This book is a study of how the theories and actual practices of a Pan-Asian empire were produced during Japan’s war, 1931–1945.

As Japan invaded China and conducted a full-scale war against the United States in the late 1930s and early 1940s, several versions of a Pan-Asian empire were presented by Japanese intellectuals, in order to maximize wartime collaboration and mobilization in China and the colonies. A broad group of social scientists – including Rōyama Masamichi, Kada Tetsuji, Ezawa Jōji, Takata Yasuma, and Shinmei Masamichi – presented highly politicized visions of a new Asia characterized by a newly shared Asian identity. Critically examining how Japanese social scientists contrived the logic of a Japan-led East Asian community, Part I of this book demonstrates the violent nature of imperial knowledge production which buttresses colonial developmentalism. In Part II, the book also explores questions around the (re)making of colonial Korea as part of Japan’s regional empire, generating theoretical and realistic tensions between resistance and collaboration.

*Japan’s Pan-Asian Empire* provides original theoretical perspectives on the construction of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural empire. It will appeal to students and scholars of modern Japanese history, colonial and postcolonial studies, as well as Korean studies.

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Seok-Won Lee
This book is dedicated to my wife Eunil Bae and my children Yejun Lee, Joshua Lee and Daniel Lee.
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Acknowledgments

My first meeting with J. Victor Koschmann at Cornell University in 2003 was followed by a series of encounters with insightful scholars and a caring community of graduate students. This book is the outcome of my doctoral studies in East Asian intellectual history, among these exceptional people. When I was struggling with my doctoral dissertation topic, Professor Koschmann encouraged me to expand my interests to the intellectual history of the Japanese Empire. Professor Naoki Sakai has always been a thought-provoking teacher as well as a colleague who has stimulated my ideas. Without the wonderful teaching of Professor Sherman Cochran, I would not be able to discuss Chinese history seriously in my book project. Professor Hirano Katsuya helped me increase the sophistication of my inquiries into colonialism and minorities in my research project.

Together with these mentors, I must say that being surrounded by a group of wonderful colleagues is one of the best strokes of luck in the academic world. I believe that I have been one of these lucky scholars. From the beginning of my graduate studies in Seoul, Korea and Ithaca, New York to this day, I have received a great deal of support and intellectual inspiration from many wonderful colleagues. I just want to express my deepest gratitude to all of them collectively, instead of listing each of their names on this page.

The Rhodes College Department of History has been the most nurturing intellectual community in my life since I entered the real academic world. Joining Rhodes in Fall 2011, I have not only received much financial and administrative support from the College, but I have also been intellectually stimulated by the wonderful historians around me and the College’s focus on a liberal arts education. Together with this book, my research on Asian intellectual history has been extended to the topics of Afro-Asian encounters and Asian-American history. As a result of being in Memphis, one of the most dynamic cities in the United States, and surrounded by an atmosphere of critical thinking at Rhodes College, I must say that this book project has been greatly improved, and I owe a large debt to my colleagues in the Department of History and the entire Rhodes community.

My research and writing grew with my family and their love. First and foremost, Eunil Bae, the love of my life, has been the one who has supported me at every stage of my academic career. I hope that I can at least show my gratitude to her through this book. While I have been turning this dissertation into a
book manuscript, three wonderful boys – Yejun, Joshua and Daniel – came into our family and they have been an invaluable source of joy in my life. Finally, this book is dedicated to my mother and my parents-in-law for their ongoing and unconditional support.

Earlier versions of several chapters were previously published. Parts of Chapters 1 and 2 appeared in the summer issue of the Korean journal *Yoksamunjeeyongu* and the January 2014 issue of *Social Science Japan Journal*. Chapter 3 was contributed to the 2008 winter issue of the Korean journal *Yoksamunjeeyongu*, and Chapter 4 was published in the summer 2016 issue of *The Review of Korean Studies*. These chapters have been revised substantially and are included in this book with permission from the journal publishers. Finally, as is always the case in my writing, all the errors in this book are mine.
Introduction

Empire Beyond Empire: Pan-Asianism and Regionalism in Modern Japan

In September 1937, W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the most influential African American intellectuals of the twentieth century, contributed an article to The Pittsburgh Courier on the recent outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. Criticizing England, France and America, Du Bois predicted that the Sino-Japanese War would be “one of the great deciding wars of the world” and boldly concluded that “the future of [all] colored people is bound up with it.”

Du Bois’s endorsement of Japan’s invasion of China as a war of racial liberation was not an uninformed reaction. He had produced numerous articles in which he showed a keen interest in a Japan-led Asian order since the 1910s. His visit to Japan and Manchukuo in 1936, Imperial Japan’s 1930s laboratory for Pan-Asian colonialism, convinced him that Japan’s Pan-Asian empire provided a parallel example in support of his speculative idea for a Pan-African international community. But Du Bois had little access to independent sources regarding the iniquitous reality of Japanese imperialism and colonialism. As such, he overestimated the munificent quality of the Japanese plan for Asia, particularly in considering it as analogous to his own idealistic vision for the political enjoinment of Africa and its diaspora. At the heart of Du Bois’s optimistic appraisal of the seemingly emancipatory value of Japanese imperial expansion was the clear deployment of a politics of racial liberation in statements by the Japanese government.

