

THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN COLONIAL LIFE: RESIDENTS' MOVEMENTS IN KOREA UNDER JAPANESE RULE*

'Can a robust public sphere coexist with an authoritarian state?'¹ Scholars have posed this question in regard to both political life in Japan before 1945 and civic life in South Korea after 1945.² Between these two distinct areas of inquiry, however, lies the history of Japanese rule over the Korean peninsula (1910–45), which has remained outside their purview. This article extends the question to colonial Korea by adding another question of comparative importance: can the colonizer and the colonized together constitute a viable civil society?

Most scholars of colonial Korea, home to nearly one million Japanese by 1945, would respond in the negative, as would most

* For their comments, encouragement and advice on an earlier draft of this article, I should like to thank my wonderful colleagues Allyson Hobbs, Priya Satia, Edith Sheffer and Laura Stokes. I must also thank Aishwary Kumar for enlightening me on the ongoing scholarly debate on the public sphere in British India, and Sun Joo Kim and Andrew Gordon for directing me to relevant studies on the term 'public' and its variants in the context of Korea and Japan.

¹ This question is posed by Mary Elizabeth Berry in her 'Public Life in Authoritarian Japan', *Daedalus*, 3 (1998), 133. A similar question is raised by seminal works on urban political life in inter-war Japan such as Andrew Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley, 1991), and Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life* (Princeton, 1997). More recent works have approached this question from a variety of perspectives, from youth activism: David R. Ambaras, *Bad Youth: Juvenile Delinquency and the Politics of Everyday Life in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, 2006); to parliamentary discourse: Kyu Hyun Kim, *The Age of Visions and Arguments: Parliamentarianism and the National Public Sphere in Early Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); and ruffian violence: Eiko Maruko Siniawer, *Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists: The Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860–1960* (Ithaca, 2008).

² See the collection of essays dedicated to this topic in Charles K. Armstrong (ed.), *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy and the State* (London, 2002); also Han Sang-Jin, 'The Public Sphere and Democracy in Korea: A Debate on Civil Society', *Korea JI*, xxxvii, 4 (1997). For a parallel, and more contested, debate on 'civil society' and its relationship to Confucianism in the context of Chosŏn dynasty Korea (1392–1910), see Cho Hein, 'The Historical Origin of Civil Society in Korea', *Korea JI*, xxxvii, 2 (1997); David I. Steinberg, 'Civil Society and Human Rights in Korea: On Contemporary and Classical Orthodoxy and Ideology', *Korea JI*, xxxvii, 3 (1997); John Duncan, 'The Problematic Modernity of Confucianism: The Question of Civil Society in Chosŏn Dynasty Korea', in Armstrong (ed.), *Korean Society* (which provides a nuanced and thoughtful critique of the ongoing debate).

historians of settler colonial Africa, one of whom has argued, 'civil society was first and foremost the society of the colons'.³ However, for two main reasons this contention is not wholly applicable to colonial Korea. First, the authoritarian regime of the governor-general held sway over a sizeable but politically weak Japanese settler population, who stood on an ambiguous threshold between subjects and citizens.⁴ Secondly, and more importantly, state dominance was a condition shared between the metropole and the colony.⁵ Less a local agent of the metropolitan cabinet than a direct servant of the emperor, the colonial state in Korea may be seen as an unmediated extension of the authoritarian structure centred on the emperor that framed the constitutional government in Japan.⁶

But if Japanese settlers lacked the power to govern their own affairs — an essential measure of a civil society — Koreans fared still worse, as scholars have amply shown. Having been formally annexed to Japan in 1910, Korea's once vigorous public life all but disappeared through police surveillance and censorship. In the 1920s, following the independence demonstrations of March 1919, Koreans of various ideological stripes began to pry open a limited space for political action as the fetters of state control loosened and the public, led by the vernacular press, burst forth through a web of cultural activities and voluntary associations.⁷ But this 'liberal' interlude soon gave way to a renewed

³ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996), 19; Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, 'Introduction: Settler Colonialism. A Concept and its Uses', in Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen (eds.), *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies* (New York, 2005), 12. But there were, of course, significant degrees of difference in the levels of settler autonomy among the European settler colonies in Africa: *ibid.*, 5–7.

⁴ See Jun Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011).

⁵ This point becomes apparent when placed in comparative perspective. Contradictions that arose between the liberal political institutions in the metropole and the repressive practices in the colony — tensions so pronounced in the European empires: David B. Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires, 1415–1980* (New Haven, 2000), 328 — appear to diminish in the case of the Japanese empire, where metropolitan as well as colonial populations were treated as subjects of the emperor rather than rights-bearing citizens.

⁶ Edward I-te Chen, 'The Attempt to Integrate the Empire: Legal Perspectives', in Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie (eds.), *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945* (Princeton, 1984), 253–4, 262–5.

⁷ See Michael Edson Robinson, *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920–1925* (Seattle, 1988).

phase of coercion in the 1930s, when the colonial state began to prepare and mobilize the local population for Japan's continental expansion and total war. Throughout these shifting phases of colonial rule, a 'public' is often assumed to be a locus of nationalist activity, rather than one of collective action, in this case between Koreans and Japanese (far less, one of collaborative interaction with the state). In this bifurcated view of the public, the colonized and the colonizer rarely connect across their ethnic divide to agitate for a common social or political cause; colonial Korea in this rendition appears not dissimilar to its better-known European counterparts in colonial Africa, where interactions between state and society sharpened more often than they complicated racial divisions.⁸

Recently, however, a number of scholars, notably Yun Hae-dong and Namiki Masato, have alerted us to a distinctive type of public sphere that emerged in Korea's upper and middle strata, where the line between state and society, or ruler and ruled, remained murky.⁹ Although the Korean nationalist movement declined from the late 1920s to the 1940s, civilian participation in politics steadily increased, they argue, noting the expanding cohort of non-government public officials: Korean and Japanese elites appointed to, or elected to run, local self-governing bodies including school boards, chambers of commerce, city assemblies and community councils. Rather than interpret membership in these parastatal institutions as a sign of acquiescence to the state, new studies have shown how local elites used these institutions to express autonomous opinion and even engage in political action that involved the wider population.

Focusing on these men of influence who traversed the porous borders separating the spheres of local governance and civic

⁸ See Elkins and Pedersen, 'Introduction: Settler Colonialism', 12.

⁹ Yun Hae-dong, *Singminji ūi hoesaek chidae* [The Colonial Grey Zone] (Seoul, 2003), proposes the concept of a 'grey zone' to refer to a political public sphere that lies between the two poles of submission and resistance in a spectrum of actions taken by local actors to press their shared concerns related to everyday life within a hegemonic framework of modernity. Namiki Masato provides a more specific understanding of the 'colonial public sphere' by tracing the institutional evolution of municipal and provincial politics in his article 'Chōsen ni okeru "shokuminchi kindaisei", "shokuminchi kōkyōsei", tainichi kyōryoku: shokuminchi seijishi, shakaishi kenkyū no tame no yobiteki kōsatsu' ['Colonial Modernity', 'Colonial Public Sphere', Collaboration with Japan in Korea: Preliminary Observations for the Study of Colonial Political and Social History], *Kokusai kōryū kenkyū: Kokusai Kōryū Gakubu kiyō*, v (2003).

action, I propose to show how a limited public sphere — an urban and bourgeois space of public debate and opinion — opened at the very interface of state and society.¹⁰ In doing so, I join a new generation of scholars who have responded to the call of Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson to analyse the dynamic interplay between Japanese rule and Korean society in terms of ‘colonial modernity’, to think beyond the dualism of coercion and resistance.¹¹ At the same time, I want to push its conceptual parameters further, as Yun and Namiki have done, by locating a public in social movements, without assuming its ethnic division.

