

Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*: A novel of 20th century Korea and Japan—“History has failed us, but no matter”

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Pachinko by Min Jin Lee, New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2017, 490 pp.

“Pachinko” is a popular mechanical arcade game in Japan, often used for gambling (a North American equivalent might be the slot machine). It is both a game of chance and one of the few businesses that ethnic Koreans in Japan (*zainichi*) could own in the period following World War II.

Pachinko is the second novel by Korean-American author Min Jin Lee (born 1968). The *New York Times* ranked it as one of the 10 best books of 2017. Apple Inc. bought the screen rights and plans to oversee the production of a television series based on the book.

The novel tells the story of four generations of a Korean family, the Baeks, through most of the 20th century. It begins in the Korean fishing village of Yeongdo during the Japanese occupation (1910-45) near Busan, today South Korea's second-largest city, and later continues in Japan. Throughout there is pervasive and sometimes violent discrimination by the Japanese against Koreans.

The Kim family in Yeongdo takes in lodgers. Their only surviving son, Hoonie, is born disfigured and disabled. On top of this, the Japanese occupation is a disaster for the Korean people, creating hunger and want all over the country. Hoonie eventually marries a girl, Yangji, whose family is desperate. The couple have a reasonably happy marriage, but after Hoonie's death, their daughter, Sunja, becomes involved with a gangster, Hansu, who works closely with the Japanese.

Sunja becomes pregnant out of wedlock by Hansu, who is married and wants to support her as his mistress. She refuses, and a shy and generous guest in the boarding house, a young Christian preacher, Isak Baek, marries her.

Japanese imperialism needs workers to produce armaments as it expands into Asia. Isak and Sunja, along with hundreds of thousands of other Koreans, move to Japan, where Isak takes a job as a factory foreman in Osaka. They join his brother Yoseb, the pastor at a Korean church, and his wife Kyunghee. Sunja's child by Hansu, Noa, is born and soon afterward (with Isak), a son, Mozasu.

Koreans in Osaka are forced to live in a ghetto, and their

Christianity is suspect to the authorities. Isak disappears into a Japanese prison when he will not renounce his faith. For months the women go to the jail and speak to the polite Japanese guard. They bring Isak food which, they discover, he never receives. Years later, Isak is released, having been tortured and starved, and dies soon after.

Sunja and Kyunghee support the family by selling kimchi at an outdoor market. Here there are scenes with ordinary Japanese, who are kind and sympathetic to them. The women eventually work for a restaurant secretly owned by Hansu.

The war with the Americans comes and there is terrific destruction and loss of life as Osaka is firebombed. With Hansu's help, the Baeks escape to the countryside. They return to Osaka after the war is over and the fortunes of the family rise in the postwar boom. Noa goes to a prestigious university, but when he discovers that Hansu, who has financed his education, is his biological father, he disappears and comes to an unhappy end living anonymously in the north of Japan. Mozasu becomes a pachinko parlor owner.

In the end, the Baeks become rich. The next generation, represented by Solomon, Mozasu's son, is raised extravagantly. Solomon lives in New York and Tokyo and works with the worst kind of investment sharks of the 1980s. In the end, this generation cannot escape anti-Korean racism, despite its wealth.

In the first (and some of the best) chapters of the novel, which take place in the Yeongdo boarding house, during the Japanese occupation, Lee writes with humanity about her characters, and reveals their humanity to us: “This thing called the Depression was found everywhere in the world, the lodgers said frequently during meals, repeating what they'd overheard from the men at the market who could read newspapers. Poor Americans were as hungry as the poor Russians and the poor Chinese. In the name of the Emperor, even ordinary Japanese went without.”

The portrayals of the poor fishermen who live as tenants in the boarding house are memorable, and one wishes such social and psychological pictures would recur in the book.

Lee, the daughter of South Korean immigrants to the US, has remarked that she had to recast the entire novel after moving to

Japan and interviewing dozens of members of the Korean community there: “After my interviews, I realized that the story had to begin in 1910, and my character Sunja moves from Korea to Japan in 1933.”