This development began with the establishment of Manchukuo, and the official use of the slogan the “harmony of five races (gozoku kyowa)” in government propaganda. Such official proclamations were only the surface manifestation of the various profound sets of theories regarding the top-down construction of a Pan-Asian community. This was the deeper intellectual context that provided the epistemological limits to the official position regarding racial harmony in the new imperial Japanese version of Asia. Unfortunately, this was a context of scholarly thought and argument that Du Bois was unable to consider in his assessment of the Japanese empire, or critically advance within his own pan-African perspective.

By 1931, Japan was an established imperial power whose sphere of control spanned from northeast China through the Korean peninsula and down to Taiwan. In September 1931, the Japanese Kwantung Army realized the nation’s long-term imperial
ambition of occupying northern China. The 1931 Manchurian Incident (or the Manchurian Crisis) began with a staged explosion on the South Manchurian Railway and then rapidly proceeded to vastly alter the topography of the Japanese empire. The Japanese government claimed that this explosion was an attack by anti-Japanese Chinese forces, and in response the Kwangtung Army carried out a large-scale military operation and eventually occupied most of northeast China. Most Western imperial powers, including the United States, were openly hostile to this military invasion, but in March 1932, Japan established the imperial state of Manchukuo, a new geopolitical entity between mainland China and the Korean peninsula.

Manchukuo provided an experimental site for the practice of new forms of Japanese imperial ideology. The rhetoric of the “harmony of five races,” which Du Bois found attractive, epitomized the “utopian” conceptual dimension of Japan’s ambitious empire-building project. The apparently “reformist” approach to the Japanese colonial project was in part due to the observation by Japanese bureaucrats and intellectuals that the possibility to build an empire in the historically conventional sense was over. They were attentive to the political, economic and demographic changes occurring inside and outside the region of their control, and one of the most conspicuous symptoms of the collapse of the old Japanese imperial structure was the unprecedented influx and outflow of population between the imperial metropole and her colonies. According to zainichi historian Park Kyung Sik, the number of Korean subjects in Japan proper skyrocketed from 419,009 to 881,347 between 1931 and 1937, and the same was true of Japanese residents who moved to Manchukuo, Taiwan and Korea. These migrations created new social divisions and lines of conflict within the Japanese empire. Since most colonial immigrants to Japan proper occupied the low-wage jobs that low-class Japanese workers previously held, they often competed and eventually conflicted with these similarly economically disenfranchised Japanese workers. Socio-political changes driven by this unprecedented population mobility suggest that the rhetoric of “racial harmony” was initially deployed to cover up various politico-economic tensions in reality. For instance, the growing number of Korean workers and unions in Japan competed directly with low-class Japanese workers. This resulted in aggravating the existing negative images of Koreans held by ordinary Japanese people, and intensified racism against migrants in Japan. Recent historical studies of migrant subjects within the Japanese empire illustrate how various differing agencies and interests combined to form the contours of the imperial society. This appreciation for the full diversity of factors involved in influencing migration patterns across the empire renders the traditional narrative of the hierarchical empire-colony power structure unable to usefully account for the complex social dynamics shaping the wartime Japanese empire.

These rapidly changing and threatening circumstances called for a more effective method of governance to maintain the stability of the empire. First and foremost, the political and theoretical grounds for a sense of unity that might encompass and address all Asian people and minimalize inter-ethnic socio-economic conflicts were urgently called for. Japan had become internationally isolated in the aftermath of the 1931 Manchurian Crisis. After fierce debates over
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how to handle diplomatic pressure from Western imperial powers regarding imperial expansion in China, Japan made the aggressive decision to withdraw from the League of Nations in 1933. As Hotta’s recent work shows well, Japan’s isolation from the international order partly explains why Pan-Asian regionalism first gained a currency among intellectuals and politicians as an alternative diplomatic approach to maintain Japan’s hegemony in East Asia. In that respect, it would be correct to consider wartime Japanese Pan-Asianism as a response to her exclusion from the Euro-centric world order. Perhaps the official slogan of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (daitōa kyōeiken),” first coined in the early 1940s, represents the apex of imperial Japan’s desire to create a new international order against the West. At issue here is the problematic historical tendency to conceive of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” as deceptive fantasy bearing no relationship to real imperial aims and desires. This has arguably precluded students of Japanese and East Asian history from comprehensively and seriously addressing the broad scope of regional Pan-Asian thought and practice during the twentieth century.

This book will trace the intellectual trajectories of Pan-Asianist theories and practices during the wartime period, 1931–1945, focusing on Japanese and colonial social scientists, Korean social scientists in particular. Recent studies of Pan-Asianism have more usefully provided a different perspective on how and why the idea and practice of an Asian unity has actually offered a powerful resource for Asian people to define their lives during the twentieth century. These new studies, in spite of their different methodological orientations, share the common thesis that Pan-Asian regionalism was not merely reducible to being a floating idea or superficial piece of rhetoric. Instead, they would consider it as an influential stream of thought that has had a profound impact on the self-conception and everyday life of Asian people.

