Editor's Note: For suggested resources and a chapter outline for *Pachinko*, please see the online supplements for this issue.

Contextualizing Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*

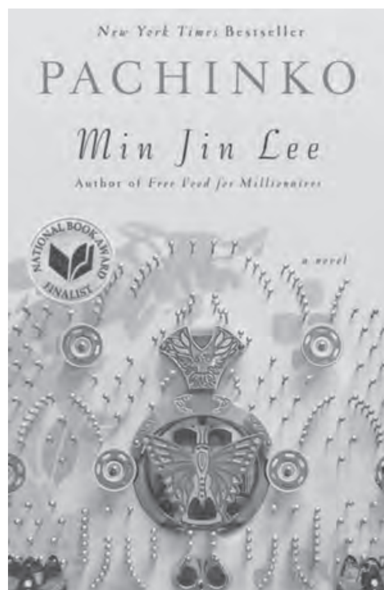
By Todd Munson

Pachinko

By Min Jin Lee

New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2017

496 pages, ISBN: 978-1455563937, Hardcover



Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*, nominee for the 2017 National Book Award for fiction, is a sweeping historical saga of one family's experience living as "forever foreigners" in twentieth-century Japan. Despite its heft (496 pages in the hardcover edition), the novel is written in an accessible and engaging style appropriate for both undergraduates and high school students. Moreover, *Pachinko* is set in a particularly rich era of modern East Asian history, encompassing colonial Korea, World War II, the Allied Occupation of Japan, the Korean War, and Japan's high-growth and "bubble economy" periods. Unlike many historical novels, however, *Pachinko* offers no omniscient narrator or other literary device to explain the greater historical context. Rather, we view events exclusively from the perspective of the main characters, ordinary people with a very limited understanding of the world beyond their immediate experience. While younger readers might appreciate the fact that the novel is not "bogged down" by excessive historical detail, teaching *Pachinko* in a history or East Asian civilization course will only be a fully rewarding experience for students when instructors provide sufficient context. The purpose of the essay that follows is to suggest the relevant background needed to appreciate the novel's historical setting; the accompanying online materials resources and chapter outline may be used to facilitate reading and classroom discussion.

Students may be surprised to learn the degree to which Japan's and Korea's histories are entwined. Indeed, there were many similarities between the civilizations residing on the southern Korean peninsula and the southern Japanese islands in the centuries bridging the advent of the Common Era. The centuries to follow brought waves of immigration to the archipelago, along with skills such as writing, construction, and metallurgy; and concepts such as Buddhism and Confucianism systems of governance and education. After Japan coalesced into a protounified state, attention shifted toward China, the locus of civilization and technology in the ancient Asian world. Relations with Korea became hostile in the medieval and early premodern eras, first from frequent assaults by "Japanese pirates" (actually composed of various ethnicities) and later from a failed invasion force ordered by the hegemon Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late sixteenth century.

Japan's early modern period was marked by a degree of national isolation, but the founding of the Meiji state in 1868 witnessed an increasingly aggressive and Imperialist turn. Seeking to emulate modern colonial powers, a plan was floated in the 1870s to invade Korea over a perceived slight to the Japanese emperor. Though ultimately abandoned, the Korean government was forced to sign a treaty opening ports and allowing its recognition as a sovereign state—in other words, theoretically removing Korea from the umbrella protection of the Chinese "tribute system" that had been in place for centuries.

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The period of the 1880s and 1890s was a tumultuous one for East Asia, as the Meiji government—guided by the rhetoric of Imperial worship and belief in the sacred spirit of the Japanese people—set parallel courses on industrialization and Imperial expansion. Neighboring Korea, boasting abundant raw materials and a potential market for industrial manufactures, was an optimal target. Korea resisted Japanese overtures, and the Qing court continually sought to maintain influence. Chinese forces were called in to subdue a Korean coup attempt in the 1880s and again ten years later to put down a peasant rebellion—the latter action met in equal force by the Japanese military. The resulting Sino–Japanese War of 1894–1895 permanently extinguished Chinese influence and marked the onset of heavy Japanese investment and development in the peninsula. The Russo–Japanese War of 1904–1905, fought to consolidate control of Korea and northeastern China, confirmed Japan's predominant interests in the peninsula, which became a "protectorate" led by a Japanese resident-general. Five years later, Korea was formally annexed as a Japanese colony, and the 500-year-plus Chosŏn dynasty came to an end.