Studies on colonies elsewhere offer useful signposts for this avenue of inquiry. By illustrating, through a dialogue with Habermas, the critical role of local notables in shaping public life in the colony, they have shown that the public sphere was not necessarily predicated on the rise of liberal democracy. In the case of British India, which has generated particularly active debate on the topic,¹² urban and middle-class colonial publics emerged through critical and productive engagement with the imperial system, forging an ideological space where, as C. A. Bayly, for instance, has shown, early Indian liberals and British expatriates, in their ‘global imagining of constitutional liberty’,

¹⁰ The elite nature of the colonial public sphere is reflected in the limitations of available sources used for this article, mostly local newspapers and magazines, that document few voices of ordinary Koreans and Japanese residents; for more on the sources, see n. 19 below. Strictly speaking, ‘the public’ in this article refers to the realm of public opinion as led, claimed and represented by Japanese and Korean members of the local bourgeois elite.

¹¹ Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (eds.), *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), editors’ intro.

¹² C. A. Bayly, for example, alerts us to the existence of an indigenous public sphere — what he calls the Indian ‘ecumene’ — by examining vibrant debates on politics and religion among India’s local notables and officials before the age of nationalism and print media: see his *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996), chs. 5–6. In a more recent and conscious attempt at theorizing the ‘colonial public sphere’, Neeladri Bhattacharya illustrates the growth of multiple and internally ‘segmented publics’ within the Indian national community: see his ‘Notes towards a Conception of the Colonial Public’, in Rajeiv Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld (eds.), *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions* (New Delhi, 2005). Focusing on the lives of British colonialists, Mrinalini Sinha analyses the European club as ‘a unique institution of colonial civil society that functioned in an intermediate zone between both metropolitan and indigenous public spheres’: see her ‘Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India’, *Jl Brit. Studies*, xl (2001), 492.

came together to challenge the East India Company's monopoly.¹³ Recent studies on Taiwan, a closer comparator for Korea, have also begun to probe the growth of a public sphere in the colonial context, as a medium through which educated Taiwanese and expatriate Japanese mutually cultivated their political awareness, career and identity.¹⁴ The thoughts and activities of local elites, as charted by these studies, complicate, if not fully bridge, the chasm between two distinct and 'incommensurable' public spheres that typically emerge from existing accounts of empire: one a space of national struggle for the colonized (spawning 'indigenous publics' or 'counter-publics'); the other a space of civic rights and autonomy that was all but the preserve of colonists from the metropole.¹⁵

A re-examination of political life in colonial Korea would further move us beyond such a dichotomy and allow us to explore the possibility that critical public spaces emerged not only within but between national and imperial communities. I illustrate my point by using the case of the citizens' movement for public electricity (*denki fueika undō*). Launched by urban residents across Korea in the late 1920s and early 1930s, this movement aimed to reduce public utility bills by bringing electricity under the direct management of each municipality, rather than leave it in the

¹³ C. A. Bayly, 'Rammohan Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism in India, 1800–30', *Mod. Intellectual Hist.*, iv (2007).

¹⁴ See, for example, Ming-cheng M. Lo, *Doctors within Borders: Profession, Ethnicity, and Modernity in Colonial Taiwan* (Berkeley, 2002); Liao Ping-hui, 'Print Culture and the Emergence of "Public Sphere" in Colonial Taiwan, 1895–1945', esp. 83–92, and Fujii Shōzō, 'The Formation of Taiwanese Identity and the Cultural Policy of Various Outside Regimes', 63, 70–2, both in Liao Ping-hui and David Der-wei Wang (eds.), *Taiwan under Japanese Colonial Rule, 1895–1945: History, Culture, Memory* (New York, 2006); see also Fujii Shōzō, *Taiwan bungaku kono hyakumen* [Taiwanese Literature in the Past One Hundred Years] (Tokyo, 1998). Drawing on Namiki's discussion of the colonial public sphere, Hui-yu Caroline Ts'ai examines the operation of the colonial police composed of Taiwanese and Japanese in terms of the 'colonial police sphere': see her *Taiwan in Japan's Empire-Building: An Institutional Approach to Colonial Engineering* (New York, 2009), ch. 3.

¹⁵ Both public spheres are internally complex and fragmented, but they seldom extend across their divide to link up with each other and coalesce into collective social action or organized political agitation. In this respect, racial separation seems particularly pronounced in the public and political life of colonial (and post-colonial) Africa. For representative works on this issue, see, for example, Jean-François Bayart, 'Civil Society in Africa', in Patrick Chabal (ed.), *Political Domination in Africa: Reflections on the Limits of Power* (Cambridge, 1986); Crawford Young, 'In Search of Civil Society', in John W. Harbeson, Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan (eds.), *Civil Society and the State in Africa* (Boulder, 1994).

hands of a corporate monopoly.¹⁶ Pivotal to the municipalization campaign was the role of Korean and Japanese members of the recently installed city assemblies, who constituted a small but influential local bourgeoisie. Conventionally viewed by scholars of Korea as handmaidens of state bureaucracy, these civilian elites led the campaign with new authority and awareness as representatives of the ‘people’, as they performed an intermediary function of channelling public opinion to the state and putting ‘the state in touch with the needs of society’.¹⁷ In bringing the daily concerns of local residents into public and policy debates, the assemblymen adopted a shared language of common good to challenge the state-sanctioned corporate monopoly on public utilities and the authoritarian structure of governance more broadly. And, while the assemblymen clashed viciously over strategies to realize their vision, with each camp claiming to represent the popular will, they shaped and spread the concept of a public and publicness (Japanese: *kōkyōsei*; Korean: *konggongsŏng*) in the process.

In order to situate the campaign in historical context, I first explain how official reorganization of the system of local self-government in the early 1930s significantly broadened the scope of elite political participation in colonial Korea. Focusing on the capital, Seoul, I then trace how a discursive space of public debate and criticism emerged through the residents’ call for public electricity, led by the assertive, and faction-ridden, city assemblymen and backed by the local press. Neither a site of zero-sum conflict between the state and its local citizens,¹⁸ nor a racially divided space of colonial privilege, the public sphere that

¹⁶ For a study on consumer agitation over water rates in London in the 1880s, a period of transition from private to public ownership, that provides a fascinating parallel with the municipalization campaign in Seoul, see Vanessa Taylor and Frank Trentmann, ‘Liquid Politics: Water and the Politics of Everyday Life in the Modern City’, *Past and Present*, no. 211 (May 2011).

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 31.