The fact that Pan-Asianism has received little attention among students of East Asian history was partly due to the common perception that it was premised upon blood-oriented, intrinsic and thus irrational concepts of Asia. The result of this reductive rendering is that the complex discourse behind Japanese imperial Asian regionalism is characterized as a simplistic configuration in which the concept of Pan-Asia unconditionally designates an anti-modern, anti-Western ideology and signifies a fundamentalist zeal for returning to a traditional Asia. The irony of the coexistence between dormant anti-Western sentiments and the Japanese search for modernization culminated in the late 1920s and 1930s, when imperial Japan’s transformation into a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural empire resulted in the eruption of various Asian regional discourses that were oftentimes contradictory. For instance, until the 1920s, the Japanese advocates of anti-Westernism had mainly targeted European powers as the primary object of their ideological attacks. However, the question of the United States as part of the ultimate Western foe to be overcome had always existed since, Yoshimi Shunya has argued, Americanism had quickly penetrated the cultural sectors of everyday life in 1920s Japan. Under these circumstances, a number of Japanese imperial intellectuals adhered to this form of “spiritual Pan-Asianism” during the wartime period. Spiritual
Pan-Asianists’ agitation for an upcoming war between Japan and the West had received public attention in Japan proper in the 1920s, when tensions between the United States and Japan were aggravated. However, a fundamental limit within spiritual Pan-Asianist thought was the absence of concrete means of creating a realistic politico-economic structure of a new East Asian empire, other than calling for spiritual and cultural bonds that were at best applicable to Japanese citizens within Japan proper. It was at this point that more concretized, rational and even scientific visions of a Pan-Asian empire were produced and gained currency among both Japanese and Korean intellectuals. This book explores these newly emerging Pan-Asianists, who were clearly aware of the urgency to overcome the traditional empire-colony power structure to forge a new empire.

Pan-Asian empire beyond old empire: the rise of “rationalist” Pan-Asianism

Challenging simplistic misconceptions of Pan-Asian thought, this book offers a substantially different narrative of how various Pan-Asianist theories and theorists were often at rival variance in wartime Japan, and how among these, a scientific, rational and futuristic notion of an Asian unity actually prevailed in academic circles as well as in the field of real politics. To this end, the following investigation pays particular attention to a broad group of Japanese and Korean social scientists who proposed a new vision of Pan-Asian community. Rōyama Masamichi, Kada Tetsuji, Takata Yasuma, Shinmei Masamichi, Ezawa Jōji and Moritani Katsumi, these intellectuals belonged to separate established disciplines in the field of social sciences – political science, economics, sociology and geography. Crucially, many of them shared the common influence of Marxism and other radical thoughts during the Taisho period despite being trained in non-Marxist mainstream social sciences. Beginning in the early 1930s, this collection of scholars independently undertook investigations into the shared trans-disciplinary social scientific question of how to overcome the limits of a liberal capitalist economy and democracy: The dominant social structure which was presumed to have provided the backbone of the modern nation-state system and the existing imperial order. At the heart of this inquiry was the need to rationalize Japan’s transition to becoming a new multi-ethnic empire. In this endeavor, these scholars became influential within the imperial intellectual sphere and their notion of a multi-ethnic empire, often called the East Asia Community (tōa kyōdōtai) rapidly gained currency among both Japanese and colonial thinkers, and Korean intellectuals in particular, during the late 1930s and early 1940s.11

This book pays special attention to the question of why “rationalist” and once liberal and progressive intellectuals, mostly social scientists, occupied the forefront of Pan-Asian imperial discourses in the early 1930s. These scholars came to dominate the Japanese academy during the wartime period, specifically through their notion of a Pan-Asian community. This investigation follows the imperative set by Katō Shûichi and other scholars in their considering wartime Japan as the continuation of prewar Japan.12 It is important to note that the practical
Introduction

approach to constructing a new Pan-Asian community originated in the academic observation that a new paradigm was necessary to enable the reconstruction of Japanese society during the time of total war. To understand the mentality of these social scientists as self-defined “social pioneers,” one needs to understand the “problem-solving” pragmatic concern of Japanese social science in the early twentieth century. Social scientists in Japan, prior to turn of the century, were prized and privileged citizens as they provided the ideological direction as well as the practical knowledge to support the nation’s modernization during the Meiji period. However, the critique of social scientists as uncritical servants of state-led, top-down and authoritative modernization programs grew at the turn of the twentieth century. In response, liberal and progressive intellectuals called for the national discipline of social science to reform its focus and address the concerns of the socially disenfranchised. This tendency was related to the fact that the shadow of Japan’s rapid and top-down modernization – economic inequality between the rich and poor, imbalance between metropole and rural areas, zaibatsu-oriented economy and so on – was increasingly conspicuous in the 1910s and the 1920s. The escalation of internal inconsistencies in early-twentieth-century Japanese society gave rise to a new influential group of social scientists. This circumstance historian Andrew Barshay categorized as the moment of “pluralization” in the Japanese social sciences. These newly empowered intellectuals and academics called variously for social reforms to the democratic system, a free-market economy independent of state intervention, and sometimes even a full-scale Marxist social revolution. Through this thinking process, young Japanese social scientists now considered it their ontological task to provide solutions for social problems. For them, the term and idea of society was a newly “discovered” space in which different class, religious, economic and political interests collided, and solutions to these conflicts might be created.