The first of *Pachinko*'s three books, "*Gohyang*/Hometown," opens as Korea has entered the colonial period. For the residents of rural Yeongdo—a fishing village on the southeastern tip of the peninsula—Japanese "thieves" and Korean "incompetent aristocrats and corrupt rulers" have dispossessed vast numbers of illiterate farmers unable to confirm ownership of their land (2). Among them are the parents of Yangjin, an adolescent girl married off to relieve their financial hardship. However, Yangjin's new family—including her only surviving child, a daughter named Sunja—is soon forced to transform their home into a boardinghouse to meet expenses. When Sunja becomes a teenager herself, her attention is drawn to a handsome outsider named Koh Hansu, but their relationship ends soon after she realizes she is pregnant.

The arrival of Baek Isak, a Methodist minister from P'yŏngyang, marks an early turning point. Readers unfamiliar with the history of Christianity in East Asia will be interested to know that missionaries traveled to China, Japan, and Korea as early as the 1500s, though it was only after Korea's forced opening in the 1870s that Protestants were able to establish a strong presence in the northeast. By 1910, seminaries were established and the first native ministers were ordained. By the time the novel opens, about 1 percent of the population of Korea was Protestant, primarily among them educated and well-to-do families from the north. This demographic also produced the leadership core of early

independence activists, many of whom were imprisoned or lost their lives—Isak mentions that his older brother Sameol was killed during colonial Korea's signature protest movement, named after the date which it began: March 1, 1919. On that date, a group of Korean independence activists—approximately half of whom were Christians—led a nonviolent demonstration met with deadly force by Japanese military, resulting in thousands of deaths, injuries, and imprisonments.

The remaining chapters of book 1 occur in the 1930s. The Great Depression and Japan's invasion of Manchuria have reduced Korea to dire poverty; in the wake of her husband's death, Yangjin struggles to maintain her boardinghouse as daily necessities became scarce. Sunja and Isak, newly married, emigrate to Japan and move into the home of his brother, Joseb, and his wife, Sunghee. They live in the Ikaino neighborhood of Osaka, a "misbotten village of sorts, comprised of mismatched, shabby houses" (102). Joseb, who has worked in Japanese factories for several years, warns the couple that Japanese hold a low opinion of Koreans—but that Koreans cannot be trusted either: "We're all hungry … just because they're Koreans doesn't mean they're our friends" (105). At the close of the first book, Sunja gives birth to a son, Noa.

Vintage1974 Sankyo Mini-Mouth pachinko machine. Source: *Pachinkoplanet.com* at https://tinyurl.com/yxeo43v9.

For Lee's everyperson characters, political and military history are no match for the fight for daily survival—the "belly as emperor."

Book 2, "Motherland," spans the entirety of World War II and the Korean War, and deepens the reader's relationship with Sunja and Isak. The first chapter takes place six years after Noa's birth, during which time Sunja and Isak have had a son of their own, Mozasu. The family's settled life in Osaka is disrupted when Japanese police arrest a group of Christians, Isak among them, at a Shintō shrine because one of their group was mouthing the Lord's Prayer during the ritual. Sunja assumes responsibility for the financial well-being of her family, making and selling kimchi at the train station. As this section of the narrative unfolds, it is evident that conditions are deteriorating in Japan—and again, it is Isak's brother Joseb who proves especially insightful:

> *Japan was in trouble. . . The government knew it but would never admit defeat. Did Koreans want Japan to win? Hell no, but what would happen to them if Japan's enemies won? Could the Koreans save themselves? Apparently not. So save your own ass—this was what Koreans believed privately. Save your family. Feed your belly. . . In the end, your belly was your emperor.* (177–178)

Although Joseb may have had no foreknowledge of events to come, he was aware of the ultimate truth: that war was ultimately "senseless" and

