1930s. The blurring of public and private spheres that was manifest in Kaesong's financial structure could also be seen in the actual management of the company. Corporate policy was largely an extension of official industrial policy. Kyongbang was, in all but name, a quasi-governmental company, privately owned, to be sure, but with a financial and management structure intimately linked to the colonial state. Kyongbang depended on Japan not only for capital and technologies, but also for raw materials and markets secured by Japan's military expansion on the Asian continent. Japan maintained a hierarchical division of labor within the empire. In general, Japan was to be the producer of the sophisticated manufactured goods that required advanced technology, Manchurian and later China were to furnish many of the industrial raw materials, and Korea was to specialize in basic, unsophisticated industries requiring unskilled or semiskilled labor. As peripheral areas in the Japanese empire populated mainly by poor people with simple tastes, Manchuria and inland China were ideal markets for colonial Korea's manufactured goods, especially textiles. Dependency on China as a source of raw cotton clearly gave Kyongbang a vested interest in Japanese militarism on the continent and strengthened the company's ties to the imperial system as a whole. Likewise, the marketing of its goods in mainland China led Kyongbang into active collaboration with Japanese imperialism and greatly increased the company's tangible stake in the perpetuation of the empire. Last but not least, the Japanese imperial army soon became a captive customer with immense resources and an insatiable appetite for uniforms and fabrics. The company's net profit from the war were considerable. In addition to the opportunities afforded by the new market, the subjugation of Manchuria offered Koreans a certain psychological satisfaction that made Japanese control of Korea itself more palatable. Simply put, Manchukuo gave Koreans the opportunity to engage in the same kind of economic exploitation of the Chinese that Koreans had been suffering under the Japanese since 1905. Examples of this "surrogate imperialism" are to be found in the factories that

Kyongbang opened on Manchurian territory, where it followed a deliberate policy of hiring only Korean labor. Both in Manchuria and in Korea, labor conditions made working at Kyongbang a "living hell". The vast majority of workers were poor, unmarried peasant girls in their early to late teens. Kyongbang girls were paid at most only about one-half the corresponding rate in Japan. Korean labor was not merely cheap; it was also bereft of any political or legal protection. Strikes in prewar Korea were frequent and often violent, and the Korean capitalist elite came to rely heavily on the support and intervention of the Japanese police to maintain the status quo. In the late 1930s, Korean capitalists even cooperated with the Government-General in its implementation of a ruthless wartime policy of assimilation that aimed at the virtual eradication of Korean culture. In Kyongbang, Japanese became the language of all the company's official records, and Japanese-language classes for the employees were established inside the company itself. Colonialism, for better or for worse, was both the catalyst and the cradle of industrial development in Korea. The model of Korean capitalism was less Japanese than Korean-colonial in character; Japanese colonialism, and the particular form that such colonialism took in Korea, gave rise to patterns of industrial development on the peninsula that were distinctively different from those in Japan itself. Imperialism provided the original impetus for the development of Korean capitalism. The Japanese in Korea were actually both agents of socioeconomic change and oppressors at one and the same time. The colonial Korean bourgeoisie sided with the imperial regime and its collaboration prevented it from achieving a position of ideological leadership in Korean society. By 1945, it had become a class in conflict with its own society on ideological as well as material grounds. It was therefore under the aegis of this authoritarian system - essentially a military dictatorship operating through a civilian bureaucracy - that Korean capitalism experienced its first surge of growth between 1919 and 1945. Democratic politics had no part whatsoever in the functioning of the system. By the end of the colonial period, dictatorship had become not only a comfortable political mode for the accumulation of capital, but a political prerequisite for Korean economic elite's survival in the midst of widespread economic and nationalist discontent. Apart from casting a light on the origins of Korea's postwar development, Carter Eckert's *Offspring of Empire* invites the reader to ponder more contemporary concerns. One is tempted to draw a parallel between the working conditions in the Kyongbang industrial complex and the busy sweatshops of Factory China. Of course, China's recent economic growth doesn't take place under colonial conditions, and foreign capital does not hold the same sway as imperial power. We cannot substitute foreign multinationals for Japanese imperialists, and China's authoritarian regime for Korea's or Manchukuo's puppet state. But just as the colonial origins of Korean capitalism "locked in" an authoritarian model of political governance that lasted

until the democratization wave in the 1980s, so is Chinese development constrained by the nature of the regime and the overwhelming share of foreign capital that has transformed China into the "factory of the world". To acknowledge that industrial development finds its origins in specific regimes of production and governance is then to suggest that its initial conditions will have long-lasting social and political consequences. We are all, in a way, the offsprings of empires.

OFFSPRING OF EMPIRE is, in one aspect, history of a powerful landlord family, Kochang Kims, their interactions with Japanese colonial authorities and the active role they played in the growth of textile and other industries throughout 20th century Korea. More broadly and importantly, it is a rigorous and insightful analysis of the emergence of industrial capitalism in Korea. When it was initially published, the book received criticism from Korean scholars for challenging the then-dominant model of the nationalist scholarship; "sprout theory," or the notion that indigenous sprouts of industrial capitalism were nipped by the colonial exploitation by the Japanese. Recently, however, nationalist scholarship has come under attack by a new generation of Korean historians. Much of the nationalist criticism -- including the claim that the book "rationalizes" Japanese colonial rule -- were operating under the (unstated) assumption that economic development was an unquestioned good, and since the Japanese colonial rule was evil, it could not possibly have helped Korean economic development. Some young Korean historians are now seriously questioning this assumption. Economic development, in either colonial or postcolonial Korea, no longer appears to be an unquestioned good, given its gross human rights violations, environmental destruction and other negative legacies. (North Korea in its way had to deal with the legacy of colonialism -- it can be seen as a nation where nationalism, emerged as an oppositional ideology to the Japanese colonial rule, has been elevated to the level of religious credo. The result of this, as we all can plainly see, has been disastrous to the basic human dignity of North Koreans) The evidence for continuities between colonial and postcolonial regimes is too numerous and obvious to be brushed aside. The fact that there was economic development under the colonial rule by no means justifies or excuses the Japanese domination, an act of profound disregard and contempt for the people of Korea. Acknowledging this fact simply opens the way for raising more questions and topics to be investigated about the nature of Japanese colonialism. The critical attitude of many young Korean historians indicates, indeed, that one of the most important negative legacies of Japanese colonialism, i.e. absolutist, unyielding allegiance to nationalism, (which so often breaks down into the "blood is thicker than water" variety of ethnic chauvinism) is becoming the thing of the past. Read OFFSPRING if you are interested in modern Korean history, modern Japanese history and

East Asian economic development, and make up your own mind.

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