However, the geographical scope of interest for these social scientists in the 1920s was largely confined to Japan proper. Only a few intellectuals were acutely aware that Japan’s social issues were inseparable from its imperial structure. Therefore, the rise of progressive and liberal intellectuals in early-twentieth-century Japan does not necessarily tell us that Japanese social scientists had armed themselves with a critique of imperialism, except for a small group of radical Marxist scholars. As Andrew Gordon demonstrates, the development of democracy and capitalism at home became paradoxically associated with endorsing national interests abroad. Consequently, imperialism and democracy co-habited the national political terrain for a considerable time. External and internal changes to Japanese society in the early 1930s suddenly deconstructed the mutually inclusive coexistence of imperialism abroad and the optimistic liberal and progressive atmospheres at home. The “crisis mentality” that had originated in Europe in the aftermath of the First World War and the Great Depression quickly arrived in Japan. On the other hand, Japan’s position in the international order was jeopardized as it invaded northern China in 1931. All in all, Japanese intellectuals had become increasingly aware that the challenges that imperial Japan faced could no longer be solved by solely “domestic” prescriptions. It was at this
point that Japanese intellectuals who had been overwhelmed by Taisho liberal atmospheres looked beyond the national border and became involved in imperial projects abroad.

First of all, they were convinced that without creating a new theoretical basis for empire, imperial Japan could not cope with the numerous challenges threatening social stability, from ethnic conflict to economic crisis. These social scientists were convinced that imperial Japan could not simply stick to the conventional logic of empire and ape the ways in which European powers governed their colonies. As European governments took colonies as sites for economic exploitation, serious measures to minimize the physical and cultural interaction between the colonizer and the colonized were also created. Population mobility was restrained, and if colonial subjects migrated within the empire, they always faced severe ethnic discrimination in the metropolitan center. Interracial interaction was also largely shunned by white settlers in the colony. Ann Stoller has explored the question of how white European residents in Southeast Asia created and maintained rigid tensional spaces of interaction in racial and economic hierarchies. Within such a power structure, it was almost impossible to envision an empire of intimacy: a conceptual community where both the colonizer and the colonized subject could become jointly incorporated under a new, shared form of imperial identity, and a common sense of destiny. Imperial Japan also adopted similar ethnic hierarchy-oriented governing structures in its early stages, but as I have discussed, the massive influx and outflow of population from the early 1930s on made it impossible for Japan to maintain separatist policies of racial exclusion. Most importantly, Japan’s overt expansionist moves invited criticism and resistance from European powers. The rise of Pan-Asianism in defense of a new, Japan-led Asian order demanded actual changes that would politically distinguish Japan’s empire from the European form of imperialism.

Under these circumstances, these intellectuals witnessed and partially incepted the end of the old imperial order and heralded the coming of the new: a process this book terms as “empire beyond empire.” As political scientist Sakai Tetsuya has noted, liberal Japanese scholars during the Taisho period were convinced that a pluralist internationalist thinking should replace the nation-state framework that had sustained the balance of power up until the early twentieth century. Several strong nation-states in the European continent, with the recent addition of the United States, were the major global imperial powers and divided the world into their spheres of interest. However, various predictions of the end of the Euro-centric order appeared in the wake of the destruction of the Great War and the Great Depression, and they were in different contexts, pointing to the advent of non-Western regional power. In this regard, many Japanese intellectuals were influenced by geopolitical theorists such as Alfred Mahan, who anticipated that an Asia-based regional power would threaten the Euro-centric hegemony. Accordingly, they strove to disseminate the newness and validity of a Pan-regionalist thinking within the conceptual reconstruction of the Japanese empire. To be sure, it was an opinion held not just by these rationalist social scientists but also by conservative and so-called Japanist intellectuals that a new Asian empire must
incorporate Chinese and other Asian colonial subjects. However, the significant difference between rational social scientists and spiritual Japanist Pan-Asianists was that the former were clearly aware that a new, Japan-led regional empire would only be possible by drawing on voluntary participation from Chinese and colonial subjects, not by spiritual and biological ties such as the Imperial Way or racial similarities among Asian subjects. To this end, it was stressed that realistic and favorable social and political policies should be put into practice to maximize mobilization from within the colonial territories. For this reason, racist colonial governance was criticized for jeopardizing the stability of the empire. As sociologist Kada Tetsuji argued in his 1938 best-selling book *Race, Nation and War*, racism is not rigidly part of social science.\(^2\) Vehemently criticizing the blood-centered ethnic nation-building project of Alfred Rosenberg, the icon of racist theory in Nazi Germany, Kada reconfirmed that Japan’s new empire building should be based on the creation of minzoku, a socially, politically and culturally constructed Asian community.\(^2\) At stake was the question of what socio-political and economic engineering processes should be embarked on in binding these Asian subjects to a Japan-led East Asian empire. Here, these Japanese and colonial social scientists became closely involved in creating a new body of imperial knowledge that ranged from theories such as racism, national socialism and communitarianism to most practical issues of colonial economic development and the geographical reconstructing of imperial territories.