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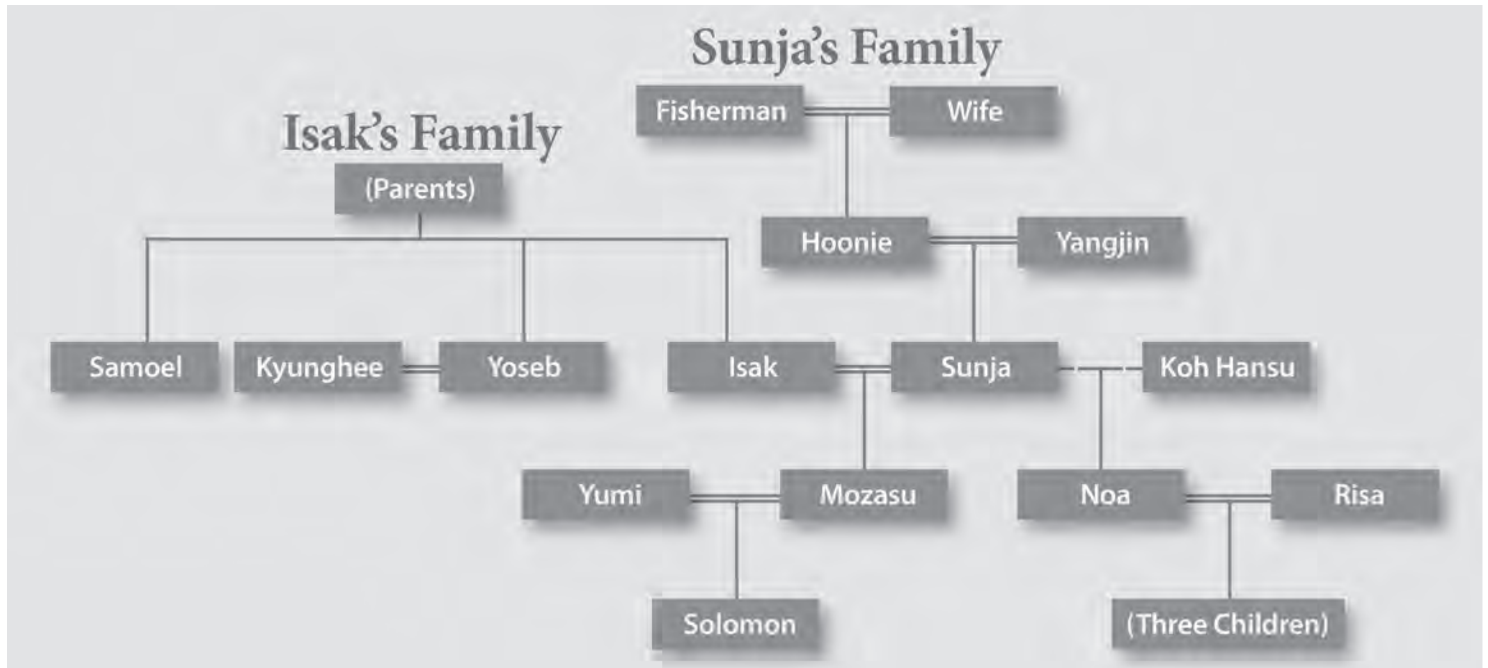

Pachinko Family Tree. Chart created by the author and Willa Davis.

that Koreans, in Japan or elsewhere, must rely on themselves. For Lee's everyperson characters, political and military history are no match for the fight for daily survival—the "belly as emperor." For Sunja and her family, the focus is on finding enough cabbage to make the kimchi she sells outside the train station.

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The remainder of book 2 unfolds during a critical time in modern East Asian history, though Lee touches only lightly upon events generally considered crucial to our understanding of the period: World War II and Japan's surrender, the American Occupation of Japan, the division of the Korean peninsula, and the Korean War are all scarcely referenced, let alone described or explained. This is not necessarily a downside, as (young) readers often skip past the expository "infodump" sometimes encountered in historical fiction. Moreover, such a narrative strategy hues closer to the experience of the novel's characters, whose own understanding of geopolitical events is unavoidably very restricted. For these chapters, instructors would do well to provide ancillary materials from past issues of *Education About Asia* or elsewhere.[1]