¹⁸ Here I build and expand on a point made in Shin and Robinson (eds.), *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, 6–9 (editors’ intro.), by taking account of Japanese settlers, who are missing from their discussion. And rather than assuming a public autonomous from and antithetical to the state, I follow the work of Kim, *Age of Visions and Arguments*, 9–10, in treating the public sphere as a space of interaction (‘conflict and collaboration’) between state and society, which grew, if haltingly, under an authoritarian structure of government.

emerged through the campaign was a discursive and internally contested space, where leaders of Korean and Japanese resident communities came together to discuss common problems and engage in joint political action vis-à-vis the state authority they served at the local level. The pages that follow chart this dynamic process as chronicled in detail by the print media to provide a historically specific understanding of how the public sphere may have emerged and operated within the constraints of the governor-general's rule.¹⁹

I

EXPANSION OF LOCAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

At the end of the 1920s Korea's political landscape was in a state of flux. Having created the Sin'ganhoe (New Korea Society) as a united front of nationalist activity in 1927, Korean moderates and radicals clashed over its leadership, its regional branches soon falling into the latter's control.²⁰ As the nationalist movement gravitated towards the left, the colonial regime flexed its muscles, dealing a devastating blow to the communists and socialists, who were detained or driven across the northern border into Manchuria and the Chinese interior. For those who stayed in Korea and out of jail, however, political life began to take a different turn. In 1929 Saitō Makoto, governor-general of Korea in 1919–27 and 1929–31, returned from a conference in Geneva to assume his short second tenure. As a fitting conclusion to his 'cultural rule', Saitō enacted a second round of local government

¹⁹ Studies on Korea's public life in the late colonial period must rely heavily on the surviving local newspapers and magazines, owing to the general lack of primary sources and official documents, most of which were lost (or destroyed by the government-general) in the wake of Japan's defeat in 1945: *Senjiki shokuminchi tōchi shiryō*, [Documents on Wartime Colonial Rule], ed. Mizuno Naoki, 7 vols. (Tokyo, 1998–9), ii, 'Kaisetsu' [Commentary]. Residents' movements, and the proceedings at local municipal assemblies, are no exception, as demonstrated by the few existing Korean-language studies on the municipalization campaign in Seoul: Son Chōng-mok, *Ilche kangjōngi tosi sahoesang yōn'gu* [A Study of Urban Society under Japanese Colonial Rule] (Seoul, 1996), 407–41; Kim Che-jōng, '1930-nyōndae ch'oban Kyōngsōng chiyōk chōn'gi saōp puyōnghwa undong' [A Movement for the Municipalization of Electricity in the Kyōngsōng (Seoul) Area in the Early 1930s], *Han'guk Saron*, lxiii (2000). This article uses not only Korean dailies but the widest available range of Japanese-run papers and magazines, paying particular attention to their coverage of the role of city assemblymen in the campaign.

²⁰ Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea*, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1972), i, 112.

reforms to invest the existing advisory councils with legislative authority and to create new assemblies at provincial, municipal and selected town or village levels. City assemblies, the most important units of local governance, were now permitted to legislate on the general economic and educational affairs of the municipality. A fair ethnic representation was also ensured by the stipulation that the number of Japanese and Korean members could not be less than a quarter each of the overall quota.²¹

As a result of these reforms, Korean interest and participation in local politics showed a visible increase in the 1930s. To be sure, voting qualifications remained unrevised and the electorate small: even in May 1935 only 4.63 per cent of the local population (Japanese: 12.3 per cent; Koreans: 2.4 per cent) were eligible for the city assembly elections held in fourteen cities.²² But, when limiting our focus to those who did run for office, we find that Koreans fared rather well, taking much greater strides than their Japanese counterparts. Between 1930 and 1940 the total number of Japanese office-holders, including officials and employees of the government-general and local assemblies, rose by 75 per cent (from 40,398 to 70,845), whereas that of their Korean counterparts rose by 129 per cent (from 24,675 to 56,503). In 1930, 8,637 Japanese and 7,628 Koreans served in city and provincial assemblies and on school boards, but their numbers became more or less equal by 1940 (Japanese: 20,938; Koreans: 20,501).²³ In ensuring a certain balance of power between Japanese and Korean delegates, these statistics suggest, the new system of legislative assemblies undercut the settlers' ability to dominate local politics.

The first elections to the city assemblies in May 1931 drew much public attention and anticipation of change. Scenes of

²¹ These reforms were completed by Saitō's successor, Ugaki Kazushige, who assumed office in 1931. City assemblies (Japanese: *fukai*; Korean: *puhoe*) and town assemblies (Japanese: *yūkai*; Korean: *ūnhoe*) came into operation in 1931, and provincial assemblies (Japanese: *dōkai*; Korean: *tonghoe*) in 1933. *Chōsen Sōtokufu, soshiki to hito* [The Organization and Personnel of the Government-General of Korea], ed. Gakushūin Daigaku Tōyō Bunka Kenkyūjo, suppl. to *Tōyō Bunka Kenkyū*, iv (Mar. 2002), 248 n. 16.

²² Kang Jae-ho, *Shokuminchi Chōsen no chihō seido* [The Local Government System of Colonial Korea] (Tokyo, 2001), 252.

²³ Namiki Masato, 'Shokuminchiki Chōsenjin no seiji sankā ni tsuite: kaihōgoshi tonō kanren ni oite' [Political Participation of Koreans in the Colonial Period: Its Relationship with Post-Liberation History], *Chōsenshi Kenkyūkai Ronbunshū*, xxxi (1993), 35.

campaigns also bore all the markings of electoral politics in metropolitan Japan. Candidates not only canvassed local districts for votes; they used billboards, posters, handbills and newspaper advertisements to spread their manifestos, and confronted their rivals through speeches at public rallies.²⁴ Wives and relatives of the candidates,²⁵ joined by colleagues, friends and supporters from the same native prefectures (in the case of the Japanese), also helped to garner votes by going from door to door on foot. The competition was reportedly at its fiercest in Seoul, where there were over seventy candidates for the forty-eight seats in the city assembly.²⁶

Candidates, observers also noted, ran for office with a new mindset, as spokesmen of the people rather than as local functionaries of the colonial state. Broad issues like suffrage in the imperial metropole that had animated elite political debate in previous years now fell into the background amid the rush of speeches and rallies, in which candidates engaged in full-scale battle over the more mundane concerns of local residents. During the first electoral campaigns for the Seoul city assembly in 1931, for instance, Korean and Japanese candidates traded pledges promising ‘the promotion of hygiene’, ‘the expansion of schools’ and ‘the repair of public facilities’,²⁷ areas over which the colonial state had previously maintained firm control.²⁸ In seeking greater legitimacy and social respectability, as their campaign manifestos suggested, the candidates recalibrated their relationship with local communities as defenders of their interests rather than mere adjuncts to the municipal authority, as had formerly been the case. The importance of gaining such a public mandate

²⁴ *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (May 1931), 95.

²⁵ Pictures captioned ‘fujin undōin’ (female campaigners) in *Chōsen chihō jichi seido shikō kinen: Keijō fukai giin senkyoroku, Shōwa 6-nenchū aki* [In Commemoration of the Implementation of the System of Local Self-Government in Korea: A Record of the Election Campaign of Seoul City Assemblymen, Autumn 1931], ed. Kaneko Nanyō (Keijō [Seoul], 1931).

²⁶ *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (Apr. 1931), 87; *Zensen fuyū kaigiin meikan* [All-Korea Directory of City and Town Assemblymen], ed. Fujimura Tokuchi (Keijō [Seoul], 1931), 33–6.

²⁷ *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (May 1931), 95–7.