The social scientists this book explores insisted that a developmental perspective should be applied to the colonial economy. In other words, reducing the economic gap between metropole and colony was prioritized in their empire-building project. Instead of relentlessly repeating the logic of anti-Westernism and antimodernism, they suggested that people in the colony could be incorporated into a Pan-Asian community by embracing the notion of the “community of destiny,” that is, their future was bound with the developing picture of a Pan-Asian community. In this conception, it was stressed that what was important was not the abstract repetition of Asian commonness, but that subjects in both Japan and the colony could share in the futuristic vision that their life would be improved over the course of together building a new Pan-Asian empire. Based on these observations, they put forward the notion of the East Asian Community (*tōa kyōdōtai*) and this group of *kyōdōtai* social scientists formed one of the most influential streams of Pan-Asian discourse in the interwar period.

**Contesting Pan-Asianism**

To capture the historical significance of this rational, scientific and developmentalist notion of Pan-Asianism advocated by wartime Japanese social scientists, it is important to understand why they cast a skeptical eye on the existing logic of an Asian unity. As I have discussed, Pan-Asian regionalism was not a new theory invented by Japanese social scientists during the wartime period. Different types of Pan-Asianism, either as political ideology or cultural discourse, existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^2\) Okakura Tenshin, for example,
advocated Asia as a single regional unit as early as 1903. His early Pan-Asianist thinking was, however, premised on the essentialist idea that Asians shared the same cultural heritage. In that respect, although it was not his main goal to analytically interrogate the origins and sources of the idea of an essential Asian commonality, he was preoccupied with rediscovering the original aspects of a mythical Asian unity. This type of early Pan-Asianism was characterized by an emphasis on locating the cultural and intrinsic similarities that would constitute the ‘Asian spirit’ and thus discern Asians as a group distinct from the rest of world, notwithstanding that each Pan-Asian discourse was contingently shaped in close association with particular local political atmospheres.

As is well known, Okakura’s resort to Asian unity operated with the overt intention to reveal the superiority of the Japanese cultural tradition to the West. This politically contextualized appropriation of Pan-Asian thought existed elsewhere. For instance, Sun Yat-sen’s “Greater Pan-Asianism” illuminates how Pan-Asianism was closely associated with traditional sinocentric ideology. In a famous speech given to a Japanese audience in Kyoto in 1924, Sun Yat-sen introduced his idea of Pan-Asianism with a global context of modernization, tradition and racism. Criticizing Western hegemony as the “Rule of Might,” he asserted that a harmonious, ethical and thus inclusive source of political thought and governance was absent in the European tradition. On the contrary, Sun believed that the Eastern tradition of governance could be symbolized as the “Rule of Right” and suggested that Japan’s successful modernization and China’s vast spiritual tradition should be combined to form a twentieth-century version of a Pan-Asian community. Among other issues, Sun problematically used the historical Chinese tributary system as the basis for his long history of Pan-Asianism in East Asia. He argued that all Asian people had voluntarily subordinated themselves to the Han-Chinese tributary system, and that it represented the diplomatically institutionalized order of sinocentric ideology. Sun’s ambitious zeal for conceptually enjoining all East Asian people together, to offer a strong regional defense in the era of Western imperialism, was ironically premised on the singular ethnic superiority of the Han-Chinese people. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this concept of Pan-Asianism also permitted Sun to call for the elimination of “the remnants of the Manchus,” the rival “barbarian” ethnic group to the Han who had established the Qing dynasty.

In contrast, the rise and consumption of Pan-Asianism in early-twentieth-century Japan took on a much more subtle political form. Ironic as it may sound, Pan-Asianism was often appropriated by conservative and even ultranational fascists in early-twentieth-century Japan. To understand this paradoxical relationship between Pan-Asianism and Japanese fascism, one needs to consider how Japan’s position in the international order had a profound impact on domestic conservatism. Immediately after Japan invaded northeast China in 1931 and established Manchukuo in 1932, most European powers who had endorsed Japan’s position in East Asia turned hostile for fear of Japan becoming a regional superpower. This diplomatic conflict resulted in Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933. The sense of crisis in national security stimulated conservatives and
ultranationalists who held deep-rooted anti-modern and anti-Western sentiment. Japan’s now hostile relationship with the Western powers gave them the ideological excuse to fundamentally problematize the national path toward Western modernization. Their alternative proposal was the “Imperial Way,” in which Japan was refigured as a totalitarian society. For these fundamentalist ultranationalists, the direction of Japan’s new order was designed to substitute Western social organizations and structures with Asian ones. Toward this purpose, they intentionally appropriated the concept of Asian commonality, in biological and cultural terms, as an ideological means to incorporate the colonies and the Chinese people into the Japanese empire-building project. Therefore, it was not surprising that many of these ultranational fascists also became advocates of Pan-Asianism in the early 1930s. For instance, Mistukawa Kametarō and Kanokogi Kuzunobu associated their Imperial-Way ideology with a Pan-Asian order. According to them, the ultimate dignity of the Japanese Emperor will be at last realized as his reign reaches the “eight corners of the world under one roof (hakkō ichiu).” As such, the main task for these ultranationalists was to associate spiritual pan-Asianism with imperial-way Japanism and denounce Western values, such as individualism and rationality, as detrimental to Asian unity.