Book 2 also explores the connections between Japanese crime syndicates—commonly known as *yakuza*—and the Korean–Japanese community, areas of tension that persist throughout the novel. Though Japanese organized crime has misty origins in the premodern era, the yakuza came of age in Japan's Imperial period, when large-scale immigration exacerbated issues related to income inequality and discrimination. Excluded from the ladder of industrial bureaucratic success, the Korean and Korean–Japanese communities—and other minority or persecuted groups, such as *burakumin*—were frequently resigned to a life outside the margins. Though figures are scarce, it is fair to assert that a substantial percentage of organized criminals in postwar Japan were not of pure Japanese ethnicity, and therefore restricted (legally or otherwise) from pursuing honest means of living.[2] Noa's biological father, Koh Hansu, and his assistant, Kim Changho, are the only major characters in the novel to openly pursue criminal activities (primarily protection and loan-sharking), though they never refer to themselves as yakuza. Other characters—Goro, the pachinko parlor owner, and Mozasu, Sunja's son and Goro's employee—take pains to emphasize that they have no such criminal connections, despite commonly held assumptions about pachinko gambling and the yakuza. For readers of the novel wishing to learn more about the yakuza, care must be taken not to overemphasize Korean membership and not to fall prey to characterizations that romanticize or exoticize the group in the way that the Italian mafia has been represented in recent decades. Lee's portrayal is nuanced and clear-eyed.

The eponymous title of book 3 suggests that the narrative will align with both literal and metaphoric games of chance. Set against the period of the "economic miracle," when Japan became the world's second-largest economy, Mozasu has found himself among Japan's wealthy elite, living in a palatial home filled with Western luxury goods and even hiring a famous pop singer to perform at his son's extravagant birthday party. Mozasu's son Solomon, having recently turned fourteen, must register with the Japanese government as a "resident alien." The passages describing Solomon's experience at the Yokohama Ward Office are told in great detail, though additional context may be helpful to fully appreciate Lee's emphasis on this section of the novel. In particular, students born in countries with *jus soli* (birthright) citizenship, such as the United States, may wonder why someone native to a country would need to register his or her fingerprints with the government. Considered "foreigners living in Japan" (known in Japanese by the abbreviated term *Zainichi*), Japanese-born Koreans were left essentially stateless following the resumption of Japanese sovereignty in 1952—even if they had never been to their "home" country and spoke no Korean (a 1951 poll found that 63 percent of Korean–Japanese were born in Japan).[3] As an "alien" in the country of his birth, Solomon encounters disrespectful clerks at the ward office, who argue condescendingly that "fingerprints and registration cards are vitally important" for foreign residents. And yet Solomon is not foreign—or is he? As his father explains, "this is something Solomon must understand. We can be deported. We have no motherland" (401). Despite the family's financial prosperity, their future remains capricious—much like a game of pachinko, in which small metallic balls fall randomly down a maze of pegs, sometimes landing in a winning hole but more likely falling down to the bottom.

Though *Pachinko* is of obvious relevance to history and literature courses, the novel provides rich opportunities for students to discuss issues of race, immigration, and discrimination—indeed, this is a subject Lee touches upon in many ways through the novel. While the Korean experience may be paramount in the narrative, we are reminded in various ways that discrimination exists in many ways in Japan, a country that has traditionally privileged a narrative of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, despite the presence of a population that problematizes the notion of a singular Japanese people and culture. By avoiding shopworn stereotypes (the kamikaze pilot, the salaryman, the "education mother"), *Pachinko* instead reveals the ignored people about whom many foreigners are unaware when they consider Japan's twentieth century: Koreans, Christians, the poor, prisoners, working women, homosexuals, the disabled, unmarried and interracial couples, HIV patients, and drug addicts all fall within her scope.

In the opening lines of the novel, Lee notes that "history has failed us, but no matter" (5). I believe here the author refers to what we might think of as "history with a capital H": that is, the study and teaching of the subject, rather than the ceaseless unfolding of events over time. In that sense, she is correct—too often have we relied upon the standard narrative of the period (World War II, the Korean War, Japan's "economic miracle," and so on) and neglected those ordinary yet extraordinary people who lived in the interstices of empire, at the margins of their own societies, and as men and women without a country. For the history teacher—for *any* teacher—Lee's work thus represents both a challenge and an opportunity. ■

NOTES

1. See the suggested resources in the online supplement to this article.
2. See, for example, David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, *Yakuza: Japan's Criminal Underworld* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
3. When Japan and South Korea established diplomatic relations in 1965, Korean–Japanese were given the opportunity to apply for South Korean citizenship, but many felt no allegiance to this new country, especially those whose families originated in the northern part of the peninsula.

TODD MUNSON is Professor and Chair of Asian Studies at Randolph–Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He is the author of *The Periodical Press in Treaty-Port Japan: Conflicting Reports from Yokohama, 1861–1870* (Brill / Global Oriental, 2013), and multiple articles and book chapters on Japanese and American visual culture.

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