Perhaps as a result of this decision and also, of course, because of Lee’s own talent, there is something vital and poignant particularly in the earlier sections of the novel set in Korea and in Osaka during the war. People live under the shadow of great historical events that demand everything from them. The premise is exciting, and Min Jin Lee deserves credit for undertaking a novel along such broad lines.

The book was popular with American readers in 2017, when it was a bestseller. *Pachinko* was also popular with the critics, which may have had something to do as well with its focus on nationality and ethno-chauvinism. The work was a runner-up for the National Book Award.

Lee’s conception of history, however, tempers and limits her artistic accomplishments, in my view. The first line of the novel, “History has failed us, but no matter,” reinforces one of the likely meanings of the title: life and history are a sequence of chance events from which an individual or a people may emerge better or worse off.

The author asks us to consider nearly 70 years of the Baek family. However, according to Lee, history—including the titanic events of the invasion and colonization of Korea by Japan, the wars and migrations in that region over the next 40 years and the stability after the destruction of a world war—is a process over which human beings, in the end, have no control and must endure stoically.

The possibility of collective action by the Koreans in Japan and by the Japanese population itself is missing. The years immediately after the war saw a mass strike wave by the Japanese working class and a determination never again to return to militarist barbarism that lasts to this day.

It is also significant that Lee says little about the Korean War and its impact on *zainichi* in Japan. As the North and South Korean states were formed during the massive American intervention on the peninsula after the war, accompanied by the Soviet Army’s seizure of Manchuria and the north of Korea, the Koreans in Japan developed differing and polarizing political allegiances.

Most significantly, the Korean War (1950-53)—and the series of insurrections and massacres under the American puppet regimes of South Korea that immediately preceded the war—does not appear to have much impact on the Baeks or anyone they know. Although Sunja does have this thought, “It seemed as if the occupation and the war had changed everyone, and now the war in Korea was making things worse. Once-tenderhearted people seemed wary and tough. There was innocence left only in the smallest children.”

The Chinese Revolution of 1949 is simply not mentioned.

The maxim that a historical novel is a product of the time in which it was written holds true for *Pachinko*. This is revealed

through three aspects of the novel’s final portions.

The first is a focus on the discrimination that Korean *zainichi* in Japan experience. What Lee emphasizes is unrelenting racism against Koreans in Japan and the deep bitterness that produces. Absolutely nothing apparently can overcome identity imposed from the outside and the inside.

Secondly, the cultural impact of the last 30 years of skyrocketing economic inequality shows through in *Pachinko* as the Baeks get horribly rich, and, moreover, issues of identity are fought out among this layer of the population.

Finally, in the lives of Solomon and his contemporaries in the 1980s, history itself is almost entirely absent. The younger generation gives almost no thought to the past, or to what might lie ahead. The period since the collapse of the USSR has been dominated in cultural life by the idea that history and social life have little significance for human motivation.

The characters reach an impasse, and it is not clear the author sees much farther than they do. At one point, Solomon’s father, Mozasu, asserts: “This country [Japan] isn’t going to change. Koreans like me can’t leave. Where we gonna go? But the Koreans back home aren’t changing, either. In Seoul, people like me get called Japanese bastards, and in Japan, I’m just another dirty Korean no matter how much money I make or how nice I am.”

Solomon, as a *zainichi*, takes the fall for a deal gone bad. The man who betrays him expresses scorn for “able-bodied middle-class people who are scared of their shadows” and who “pay the mediocre tax in regular quarterly installments with compounding interest.” He goes on, “When you play it safe, that’s what happens, my friend. So if I were you, I wouldn’t throw any games. I’d use every fucking advantage. Beat anyone who fucks with you to a fucking pulp. Show no mercy to chumps, especially if they don’t deserve it. Make the pussies cry.”

This contempt, whether it’s being held up to criticism or not, echoes that found in Lee’s first novel, *Free Food for Millionaires* (2007), also listed by the *New York Times* in its Top Ten Novels of the Year. Here Lee depicts a daughter of Korean immigrants in Queens, New York, recently graduated from Princeton, as she makes her way among young Wall Street brokers. There are some effective scenes in the book and to a certain degree it provides a window on Korean immigrant life in the US, but the focus is on the obnoxious and trivial affairs of the top 5 percent of income earners in New York City.

In both novels, history is meaningless and senseless in the end.



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