

## To the Diamond Mountains *A Hundred-Year Journey Through China and Korea*

BY TESSA MORRIS-SUZUKI

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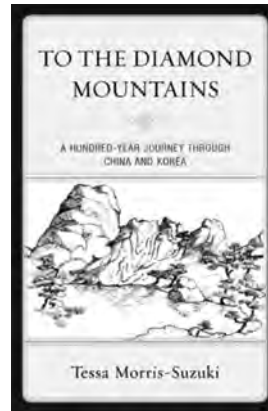
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Reviewed by Constance Vidor

Retracing the steps of historical travelers has become a popular scaffolding for travel, adventure, and historical narratives. This device allows the writer to present a region through the double vision of her own perceptions and those of the historical figure. The reader benefits from two sets of insights, each filtered through a different personality, each reacting to the same region at different points in time.

*To the Diamond Mountains* uses the double-perspective approach to create a narrative that connects and juxtaposes histories and landscapes of China and Korea. The author reenacts a journey made by the English traveler Emily Georgiana Kemp in 1909–1910. Interweaving Kemp's observations with her own, Morris-Suzuki portrays the power of change and memory in northeast China and the Koreas.

The journey begins in Harbin, a provincial capital in northeastern China. In Kemp's day, it was a hub of trade and travel, its imposing railway stations the scene of monks, priests, soldiers, laborers, and merchants representing a kaleidoscopic array of European and Asian identities and agendas. Just before Kemp's arrival in March 1910, Harbin Station had seized worldwide attention



as the setting of the assassination of the Japanese statesman Ito Hirobumi by Korean independence activist Ahn Jung-geon. Ahn Jung-geon's act was a protest against Japan's expanding control of Korea that would develop into a full-scale occupation and tyranny during the following decades. Morris-Suzuki contrasts Kemp's vivid response to Ahn Jung-geon's act with her own fruitless search for a plaque or marker of commemoration in Harbin Station.

Far more visible in Harbin is the city's heritage of Russian architecture, left by refugees from the Russian Revolution and, with the decline of this presence, now in the care of the city's predominantly Chinese population. Morris-Suzuki constructs this account of Harbin, past and present, as an example of the turbulent flow of ethnic and national migrations, conflicts, beliefs, and achievements that make up the history of East Asia.

Kemp's ultimate destination was the Diamond Mountains, located in what is now North Korea. For centuries, the Diamond Mountains have been a pilgrimage destination for Buddhists from throughout East Asia. Today, only one of the mountains' four great temples is still standing, the rest destroyed as a result of bombing during the Korean War. Morris-Suzuki's comment speaks to the heartfelt ethical dimension that informs every page of this book.

*It seems curious . . . that while the destruction of Italy's Monte Casino, Germany's Dresden, and England's Coventry Cathedral still evoke intense debates about war and culture, there has been no debate at all about responsibility for the destruction of these temples, some of Asia's greatest Buddhist works of art.*

More recently, another act of destruction took place in the Diamond Mountains when North Korean guards shot a South Korean tourist who had wandered outside a resort compound. The incident prompted the closing of the resort, one of the few sites of peaceful collaboration between North and South Korea. Morris-Suzuki is unable to go beyond the foothills of the Diamond Mountains, her access limited by the official minders who accompany the few tourists who are allowed into North Korea. The author contrasts the uncertainties of her experience with those of Kemp's time. In 1910, the isolation of the region was a fact not of politics but of geography and technology. Kemp traveled by pony and by foot with Korean guides who turned out to be almost as inexperienced as she was. Despite the rugged terrain and uncertain guidance, Kemp walked in a mythic landscape that Morris-Suzuki could only glimpse from afar.

It is within these contrasting incidents of travel that Morris-Suzuki reveals the dilemmas, tragedies, and hopes of politics and culture in East Asia. The narrative engages the reader's curiosity, indignation, admiration, and fascination with its insistence on ethical reflection.

This volume is accessible to high school juniors and seniors with some guidance from a teacher, and it would make an inspiring introduction to East Asian studies for a college audience. Students with little background in East Asian studies will benefit from timelines and maps to keep a clear sense of the many dates, names, places, and events discussed in the book. ■

CONSTANCE VIDOR is Director of Library Services at Friends Seminary, a K-12 independent school in New York City. Her digital publications include *The Silk Road* online at <http://voicethread.com/share/721166/>, *Gardens of China* at <http://voicethread.com/share/974669/>, *The Kite Fighters* at <http://voicethread.com/share/631151/>, and *The Annotated Google Map of the 2012 Outstanding International Books List* at <http://g.co/maps/xb4kt>.



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