²⁸ A number of civilian elites participated in these ‘officially-sanctioned social’ projects (to quote Todd A. Henry’s apt description), but their influence remained limited and advisory: see his ‘Keijō: Japanese and Korean Constructions of Colonial Seoul and the History of its Lived Spaces, 1910–1937’ (Univ. of California at Los Angeles Ph.D. thesis, 2006), 303–4.

showed itself in the election results. In the second round of elections for the city assembly in May 1935, for instance, the businessman Cho Pyōng-sang beat his rivals when he received ‘an astounding 541 votes’, a victory observers attributed to Cho’s special ‘credo of relaying the popular will (*min’i*)’.²⁹

Attention to local interests did not die on the campaign trail. When the city assembly was convened, both Japanese and Korean delegates aggressively pushed the limits of their authority in their scrutiny of municipal budget proposals.³⁰ ‘Whether discussing hygiene or city water’, one correspondent noted, Seoul’s administrators were simply ‘no match for the city assemblymen’ in debates.³¹ The inclusion of these elites in local governance in turn exerted new pressure on the state to raise ‘the quality of municipal officials’ (whose selection criteria presumably included the ability to handle tough civilian critics).³² Above all, civilian delegates came to see themselves as an integral part of local administration, ever aware of their role of ‘guiding the municipal authorities’³³ towards the fulfilment of the people’s welfare. They demonstrated such awareness not only on the assembly floor but in the broader public sphere, where hitherto they had had far less sway. Most notable was their leadership of the residents’ movement to bring public utilities under municipal control, to which we now turn.³⁴

²⁹ Yamaka Gintō, ‘Keijō Chikurokusen no kentō’ [An Analysis of the Competition among Candidates in Keijō (Seoul)], *Chōsen Kōron* (June 1935), 5–6. Cho was a manager of the Korean branch of the Katakura Life Insurance Company. He had been active in public life since the 1920s, serving on Seoul city council (a precursor to the Seoul city assembly) and other political organizations alongside Japanese settlers: *Dai-Keijō kōshokusha meikan* [A Directory of Public Officials in Greater Keijō (Seoul)], ed. Dai-Keijō Kōshokusha Meikan Kankōkai Hensankai (Keijō [Seoul], 1936), 14.

³⁰ In colonial Korea the mayor chaired the city assembly, could order the assembly to redeliberate on a particular agenda and could also suspend or disband the assembly if it became ‘too rebellious to proceed’. These regulations made the colonial assemblies less authoritative than their metropolitan counterparts. *Chōsen Sōtokufu, soshiki to hūo*, ed. Gakushūin Daigaku Tōyō Bunka Kenkyūjo, 253.

³¹ Ichi kisha, ‘Keiki dōkai to Keijō fukai o nozoite’ [Having Peeked into the Kyōnggi Provincial Assembly and the Seoul City Assembly], *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (Apr. 1934), 85. See also the deliberations of the Seoul city assembly: *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (Apr. 1936), 80; (Apr. 1939), 51–2.

³² Ichi kisha, ‘Keijō fukai bōchōki’ [A Record of Listening to the Seoul City Assembly in Session], *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (Apr. 1939), 53; Ichi kisha, ‘Keijō fukai o nozoku’ [A Peek into the Seoul City Assembly], *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (Apr. 1937), 75.

³³ Ichi kisha, ‘Keijō fukai o nozoku’, 74.

³⁴ This was a central campaign pledge made by leading candidates for the Seoul city assembly in May 1931: *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (May 1931), 95–7.

II

RESIDENTS' MOVEMENT FOR PUBLIC ELECTRICITY

During the protectorate period (1905–10), as modern public utilities were installed in Seoul, they came under the control of one corporation, Keijō Electric (from 1908 to 1925 known as the Nikkan Gas Electricity Company). Ever since it had acquired the franchise from the Korean government, Keijō Electric had had a monopoly on the management of electricity, gas and trains in Seoul (and other satellite cities), netting huge profits.³⁵ Because the cost of electricity directly affected the daily lives and economic activity of local residents, it became a matter of contention every time the company reviewed its prices, which remained relatively high as compared to the metropole.³⁶ From the late 1920s, as industrial and household use of gas and electricity spread more widely, the city's residents began to complain that allowing one private company to manage the public utilities and thus to make an excessive profit was 'irrational' and adverse to their welfare.³⁷ Calls to municipalize the power supply grew louder when the city government in P'yōngyang bought up the operations of Keijō Electric in order to run the electricity service directly from March 1927.³⁸ This stimulated residents in other cities, including Seoul, Taegu, Pusan and Chinnamp'o, to press their respective

³⁵ With its headquarters in Tokyo, Keijō Electric began operating in 1908 as a gas company in Seoul. After it bought up the entire management of the city's electric trolleybus, electric light and telephone system from an American firm, Collbran and Bostwick, the company expanded into other cities in Korea. *Chōsen ginkō kaisha yōroku* [A Directory of Banks and Companies in Korea], ed. Nakamura Shiryō (Keijō [Seoul], 1925), 384–5.

³⁶ *Keijō Shōkō Kaigisho nijūgonenshi* [A Twenty-Five-Year History of the Seoul Chamber of Commerce and Industry], ed. Itō Masataka (Keijō [Seoul], 1941), pt 1, p. 231.

³⁷ *Tonga ilbo*, 26 Mar. 1929. The issue of prices also came to be linked with Korea's industrialization in this period, as it affected the power supply that fuelled a growing number of small and medium-size factories. The Korea Industrial Association (Chōsen Kōgyō Kyōkai), founded in 1924 and chaired by Tagawa Tsunejirō of the Ryūzan (Yongsan) Industrial Works, represented the perspective of industrialists and took the lead in lobbying on behalf of the 'people' (*kokumin*) for lower energy prices. Ōyabu Kantarō, *Tagawa Tsunejirō shi o kataru: Chōsen no tekkō-ō* [On Mr Tagawa Tsunejirō: A Steel King of Korea] (Keijō [Seoul], 1938), 30. But, on the issue of municipalization, the association appears to have remained cautious or ambivalent: Kim, '1930-nyōndae ch'oban Kyōngsōng chiyōk chōn'gi saōp puyōnghwa undong', 163; as did the Seoul Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as discussed below.

³⁸ For more information, see Heijō-fu, *Heijō denki fueishi* [A History of the Municipalization of Electricity in Heijō (P'yōngyang)] (Keijō [Seoul], 1927).

governments to follow P'yŏngyang's example as a way to reduce their energy bills.³⁹

In Seoul the initiative was taken by the newly elected city assemblymen, a few years before Keijō Electric's franchise was due to expire in January 1933.⁴⁰ In July 1931 twenty-seven members who represented over half of the Seoul city assembly submitted to the mayor, Andō Kesaichi, a proposal for the public management of gas and electricity,⁴¹ which was also signed by seventy-three Korean and Japanese community heads.⁴² In their joint statement, the civilian leaders stressed that 'electricity and gas are indispensable to the daily life of local residents (*fumin*), whose population, 400,000 strong, is projected to increase by another 150,000, after the [planned] expansion of the city's administrative boundaries'. Instead of allowing 'a monopoly by one corporation' whose vices ranged from inadequate services to unfair prices,⁴³ they argued, these utilities should be managed by 'a public organization (*kōkyō dantai*)', that is, the municipal government, in keeping with 'the trend of modern society'.⁴⁴

The language of the proposal reflected growing recognition among urban residents of 'the management of electricity as a public works project (*kōkyō jigyō*)'.⁴⁵ Underlying their call for municipalization in Seoul were several (untested) assumptions. If the city managed the utilities directly, first of all, it would be able to secure 'a stable source of revenue' and benefit its residents by 'improving services and lowering prices'.⁴⁶ Cheaper sources of energy would also reduce production costs for the city's growing number of manufacturers, and help to ensure the success of the construction of 'Greater Keijō [Seoul]'.⁴⁷ 'There is no better time

³⁹ *Osaka Mainichi shinbun Chōsen-ban*, 10 Mar. 1929; *Chōsen Mainichi shinbun*, 4 Apr. 1930. The call for municipal electricity in Seoul also appears to have drawn on the precedent set by Osaka a few years earlier: *Chōsen shinbun*, 3 July 1931.

