

## **Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque** The Living, Dead, and Undead in Japan's Imperialism, 1895–1945

Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 361 pp.

In this provocative and ambitious study, Mark Driscoll makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Japan's colonial empire and the capitalist developments that took place there. Offering a damning critique of Japanese colonialism, Driscoll brings to our attention the overwhelming and omnipresent nature of Japanese capitalism run amok and its subsequent effects on the most vulnerable sectors of society in Japan's expanding colonial empire. What becomes most clear in this wide-ranging study is the extent to which capitalism infected and, to use Driscoll's language, vampirized and grotesqued Japan's empire in East and Northeast Asia. Utilizing a variety of under-used and innovative primary source materials, including literature, memoir, diaries, magazines and journals, news reports, and sexological tracts, Driscoll brings to light the multitude of ways in which Japanese business and politics operated in securing human capital and natural resources in Korea and mainland China.

For Driscoll, labor plays a key role in our understanding of Japan's colonial empire, both at home and abroad. In this regard he shares much with Ken Kawashima's recent and excellent work, *The Proletarian Gamble*, also from Duke University Press (2009), which examined interwar Korean day laborers in the Japanese metropole. *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque* also draws heavily on the Foucauldian concept of the biopolitical, which evolved into the neuropolitical and finally the necropolitical, as refined by Achille Mbembe, to explain the expansion of Japanese capitalism. It is these three concepts that serve to divide the book into discrete parts.

Part I, "Biopolitics," focuses on the period of 1895 to 1915 and examines Chinese coolies, Korean tenant farmers, pimps, and so-called female hysterics as a basis for illustrating the biopolitical elements that "produced Japan's imperialism and pushed capitalism to take on a more complex regime of grotesqueing" (17). Using a variety of periodicals and works by Japanese entrepreneurs from the period, Driscoll illustrates how Chinese coolies, according to one Japanese businessman, lacked "cultural and even material needs" and were thus perfectly content

to “slave away the days in a near inhuman state” for the profit of Japanese businesses in the colonies (48). Chapter three, “Empire in Hysterics” examines the ways Japanese women living in the colonies were stigmatized by the media, sexologists, and Japanese society-at-large. In comparison to the metropole, the colonies lacked the discourse of “good wives, wise mothers,” and Driscoll argues that “hysterical” women were seen as too independent, insufficiently Japanese, or too close with Koreans. While this chapter is an important contribution to our understanding of Japanese women in colonial Korea, it nonetheless feels somewhat out of place, sandwiched between chapters that focus on the plight of colonized peoples in Manchuria and Korea. Part I concludes with an examination of the Oriental Development Company (ODC) and the dispossession of Korean farmers’ land. Ostensibly, the ODC was established as a vehicle to encourage the settlement of Japanese nationals in Korea as farmers, who would also serve to educate Koreans in the newest scientific methods of agriculture. Yet many Japanese emigrants viewed farming as beneath them (103) or were often afraid to leave their enclaves for fear of reprisals (110). Instead of working to overhaul Korean agriculture under the direction of Japanese settlers, as originally envisaged, the ODC instead became focused on extracting rent and capital from Korean farmers.

Part II, “Neuropolitics,” focuses on the period from 1920 to 1932 and shifts to examining mass culture in Japan proper. It effectively links the first part on biopolitics with the third section on wartime necropolitics, by examining Japanese capitalist consumers in the metropole. Part II focuses mainly on the ways consumers’ senses were “commodified,” to use Driscoll’s terminology. During this period when neuropolitics was *de rigueur*, residents in advanced capitalist societies like Japan were constantly exposed to a world “corrupted by commodification” (200). Chapter five, probing modern boys and girls (*mobo* and *moga*) draws heavily on the ideas of *ero* (erotic) and *guro* (grotesque) in keeping with the book’s title. By examining articles in journals such as *Abnormal Psychology*, Driscoll argues that the most complex treatments of metropolitan capitalism took place in sexological publications (148). Moreover, through a reading of Umehara Hokumei’s novel *The Killing Capitalist Konglomerate* (Satsujin kaisha) (1924), Driscoll suggests “overlaps and continuities” between *ero-guro* and fascism—a point of contention in previous scholarship which has often seen them as incompatible. Yet, Driscoll’s argument detailing synergies between the two is well supported by his extended discussion

the *Kapitalist Konglomerate* and important publications including *Arts Market*, *Criminal Science*, and *Crime Digest*. Among other key points, he notes that a large number of subscribers and contributors to these magazines were Japanese military officials—many of them officers.