Lacking in both sinocentric and ultranationalist essentialist approaches to Pan-Asianism was any notion of how to cope with the contingent economic and political issues that would preclude Asians from forming a politically coherent regional community. In this respect, these early-twentieth-century versions of Pan-Asianism should perhaps be more properly considered as a “political manifestation” of underlying desires for an ethnically oriented idea of regional hegemony. Unsurprisingly, they often turned to a notion of the common ethnic sentiment among Asian people as the basis for their Pan-Asianist logic, and ironically so given that their Pan-Asian thinking was born out of particular ethnic hierarchies within the region. Roughly speaking, wartime Japanese ultranationalist Pan-Asianism was in no way different from these early twentieth-century versions of Pan-Asianism in that it was based on Japanese racial superiority.

A “rational” Pan-Asian Empire: the “community of destiny” and modernization

If the assertion of Asian commonalities or a zeal for restoring Asian value systems, both of which regurgitated an idea of Asia as the past or traditional, was not enough to construct a new regional community, what other perceptions of Asia could be used or discovered and put forward instead? This was the primary inquiry that many social scientists shared in the interwar period, and this book explores their ideas. Their first priority was to call for fundamental epistemological transformations to enable them to contrive a new theory of Pan-Asianism. They rejected the notion of Pan-Asianism in regard to any biological or intrinsic ahistorical affinity among Asian people. Rather than return to the past as a source for a new Asian unity, these intellectuals intended to contrive a Pan-Asian theory that looked to the future. They hoped such a theory might appeal to the Chinese
and colonial subjects, and provide a “forward-looking” picture of a new Asia. Considering that if each ethnic community steadfastly adhered to the concept of biological race such as Chinese, Korean and Japanese, a new, shared subjectivity could not be formed, ethnic nationalism should therefore be transcended, to realize the future of a Pan-Asian empire where a multi-ethnic population could be endorsed and the possibility of being an “East Asian” citizen would become openly inclusive and fluid. Additionally, these scholars were not interested in reasserting the value of the traditional Asian modes of life that had historically constituted the agriculture-oriented economic conditions in East Asia. Instead, they argued that economic development was urgent in the colonies to reduce the economic gap between the colony and metropole, as they believed that this disparity had generated a destructive unevenness. The recognition that the widening economic gap between Japan and the colony would eventually become detrimental to the stability of the empire indicates that these social scientists maintained a certain level of sensitivity to colonial problems based on their pluralist perspective.

A vivid example of the social sensitivity that differentiated these imperial social scientists from the conservative, ultranational Imperial-Way fascists was their resolute stance against racist governance. Vehemently criticizing Nazi Germany’s racism, they railed against Japanese ultranationalists who intended to strengthen racial hierarchies during the wartime period. Precisely for this reason, these social scientists’ regionalist thinking created lines of conflict with both advocates of the Imperial-Way and right-wing bureaucrats, even though none of them ever directly challenged the Japanese emperor-system. The most evident example of this tension appeared in their critiques of naisenittai (Japan and Korea as one body). This was a brutal policy that aimed to incorporate Koreans as subjects of the Japanese emperor based on the supposed racial and cultural origins shared between the two nations. As Capiro’s recent study well shows, imperial Japan’s basic approach to Korean subjects was to assimilate them into the Japanese empire while maintaining an ethnic hierarchy between the metropole and the colony. To accomplish this seemingly impossible goal, various deceptive theories disguised as science were presented. The notion of naisenittai was one part of imperial Japan’s ethnic engineering projects and traceable to the theory of nissendōsoron (Japanese and Koreans as having the same ancestor) which proliferated immediately after Japan’s annexation of Korea. The idea that Koreans and Japanese shared similar physical and cultural characteristics was frequently revisited by Japanese intellectuals to justify Japan’s annexation of Korea, and used as the basis of a plan to transform Koreans into Japanese subjects in linguistic and cultural terms during the wartime period. The seemingly impossible task to incorporate colonial subjects equally within the imperial project and also maintain ethnic hierarchies offers a clear reason why the formation of ethnic subjectivity emerged as a most urgent issue in Japan’s new empire building.