⁴⁰ For a detailed study on the background, logic and official policy regarding the municipalization of electricity in Seoul, see Kim, '1930-nyōndae ch'oban Kyōngsōng chiyōk chōn'gi saōp puyōnghwa undong'.

⁴¹ *Tonga ilbo*, 4 July 1931.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 5 July 1931.

⁴³ *Keijō nippō*, 26 July 1931.

⁴⁴ *Chōsen shinbun*, 3 July 1931; the same content appears in *Keijō nippō*, 17 July 1931.

⁴⁵ *Keijō nippō*, 9 July 1931.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 July 1931. The construction of 'Greater Keijō' referred to a vision of modernizing Seoul as the core of Japan's emergent continental empire: *Dai-Keijō*

(cont. on p. 229)

to buy up Keijō Electric's operations', the proposal concluded, than at the end of its franchise in January 1933, a time to 'return this public works project to the city'.⁴⁸

Not all city assemblymen agreed, however. A day after the proposal for municipalization was submitted to the mayor, fourteen members (nine Koreans and five Japanese) objected,⁴⁹ asserting that such a grave issue as municipal electricity that 'bears permanently on the interests of residents' required 'more careful investigation', and urging 'the creation of a research organ' as a priority.⁵⁰ Their point of contention was not public management per se, but when and how it ought to be implemented. This question divided 'radicals' from 'gradualists', as the two camps came to be called. In addition to determining the exact method of buying up Keijō Electric's operations, the gradualists insisted, the profitability of public management must be assessed by using more accurate estimates regarding the cost of the purchase and the amount of ensuing profit; the extent to which energy prices could be lowered after the purchase; the cost of renovation of facilities and interest payments; and a gap that would surely arise between the purchase price proposed by the city and the sales price desired by Keijō Electric.⁵¹ They noted that the city's research on which the radicals based their claim about profitability was not only 'insufficient' and 'outdated', but 'undertaken by some of us non-experts'. To support a proposal based on such dubious calculations 'is extremely hasty and dangerous'.⁵²

The two proposals concerning municipal electricity gave rise to enduring divisions within the Seoul city assembly, which spilled over into the wider public via the local press.⁵³ The radicals

(n. 47 cont.)

[Greater Keijō (Seoul)], ed. Chōsen Kenkyūkai (Keijō [Seoul], 1925), 10–17. For a detailed analysis of this vision and its implementation, see Henry, 'Keijō', 302–47.

⁴⁸ *Keijō nippō*, 17 July 1931.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5 July 1931.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4 July 1931.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 26 July 1931.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30 July 1931. Since the early 1920s the municipal government of Seoul and its advisory city council had undertaken some research on municipal electricity as part of a broader urban planning scheme.

⁵³ The twenty-four members (ten Koreans and fourteen Japanese) who advocated an immediate shift to public management formed the Municipal Government Research Association (Fusei Kenkyūkai), whose broader aim was to 'study all aspects of municipal governance in keeping with the general will (*sōi*) of local residents'.

(cont. on p. 230)

appear to have garnered more support from the city's residents, though they faced greater opposition from corporate interests within the electricity industry.⁵⁴ The debate was extended down to neighbourhood level by Japanese and Korean heads of the newly installed community councils,⁵⁵ who launched 'a mass-based (*taishūteki*) campaign' to 'encourage city assemblymen and stir up public opinion from below in favour of realizing the municipalization of electricity'.⁵⁶ This culminated in the creation of a broader institutional platform for agitation in late July. Proponents of an immediate move to municipalization within the Seoul city assembly and community councils, joined by other men of influence, totalling some two hundred individuals, came together to form the Keijō Society for Public Management of Electricity and Gas (Japanese: Keijō Denki Gasu Fuei Kiseikai; Korean: Kyōngsōng Chōn'gi Wasa Puyōng Kisōnghoe).⁵⁷

To galvanize local residents into action, leaders of the Society for Public Management at once began to plan a citizens' rally (*simin taehoe*).⁵⁸ In preparation for the rally, they distributed thousands of copies of the society's manifesto and published its prospectus in major daily newspapers. 'Whereas private management tends to neglect the principle of public interest (*kōeki*) and leans towards extreme pursuit of profit', the society asserted,

(n. 53 cont.)

Fourteen assemblymen (nine Koreans and five Japanese) who prioritized research responded by grouping themselves as the Comrades' Club (Dōshi Kurabu): *Keijō nippō*, 5 July 1931. Still more factions emerged among the rest of the assemblymen: a few who sought to mediate between the two groups and to prevent a 'wedge' from being driven through municipal governance, and several members who maintained an 'attitude of silence': *Keijō nippō*, 26 July 1931.

⁵⁴ The Chōsen Electricity Association (Chōsen Denki Kyōkai), for instance, argued that public management of utilities would ultimately hamper Korea's industrial development by discouraging Japanese investment and sapping the entrepreneurial will of capitalists. Nor did the association believe it was feasible to purchase Keijō Electric's operations and simultaneously lower the energy prices, as the advocates of public electricity so optimistically envisaged. Kim, '1930-nyōndae ch'oban Kyōngsōng chiyōk chōn'gi saōp puyōnghwa undong', 165–6.

⁵⁵ The system of community heads (*chō*, or *dō sōdai*), first installed in the mid 1910s, was expanded in 1933 into a network of community councils (*chōkai*, or *dōkai*) and more fully integrated into the municipal administration as liaisons between bureaucratic offices and local residents: *Keijō ihō*, cxlv (1933), 4, 47.

⁵⁶ *Chōsen shinbun*, 23 July 1931.

⁵⁷ *Maeil sinbo*, 27 July 1931; *Tonga ilbo*, 27 July 1931. Of the two hundred, 120 were Japanese and Korean representatives elected at the assembly of local neighbourhood heads: *Keijō nippō*, 30 July 1931.

⁵⁸ *Tonga ilbo*, 25 and 30 July 1931.

'public management aims solely at promoting public interest, that is, reducing the residents' financial burden'. Noting that the adverse effects of monopoly had already begun to 'pose a grave threat to people's livelihoods across Korea', the society warned that if municipalization were delayed in the name of research, 'we would regret it for the rest of our lives'.⁵⁹ Pitting 'public interest' against corporate 'greed' (and defining 'publicness' as good for the whole), the advocates of municipal electricity lodged their claim in the rhetoric of 'citizens' welfare and the city's prosperity'.⁶⁰ In doing so, they not only held Keijō Electric accountable, but also highlighted the colonial state's fundamental obligation to ensure the welfare of its subjects.

The citizens' rally was held on the evening of 2 August 1931 under the watchful eyes of policemen on guard within and outside the public hall in Hasegawa-chō. Following opening remarks by Ogawa Katsuei and Ryu Mun-hwan, a dozen Japanese and Korean city assemblymen ascended the podium one after another to deliver 'an impassioned speech calling for the municipal management of electricity and gas'. At the end of the rally, with the hall packed to overflowing with more than 1,300 residents, a resolution in favour of public electricity, which 'all residents of the city earnestly desire', was passed unanimously.⁶¹ Usually a public gathering of this kind would be dominated by Japanese, one reporter noted, but at this particular rally 40 per cent of the audience was Korean.⁶² If the inclusive rhetoric of 'all residents' exaggerated the extent of their participation, it was not an entirely disingenuous claim. The presence of a heterogeneous crowd, from rickshaw drivers to merchants and salaried workers, suggested that the issue of public electricity affected residents widely across their differences in ethnicity, class and social status.

