Renaming Plants and Nations in Japanese Colonial Korea by Jung Lee. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2025. 226 pp.

This outstanding book discusses and analyzes a unique situation in Korea's science during Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). Korea was a colony of Japan, but as an Asian nation, Japan itself was also struggling to be recognized as a colonizing power amid other empires of the world, including those in Europe. In the natural sciences, the relationship of Japanese practitioners to those in Europe was similar to that of Koreans to the Japanese. These double layers of colonial or semi-colonial inequality make Jung Lee's book particularly relevant not only to historians of science but also to scholars interested in colonial or postcolonial practices in Asia. Through her in-depth study of both Korean and Japanese botanical practitioners in the first half of the twentieth century, Lee depicts the multiple layers of power-knowledge relationships in Korea's troublesome years as a Japanese colony. With her intensive study of rich sets of primary sources, she reveals how complex the nature of colonial power was to peoples in East Asia.

This complexity challenges the monolithic view of colonialism that few professional historians now take for granted—namely, that the metropole exercised absolute power over the colonized. The metropole was not all-powerful and could not control every detail of the lives of colonial subjects, who had their own agency in shaping their communities, cultures, and technosciences. In the Korea-Japan relations, there is another layer: the Japanese avoided being colonized by a European country but sought international recognition as legitimate players in diplomatic and academic exchanges. In that respect, Japan's botanists negotiated their agency in encounters with European scientists rather than simply complying with the latter's theories and categories. Still, another complexity was present. Both Japan and Korea had long been "peripheries" in the East Asian political order, where China ruled as the supreme political entity, at least until the late nineteenth century. This past led Japanese botanists to pay attention to the legacy of the China-centered world in the Korean peninsula. Although the Japanese viewed Koreans' traditional medicine with contempt and wanted to "civilize" Korea's health practices, botanical experts from Japan still wondered if there was anything pharmaceutically meaningful among the herbs used in Korea's medicinal plant markets. In this respect, another layer of power relations became manifest. These Japanese botanists, including Ishidoya Tsutomu, often ignored or appropriated the colonizing drives of the Japanese government and the Government General of Korea (GGK) for the sake of their own research interests, in which they recognized—and perhaps

even respected—Korea's agency and natural environment. They challenged the view held by some Japanese experts that Japan's plants, like the Japanese themselves, were superior to those native to Korea. For Ishidoya and others, there were intricate relationships between living organisms and their physical environments, which prompted them to doubt any notion of absolute superiority.

The Korean botanists, including Chung Tyaihyon (Jeong Tae-hyeon) and Toh Bong-Syup (Do Bong-seop), were also strong local players rather than docile colonial subjects. While they had to evade the scrutiny of the GGK, which suspected their academic community's involvement in the independence movement against Japan, many of them learned from Japanese experts in Korea or attended Japanese universities in the mainland. Although often abused, demoted, or suppressed by the Japanese authorities, they persistently conducted botanical research that came to assume distinctly Korean characteristics. Most readers will be fascinated by the naturalists' stories of interacting with the Japanese scientists and other colonizing agents, such as the GGK and its police, as well as their strategy of deliberately neglecting past works of the Japanese in order to reaffirm Koreans' footprints in naming and identifying their own plants. But the result of this endeavor did not necessarily make their work "Korean." Theirs was something hybrid that resisted any label as Korean, Japanese, or Western. In that sense, Lee wisely avoids Korea's nationalistic historiographies.

There is one more question that I think Lee might have raised. Her narrative does not discuss any scientists interested in evolutionary theory, either among the Koreans or the Japanese. Indeed, several major Japanese scientists in Korea, including Nakai Takenoshin, were systematists rather than evolutionists. Lee attributes this to their epistemic limitation stemming from their racial and imperial viewpoint. Yet evolutionary theory was very versatile, changing its meanings depending on context. Some evolutionary thinkers were racists and imperialists, but others were not. Evolution could also imply equality and cooperation among distinct racial and ethnic groups. If the Japanese did not stress evolution, the Koreans must then have had some reasons to be interested in it. In truth, many Korean nationalists, alongside some collaborators, appropriated evolution for their political discourses, becoming social Darwinians. Yet their discourses did not seem to encourage scientific studies of evolution. Why, then, did none of the botanists in Lee's book attempt to investigate evolution or offer evolutionary interpretations of plants they studied? As evolution never became a main focus of biological research in Korea throughout the twentieth century, this question should be asked in the context of Japanese colonial rule. Why was the idea, without which the biological sciences do not even make sense, not significant to them?

However, Lee's book remains highly inspiring and informative as a pathbreaking historical study. I recommend it to all scholars in Asian Studies and the history of science, technology, and medicine.

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