The imperial scholars this book examines vehemently criticized the unscientific and irrational aspects of any biological concepts of Asian commonness. Instead, they grappled with the question of creating a socio-political subjectivity that was both constructive and fluid. For instance, Shinmei Masamichi imagined a “United
States of East Asia.” This was a new concept of an “East Asian nation” in which Asians might believe that they belonged to one grand East Asian nation (minzoku), while each ethnic group – Chinese, Japanese and Koreans – would not have to denounce their indigenous identity. Shinmei and like-minded intellectuals such as Takata Yasuma and Kada Tetsuji were well aware that the key to realizing their optimistic vision of a multi-ethnic Pan-Asian community was to convince both Japanese and colonial subjects that they potentially shared a sense of the “community of destiny (unmei kyōdōtai),” a concept that frequently appeared in Pan-Asian discourses in wartime Japan. While spiritual Pan-Asianists interpreted the “community of destiny” as a revisiting of traditional Asian values or devoting oneself to the “Holy War” led by the Japanese emperor, these scientifically trained academics presented a different definition. Rōyama Masamiachi was a political scientist and one of the main advocates of the rationalist notion of a Pan-Asian regional bloc. He contended that a regional community in East Asia must share “something other than natural and perpetual elements or cultural unification” and that the destiny of all Asian people was contingent on the creation of a new form of East Asian identity, not a conception of intrinsic commonness.32

How, then, could a sense of unity be created not by resorting to “natural and perpetual elements”? This question was inseparable from the problem of how modernization and Westernization were delineated in wartime Pan-Asian discourses. As I have discussed, the more intellectuals articulated spiritual Pan-Asianism in their diatribes of blood-oriented, intrinsic Asian sameness, the deeper they became complicit with the rhetoric of “overcoming the West” or “overcoming modernity” as an anti-thesis, and the rhetoric of anti-modernity, anti-individualism and anti-capitalism was continuous in academic writing, novels, government propaganda, and other cultural and visual materials.33 The “war of thought (shisōsen)” formulated a clear-cut battleground between Japan and the “decadent” West, and involved itself in the psychological and epistemological processes of affirming an independent historicity in the East.34 As the term “overcoming” suggests, this logic in many cases employed the retrospective observation that Japan and the Japanese had historically striven relentlessly to catch up with Western modernity. For this reason, what needed to be overcome was not just the West as an actual enemy but, more importantly, the influence of Western thought within Japan.

This book does not aim to denigrate the historical significance of anti-modern and anti-Western Pan-Asianism during the wartime period. In fact, recent studies of Asianism in colonial Korea show how strongly anti-Western Pan-Asianism penetrated the mindset of not only Japanese intellectuals but also colonial Korean intellectuals. By displacing the West and repositioning Korea in a Japan-led Asian empire, these Korean Pan-Asianists attempted to overcome the reality of their prolonged colonization and obtain subjectivity as the citizen of imperial Japan.35 Importantly, they did not find that indigenous Korean culture was contradictory to the idea of a spiritual Pan-Asianism. Instead, they dexterously rediscovered similarities between Japanese and Korean culture. For instance, they insisted that the famous mu (nothingness) spirit later sophisticated by Japanese philosophers
such as Nishida Kitarō or bushido existed both in Korea and Japan. This was to demonstrate that a collective form of the Pan-Asian culture or spirit could be constituted by exploring the common aspects that existed in each ethnic group. The discursive influence of anti-modern and anti-Western Pan-Asianism also explains why a prefix of “Pan-Asia” was attached to most regionalist theories in the wartime period. However, Korean intellectuals did not accept Japan-originated Pan-Asian philosophical theories as such. As Jung’s recent study shows, wartime Korean intellectuals such as Seo In Sik were aware of the limits of a culturalist Pan-Asian ideology that eventually attempted to mobilize Korean subjects for Imperial Japan’s “holy” war. Instead of responding to the utopian vision of a Pan-Asian empire put forth by Japanese intellectuals, they grappled with the question of how the cultural ground shared by colonial Korea and Japan would be converted into energies that would replace problematic Western modernity with a new type of Asian modernity.

Based on these observations, this book argues that subsuming all wartime pan-Asian discourses under the monolithic notion of “overcoming modernity” would fail to reveal the complexity of Japanese and colonial intellectuals’ various encounters with the notion of a Pan-Asian empire. The most extreme example of this tendency might be the affirmation of the war as an action of significant historical progress which might liberate Asians from the oppression of white supremacy. More importantly, anti-modern and anti-Western Pan-Asianism in many cases operated at the level of idealized and speculative writing limited to an intellectual readership. Lacking in this tenacious return to a notion of Asia was a sense of the practical need to cope with the realistic problem of the political and economic imbalance between Japan and the colony. In this regard, those such as the “overcoming the modern” group led by the Kyoto School of Philosophy, remained trapped by modernity, since they insisted that Japanese cultural primacy in Asia was due to its regionally unique economic and technological development in the twentieth century. This perspective rendered their notion of the Japanese “overcoming” of modernity only a reaffirmation of it.

Pan-Asianism as developmentalism: the “Korea problem”