Six days later the radicals took their proposal to the city assembly, where they formally confronted their opponents and other sceptics. The much-anticipated session drew an unprecedented level of public interest and media attention.⁶³ Tickets for

⁵⁹ *Keijō nippō*, 1 Aug. 1931; *Chōsen Mainichi shinbun*, 1 Aug. 1931.

⁶⁰ *Tonga ilbo*, 1 Aug. 1931.

⁶¹ *Tonga ilbo*, 2–4 Aug. 1931; *Chosŏn ilbo*, 2–4 Aug. 1931.

⁶² Ichi kisha, 'Keijō fumin wa denki gasu fuei no hōka o ageta' [Residents of Keijō (Seoul) Launch a Campaign for the Municipalization of Electricity and Gas], *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (Aug. 1931), 104.

⁶³ *Tonga ilbo*, 9 Aug. 1931.

admission to the gallery were issued for the first time to local residents, who ‘began lining up well before the appointed hour’. Seats were also reserved for employees of the government-general and the Kyōnggi provincial government, as well as a metropolitan official from the Ministry of Colonial Affairs visiting Seoul.⁶⁴ In advancing their respective proposals for and against an immediate shift to municipal management, both sides continually deployed the language of ‘people’ and ‘public interest’ to support their claim and discredit that of their opponents, a confrontation that made ‘the assemblymen as well as the audience extremely tense’.⁶⁵

A leading voice in the radical faction, Cho Pyōng-sang, set the tone of the debate. For the city of Seoul ‘to obtain the right to manage [gas and electricity] means to expand the rights of local residents (*fumin no kenri*)’, he argued, stressing the importance of consulting ‘the residents’ consciousness (*fumin no ishiki*)’ as the fundamental credo of municipal governance. Cho was followed by his Japanese colleague, who presented statistics showing the hefty bill each resident had to pay for using gas and electricity, taking the train and having the streets well lit. The gradualists countered their arguments by claiming just as resolutely to speak in the best interests of residents. Yamanaka Daikichi criticized the radicals for rushing to pass a proposal that still ‘lacked substance’, an action that would impinge on the ‘dignity (*ishin*) of the city assembly’ and the ‘public morality’ of its members. For Kim Sa-yōn, to insist on more research meant not only ‘to lend authority to the city assembly’s resolution’, but also to honour a ‘campaign promise’ he had made to his constituency. ‘Who will bear the enormous burden of debt we would incur by purchasing Keijō Electric?’, he asked the floor. ‘None other than the city’s 400,000 residents. It is therefore incumbent upon city assemblymen as representatives of the people to take a more prudent approach’.⁶⁶

Using the lexicon of ‘popular will’, ‘rights of residents’ and ‘the dignity of the assembly’ — language seldom heard at local councils in their early years — members of the two factions competed over who spoke for their communities, who best represented their interests and how best to realize them. Words such as *kenri*

⁶⁴ *Keijō nippō*, 9 Aug. 1931.

⁶⁵ *Tonga ilbo*, 9 Aug. 1931.

⁶⁶ *Keijō nippō*, 9 Aug. 1931.

(Korean: *kwöllli*), *kōkyō* (Korean: *konggong*) and *kōron* (Korean: *kongnon*) or its variant *kōgi* (Korean: *kongūi*) had existed in the Confucian legal and political lexicon before the mid to late nineteenth century,⁶⁷ when these words came to approximate the English terms ‘right’, ‘public’ and ‘public opinion’ respectively.⁶⁸ Throughout the municipalization campaign, the repeated invocation by rallies and daily newspapers of terms such as ‘public interest’ and ‘popular will’ (which fused Confucian ideas of the ruler’s obligation to ensure the welfare of his charges with Western ideas of natural rights) became part of the rhetorical arsenal of local elites who desired to establish political legitimacy. The elite assemblymen, who were closely tethered to the state while often removed from average residents, used their public position to draw the wider populace into debates that would simultaneously grant them recognition as spokesmen of the people (in lieu of their unflattering image of ‘collaborators’ with the colonial regime).⁶⁹ Most likely with the added hope of assuring their success in the next election, both radicals and gradualists self-consciously styled themselves as representing public opinion to the colonial authority. And both Japanese and Korean delegates spoke in the new idiom of a broader ‘public’, rather than in the old language of ethnic interests.

At stake, as already noted, was the pace and method of implementation rather than the idea of municipalization itself. In the eyes of Ōmura Momozō, a leading Japanese member of the Seoul city assembly who had maintained a neutral stance, the difference

⁶⁷ In order to verify the usage of these terms, I consulted the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* [Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty], <<http://sillok.history.go.kr/main/main.jsp>>, and the *Nihon kokugo daijiten* [Great Dictionary of the Japanese Language], <<http://www.jkn21.com>> (both accessed 11 Dec. 2012). We must note, however, that the applicability of the Western notion of ‘public sphere’ (or ‘civil society’), premised upon the distinction between ‘private’ and ‘public’, in the early modern context is a subject of considerable debate among scholars of East Asia. For a recent debate on this issue surrounding *sŏwŏn* (‘private academies’) in Chosŏn dynasty Korea, see Cho, ‘Historical Origin of Civil Society in Korea’; Steinberg, ‘Civil Society and Human Rights in Korea’; Duncan, ‘Problematic Modernity of Confucianism’.

⁶⁸ Suzuki Shūji, *Nihon Kango to Chūgoku* [Sino-Japanese and China] (Tokyo, 1981), 45–53; Kim, *Age of Visions and Arguments*, 50–7. As early as the mid sixteenth century in Japan, according to Herman Ooms, some powerful *daimyo* (domainal lords) used the term *kōgi* ‘to claim legitimacy in the eye of the people, by couching their policies under the rhetoric of “public good” as opposed to the “private interests” of their rivals’: Herman Ooms, *Tokugawa Ideology: Early Constructs, 1570–1680* (Princeton, 1985), 26–9, cited in Kim, *Age of Visions and Arguments*, 50.

⁶⁹ For instance, see *Tonga ilbo*, 18 June 1924.

between the two camps was too small, and the issue too great, to merit the open confrontation that had already attracted undue publicity. Ōmura thus called on both sides to rise above petty quarrels by retracting their respective proposals and starting their discussion from scratch. 'Without the consensus of the entire assembly', he opined, 'no proposal would carry much weight in the eyes of the public'.⁷⁰ Just as vigorous debate began to infuse new life into municipal governance, the evils of divisive politics also emerged, to the chagrin of the colonial police, who throughout the 1930s kept a detailed record of 'speeches and actions of local assemblymen that require special attention'.⁷¹ Implicit in Ōmura's call for reconciliation was a question: what kind of political behaviour would be appropriate for the city assemblymen in exercising their new legislative authority? And a rather difficult proposition: to emulate the parliamentary practices of the metropole without imitating their tendency to form cliques.⁷² While the authorities deplored political discord as anathema to social order, Ōmura's call for unity also resonated with the growing attack on party politics in metropolitan Japan. And yet, some local observers acknowledged, the unfolding debate might be interpreted as a sign of the overall health of local self-government in Korea.⁷³ The majority of city assemblymen at any rate appear to have agreed that a legislative process should be driven by debates and disagreements rather than consensus-building. For, in the heat of their exchange, a plea for unity made both factions listen, but their confrontation soon resumed.