Finally, part III, entitled “Necropolitics,” examines “the living dead” in Manchuko from 1935 to 1945 after the invasion of Northeast China. Driscoll argues that neuropolitics became necrotic when activities like forced labor and induced drug addiction were “transferred to an Asian theater of war as a continuation of business—in other words, when the political accent is on killing and violently incapacitating—they move centripetally out of the margins into the matricial center of necropolitical capitalism” (229). Cleverly opening with an analysis of vampires’ appearance in ero-guro magazines and novels, he proceeds with a damning indictment of drug dealers in Northeast China. Estimates of heroin and morphine addiction were up to one in three in some areas, while those addicted to opium reached one in ten (261). One of the clearest and most disturbing examples given for the operation of necropolitics is the rounding up the Chinese drug addicts, ostensibly for a (biopolitical) program of detoxification that instead saw them appropriated for necropolitical ends as they were shuttled “out the back door” of clinics to forced labor camps where most perished (302). The final chapter examines the actions of two well-known Japanese elites: Kishi Nobusuke (prime minister from 1957–1960) and Ayukawa Yoshisuke (1880–1967), the founder of Nissan. In frank terms, Driscoll lays bare the depravity of both men: from Kishi the womanizer and money-lauderer extraordinaire to Ayukawa, whose continued financial success was based on close cooperation with the Japanese military, use of forced labor, and public defense of totalitarianism.

*Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque* provides a valuable addition to existing scholarship on Japanese colonialism in Korea and Manchuria, as prior works have often marginalized the labor practices that drove the various processes of modernization in Japan’s colonies. Not everyone will find the dense and theoretical approach in the book appealing, yet for the devoted postgraduate or scholar this is a study that offers much. The wide and extensive archive of sources that Driscoll utilizes goes beyond Japanese archives and scholarship to incorporate a range of Chinese sources and scholarship. From this, a picture emerges that is highly critical of Japanese businesses and colonial policies in Asia. Ultimately, Driscoll concludes that the villain of Japanese colonialism

is capitalism. A few areas of the book could have benefited from more careful editing or cross-checking. For example, while estimating the number of women subjected to enforced military prostitution by the Japanese military is difficult, the range of 150,000 to 400,000 so-called “comfort women” (xv, 230, 306) subsumed to the Japanese necropolitical operation seems rather high and imprecise, particularly when acknowledging in the conclusion that recent research by leading international scholars on the subject such as Yuki Tanaka and Sarah Soh have put the number at around 200,000 (324). In addition, with such a topic as Japanese imperialism we are forced to repeatedly, as Driscoll does (6), ask the question “who benefits?” On the Japanese side, elites such as Kishi and Ayukawa benefit the most, as do the drug dealers and pimps covered in the first part of the book. The damning indictments of Japan’s activities across fifty years are convincing, but it is also true that some Koreans or Chinese in the colonies did indeed benefit from Japanese imperialism and modernization efforts—for instance, in terms of expanded access to education or the resulting benefits of improved infrastructure. Such recognition need not result in uncritical embrace of a “bright” view of Japan’s history on the continent that sides with politically conservative or revisionist interpretations of Japanese colonialism, although I doubt such a view would be possible after finishing this book. In sum, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque* is a superb study that greatly expands our knowledge of the most vulnerable members of the Japanese empire and the efforts to extract every possible pound of flesh and capital from those who lived there.

**ERIK ROPERS**  
Towson University  
<hropers@towson.edu>