In contrast to these philosophers, the social scientists this study explores were not preoccupied with the concept of overcoming modernity, although they largely shared the recognition that a new Pan-Asian empire should replace the old Euro-centric imperial structure. But nor were they convinced that the building of a Pan-Asian empire would be possible through the total rejection of Western and modern values. In addition, they were aware that the economic gap between Japan and the colony, and between metropolitan and rural areas of the empire, could not be addressed simply by advocating anti-capitalism and renouncing modernization in theory. In this respect, instead of tracing the trajectories of the philosophical development of “overcoming modernity,” they shared a common inquiry as to how a developmentalist perspective might serve to incorporate both Japanese and colonial subjects into a new empire.
For example, Ezawa Jōji, the rationalist geopolitical, who is one of the central intellectuals in Chapter 3, addressed the principle of constructing East Asian space to realize the “community of destiny.” According to him, Asian space is neither a given nor a natural object, but one where countless different memories and experiences occurred simultaneously and ubiquitously. But he believed that through the project of constructing a new space – for example, through national land planning – these different experiences could converge with the common goal to build an East Asian community where economic unevenness and colonial hierarchies would no longer exist. Therefore, Ezawa argued that by creating a new space, people in the colony might obtain a promoted status within the empire-building process. This led him to emphasize the necessity of a developmentalist approach in reconstructing the new imperial territory to narrow the gap between metropole and colony. At the center of this new social scientific thinking, which Ezawa conceptualized as East Asian geopolitics, was his new interpretation of space not as a physical substance, but as an active force to be deployed toward shaping the destiny of any given community.41

In this way, these social scientists aimed to rationalize the construction of an East Asian Community, calling for domestic reforms and the deconstruction of the traditional forms of empire-colony hierarchies. The primary purpose of their particular theory of empire building was to appeal to the Chinese people. While they attempted to convince the Chinese of the historical significance of creating a Pan-Asian community, these social scientists also criticized the obstinate fixed concept of Asia propagated by the ethnic Chinese, often called the “central kingdom mentality” or the sinocentric world order. To theoretically challenge this notion, both rational social scientists and conservative intellectuals conducted extensive research on China. In so doing they created the field of China studies as an independent discipline within the Japanese academy.

While considering China as both a geographical and an epistemological unit in investigating the historical significance of wartime Pan-Asian discourses, this study pays special attention to colonial Korea. Many of these rational social scientists took it for granted that Taiwan and Korea were already part of the Japanese empire. In that respect, the rationalist Pan-Asian discourses by the Japanese social scientists that this book explores did not contain sophisticated plans or agendas for colonial Korea or Taiwan, although they revealed a clear understanding of the need to reduce the economic gap between metropole and colony as their primary concern. This discursive and political vacuum in the colony was filled by conservative and imperial-way ultranationalists who attempted to completely eliminate indigenous colonial language and culture in their fantasized goal of incorporating colonial subjects as faithful citizens of imperial Japan. The systematic implementation of naisenittairon (Theories of Japan and Korea as one body) during the wartime period in colonial Korea tells us the extent to which culturalist and spiritual Pan-Asianism prevailed in the colony as well.

However, this study argues that illuminating such total assimilation-oriented colonial policies by imperial Japan shows only a partial reality of colonial Korean subjects’ responses to Japan’s empire building. Projecting sympathy with the call
to create an Asian regionalist bloc on the one hand, these Korean intellectuals were much more concerned with promoting the advent of a new Asian empire as a way of enhancing the political and economic status of colonial Korea. Precisely for this reason, recent studies of Japan’s total war in colonial Korea have shown the complex nature of its Pan-Asian project. These Korean intellectuals in the wartime period were also clearly aware of the paradoxical absence of other colonial voices in Japanese Pan-Asian discourses. However, this blindness toward Japan’s colonial hegemony on the part of Japanese intellectuals ironically produced an important space for identity politics in Korea. The rhetoric of a universal empire was appropriated by a group of colonial Korean intellectuals as a way to overcome both the empire-colony power structure and the limits of local capitalist modes of production at the same time.

Under these circumstances, it was natural that rationalist Pan-Asianism, such as the notion of the East Asia Community, gradually gained currency among Korean intellectuals, since on the surface it called for expanding political spaces for colonial subjects as well as bringing economic development to the colony. In Jeong Sik, the primary subject of Chapter 5, was convinced that Korea’s status would be improved by the creative re-interpretation of the idea of constructing a rational empire and collaborating with Imperial Japan. He believed that Korea’s capability to produce more rice than it needed and its vast labor power would fuel the total mobilization needed to sustain Japan’s war efforts. But he also argued that Japan must reconstruct Korea’s agriculture and develop its industry to transform the latent potential of colonial Korea into a real force. In’s writing vividly illustrates how a developmental perspective penetrated not only the notions of Japanese intellectuals, but also those of colonial intellectuals.

The specter of modernization: the Asia-Pacific War and its aftermath

In this way, Japanese social scientists’ rationalist support for a Pan-Asian community was closely associated with wartime mobilization through its developmentalist logic. This, they believed, would provide the optimal way to exploit material resources and mobilize Chinese and colonial subjects for Japan’s war effort. An acute sense of historicity therefore indicates that these Japanese intellectuals produced knowledge and presented actual policies in clear support of the empire. In similar fashion to Immanuel Wallerstein’s identification of the birth of cold war area studies in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, the social scientists this book will explore were in a true sense “area specialists.” They accumulated vast amounts of knowledge with the aim to universalize the Japanese empire. For this reason, they appropriated the social scientific notion of rationality to disguise their positioning as pro-imperial and colonial social scientists. Sociologist Max Weber defined rationalization as the driving force behind modern society. According to him, the intellectual turn to rationality diminished the explanatory power of religious, supernatural and metaphysical human activities, all of which are considered as “irrational.” Rationality is instead comprised of social and