The two factions battled late into the evening without taking a break for dinner. After over six hours a vote was finally cast and the proposal for municipalization was passed by 'an overwhelming

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ According to one police report of 1938, local political scenes began to resemble those in Japan. City and provincial assemblymen now 'willingly criticize Korean rule or lodge political attacks on local administrators', with a proclivity to 'form cliques as if following the example of metropolitan political parties'. *Saikin ni okeru Chōsen chianjōkyō* [Recent Security Conditions in Korea], ed. Chōsen Sōtokufu Keimukyoku (1938; Tokyo, 1966), 35.

⁷² Members of the city assembly were particularly prone to factionalism because they were also in charge of electing two-thirds of the provincial assemblymen: Ichikisha, 'Keijō fukai o nozoku', 75.

⁷³ In this vein, one local correspondent likened the city assembly to the House of Representatives in the Japanese Diet: *ibid.*, 74.

majority' of thirty to fifteen.⁷⁴ Even after its passage, however, the radicals and gradualists continued to collide as they moved to the next stage of discussing how to implement the proposal. For this purpose, the mayor of Seoul promptly set up 'a preliminary committee for the municipal management of electricity and gas'. But its twenty-five members, elected by internal vote among the assemblymen, turned out to be dominated entirely by radicals,⁷⁵ who did little to bring gradualists into the fold, thereby throwing their discord into sharper relief.

Meanwhile, the local press helped to draw the wider public into the movement for municipal electricity. Although the city assembly was not divided along ethnic lines, Korean residents of all classes appear to have been more united than Japanese settlers in supporting the cause. For instance, the pro-government Japanese paper *Keijō nippō*, founded by the resident-general of Korea in 1906 and used as a mouthpiece for the government-general after 1910, maintained an attitude of caution,⁷⁶ whereas two leading Korean vernacular dailies, *Chosŏn ilbo* and *Tonga ilbo*, which had served as the intellectual vanguard of nationalism since they were licensed to publish in 1920, consistently endorsed the campaign through their front-page editorials.⁷⁷ Representing the voices of an emergent native bourgeoisie, *Tonga ilbo* also featured a series of articles by prominent Korean businessmen who advocated municipal electricity, including Pak Yŏng-ch'ŏl of the Chōsen Commercial Bank, Ryu Chŏn of the Chosŏn Silk Fabrics Company and Yi Kang-hyŏn of the Kyŏngsŏng Spinning Company.⁷⁸ That Korean capitalists almost unanimously supported the campaign underscored the economic reality that indigenous capital was largely excluded from the colonial management of

⁷⁴ *Tonga ilbo*, 10 Aug. 1931, editorial.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 Aug., 4 Sept. 1931.

⁷⁶ Throughout its coverage of the campaign, *Keijō nippō* repeatedly noted that the issue ultimately hinged on the decision of the vice-governor-general. Other Japanese papers appear to have maintained an outlook of objectivity.

⁷⁷ See, for example, *Tonga ilbo*, editorials, 2 and 3 Aug. 1931. *Tonga ilbo*, which represented the moderate stance of Korean nationalists, supported other national campaigns as part of the 'cultural movement' in the 1920s, including the Movement for the Establishment of a National University in Korea, and the Korean Production Movement, which aimed at promoting Korea's economic self-sufficiency. For a comprehensive study on these movements led by 'cultural nationalists', see Robinson, *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea*.

⁷⁸ Kim, '1930-nyŏndae ch'oban Kyŏngsŏng chiyŏk chŏn'gi saŏp puyŏnghwa undong', 163-4.

public utilities.⁷⁹ Equally telling was the role of the vernacular press in articulating a distinctly Korean stance on the issue without antagonizing the colonial censors (who since 1919 had tolerated publications that did not pose a direct political threat to the empire).⁸⁰ Having survived an onslaught of seizure and deletion of articles in the late 1920s, *Tonga ilbo* and *Chosŏn ilbo*, as their coverage of the campaign testifies, continued to serve as makers of public opinion and nationalist sentiment while eschewing open confrontation with the regime.

By contrast, the Japanese-dominated Seoul Chamber of Commerce and Industry, like the *Keijō nippō*, chose to maintain 'an impassive attitude' towards the campaign,⁸¹ as its chairman, Jinnai Mokichi, told a local reporter.⁸² Although the chamber had periodically negotiated with Keijō Electric to reduce energy prices since the early 1920s,⁸³ on the issue of municipalization it counselled caution, as the gradualists did, stressing the need for 'more thorough investigation', and resolved to 'refrain from getting involved in the popular movement (*minshū undō*) [for public electricity]'.⁸⁴ The reason for the chamber's ambivalence appears to have been twofold.⁸⁵ The idea of municipalization not only ran counter to the capitalistic ethic, but also presented an inevitable conflict of interest: specifically, it impinged on the interests of current or former councillors of the chamber (mostly Japanese settlers such as Musha Renzō and Yamaguchi Tahee) who served on the executive board of Keijō Electric.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 164. All but one member of the executive board of Keijō Electric were Japanese: *Chōsen ginkō kaisha yōroku* [A Directory of Banks and Companies in Korea], ed. Nakamura Shiryō (Keijō [Seoul], 1931), 397–8.

⁸⁰ Following the March First Movement of 1919, the colonial government adopted a selective policy to suppress radical publications while countenancing politically moderate ones as part of its new strategy of 'cultural rule' (*bunka seiji*): Michael E. Robinson, 'Colonial Publication Policy and the Korean Nationalist Movement', in Mark Peattie and Ramon H. Myers (eds.), *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945* (Princeton, 1984), 331, 339–40.

⁸¹ *Keijō nippō*, 30 July 1931.

⁸² *Chōsen Mainichi shinbun*, 30 July 1931.

⁸³ *Keijō Shōkō Kaigisho nijūgonenshi*, ed. Itō, pt 1, p. 234; pt 2, pp. 30, 44; *Keijō Shōkō Kaigisho geppō: Chōsen keizai zasshi*, clxxviii (1930), 28–9; clxxxvii (1931), 28.

⁸⁴ *Chōsen Mainichi shinbun*, 31 July 1931.

⁸⁵ The attitude of restraint of the Seoul Chamber of Commerce contrasted with that of regional chambers of commerce, which took a more active role in their local campaigns: Kim, '1930-nyōndae ch'oban Kyōngsōng chiyōk chōn'gi saōp puyōnghwa undong', 163.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 155–6. The only Korean executive who simultaneously served on the Seoul Chamber of Commerce was Min Tae-sik.

Yet the issue of public electricity cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between national (*minjok*) and colonial capital. The campaign made apparent, for instance, that within the multi-ethnic colonial bourgeoisie the class interests of the Seoul Chamber of Commerce's directors (corporate and bank executives who led Korea's business community) and those of the city assemblymen and community heads (whose wealth and status paled somewhat in comparison)⁸⁷ were not necessarily congruent. An even greater gap existed between the mundane concerns of average Korean and Japanese residents and the business interests of upper-class capitalists, whose activities extended beyond a single locality to a peninsula- or an empire-wide scale.⁸⁸ Because the company had its headquarters in Tokyo and the majority of its shareholders were based in the metropole, many believed that most of its profits were siphoned off to Japan. In short, neither class nor ethnicity was a decisive factor driving the movement.

Rather, the major fault lines ran between other dichotomies — public and private, popular and capitalist, local and metropolitan — around which new forms of solidarity grew among the city's Korean and Japanese residents. Even as it continued to speak on behalf of its Korean readers, therefore, *Tonga ilbo* elevated the issue above the colonial divide by casting it in broader terms of 'community life (*kongdong saenghwal*)' and 'social justice', and juxtaposing these concerns with the profit-seeking attitude of Keijō Electric (rendered as capitalism writ large). More essentially, the paper saw the issue of municipal electricity as the test of statehood: the colonial authority's promise to 'solicit public opinion (*minūi chodal*)', in the name of which the second local government reforms had been enacted. While the new system of city assemblies may still have been 'experimental', the editor noted, the campaign for municipalization represented 'an opportune moment to gauge the strength of a political promise [to consult public opinion] made by the governor-general'. And the mayor of Seoul appeared to fulfil this promise, at least for the time being.

⁸⁷ As compared to the chamber executives, city assemblymen and community heads were a more heterogeneous group of middle-class or upper-middle-class men of influence (including merchants, businessmen, lawyers, journalists and other salaried workers): *Dai-Keijō kōshokusha meikan*, ed. Dai-Keijō Kōshokusha Meikan Kankōkai Hensankai.

⁸⁸ Kim, '1930-nyōndae ch'oban Kyōngsōng chiyōk chōn'gi saōp puyōnghwa undong', 164.

His swift formation of a preliminary committee in response to the passage of the proposal suggested, indeed, that ‘public opinion (*yōron*)’ carried the day, a success *Tonga ilbo* attributed to the untiring work of the Korean and Japanese city assemblymen.⁸⁹

While the city’s residents were beginning to coalesce behind the campaign for public electricity, however, the government-general began to move in the opposite direction. In October 1931 the Investigative Committee on the Management of Korean Electricity (Chōsen Denki Jigyō Chōsakai) was convened by the authorities to assess the relative costs and merits of state versus private management. Chaired by the vice-governor-general, Imaida Kiyotoku, the committee was appointed to conduct research and to offer advice to the governor-general in preparation for the future unification of Korea’s electricity industry.⁹⁰ Along with colonial bureaucrats and experts, the Japanese executives of two distribution companies, Musha Renzō of Keijō Electric and Kashii Gentarō of Chōsen Gas and Electricity, also sat on the committee.⁹¹ Although they noted the widespread public sentiment against Keijō Electric, from the standpoint of business and administration the committee members concluded that the city’s electricity and gas would be best left to private management, in effect demolishing the case for public electricity.⁹²

Upon hearing the results of their deliberation, the Society for Public Management of Electricity and Gas issued a statement claiming that the committee’s ruling in favour of the status quo (that is, Keijō Electric’s monopoly) ‘contradicted the general will of local residents’,⁹³ and held a protest rally on the evening of 7 December. At the Keijō Public Hall, ‘packed to capacity with no standing room left’, representatives of the society declared the committee’s findings null and void, demanding instead that the issue ‘be decided by the fair and impartial judgement of the city’s 400,000 residents’. The city assemblymen in turn addressed a mixed crowd in Japanese and Korean, a gesture emblematic of the co-operative nature of their protest. One excited Japanese

⁸⁹ *Tonga ilbo*, 19 Nov. 1931.

⁹⁰ *Chōsen denki jigyōshi* [A History of the Electricity Industry in Korea], ed. Chōsen Denki Jigyōshi Henshū Inkaï (Tokyo, 1981), 181. For a detailed discussion of official research and policy making on the management of electricity, see Kim, ‘1930-nyōndae ch’oban Kyōngsōng chiyōk chōn’gi saōp puyōnghwa undong’, 168–79.

⁹¹ *Chōsen denki jigyōshi*, ed. Chōsen Denki Jigyōshi Henshū Inkaï, 585.

⁹² For the proceedings of the meeting in October 1931, see *ibid.*, 185–7.

⁹³ *Keijō nippō*, 1 Dec. 1931.

spectator also jumped in to deliver an impromptu speech ‘to cheer on fellow citizens (*shimin*)’, asserting, ‘if our demands are not met, [that will mean] no laws or regulations matter’ — subversive words that prompted a police inspector to suspend the speech at once and drag the speaker from the podium. At the end of a heated rally, the organizers affirmed their solidarity with the audience by declaring ‘absolute opposition’ to the committee, a resolution later delivered to the government-general and wired to the prime minister and key bureaucrats in Tokyo.⁹⁴

Although the details of the rally unfortunately remain skeletal, reports on similar local gatherings offer us a glimpse into a mechanism by which the public sphere began gradually to take shape. The city assembly and citizens’ rallies, albeit under police surveillance, functioned as complementary arenas of political action where ordinary residents and bourgeois elites came together to discuss and agitate for a common social cause. Public rallies played a particularly instrumental role in opening the barriers to participation for the majority of residents, who were denied a voice in colonial governance. To advance their goal of municipal electricity, elite organizers strategically aligned themselves with the people in launching an assault on the collusion between state and metropolitan capital, specifically in the management of electricity and generally in their failure to grasp the problems of their daily lives.

The voices of the people, however, appear to have fallen on deaf ears. In mid December 1931, based on the Investigative Committee’s findings, Vice-Governor-General Imaida formally clarified the official stance on the management of Korean electricity, which had hitherto remained ambivalent.⁹⁵ According to Imaida, the transmission of electricity through main power lines would be controlled by the colonial government, but other lines would be entrusted to private corporations. These companies would also handle the generation and distribution of electricity, and for this purpose the existing array of electricity companies would be

⁹⁴ *Chōsen shinbun*, 8 Dec. 1931.

⁹⁵ In the 1920s the government-general, which supervised and authorized the management of electricity, lacked a clear position on the issue of public management. However, as Japan began to move towards the unification of its electricity industry, and out of concern to lure more Japanese capital for the goal of industrializing Korea, in the 1930s the government-general came to articulate its opposition to the idea of public management more explicitly. Kim, ‘1930-nyōndae ch’oban Kyōngsōng chiyōk chōn’gi saōp puyōnghwa undong’, 177–8.

consolidated into a few private enterprises. Imaida's announcement, in effect, made explicit the official opposition to the campaign, reasoning that public management 'will not contribute to the sound development of electricity ventures' or 'promote state interests and the people's happiness'.⁹⁶

In response to Imaida's statement, the new mayor of Seoul, Inoue Kiyoshi, immediately backed down from the plan for municipalization and, at an informal meeting, conveyed to the city assemblymen his intention to suspend its preparation.⁹⁷ Because he had to obey the orders of a higher authority, the mayor explained, he would neither seek central approval for public electricity nor convene another assembly to discuss the matter further, actions that 'would go against the government-general's policy decision'.⁹⁸

Not surprisingly, the mayor's turnabout provoked open confrontation with the city assemblymen. Although they remained internally divided,⁹⁹ members of both factions responded by turning the issue of municipalization into a broader matter of 'protecting the right to local autonomy (*jichi*)' against its official infringement.¹⁰⁰ Even the fourteen assemblymen who had urged caution minced no words in criticizing 'the mayor's attitude to shut the door completely' on public management. Rather than blame the mayor, however, they ultimately accused the government-general of pressuring him to accept its diktat and of breaching 'the mayor's right to convene a city assembly and submit a proposal [for public electricity] as the chair of the assembly'. To undermine these rights, they bewailed, was tantamount to 'hinder[ing] the growth of the newly installed system of local self-government'¹⁰¹ in Korea, indeed, nipping it in the bud.

The radicals took more dramatic action. Exasperated by the government officials, fifteen assemblymen, led by the veterans Cho Pyŏng-sang, Narimatsu Midori and Ye Chong-sŏk, and joined by Ōmura Momozō, who had taken a neutral position,

⁹⁶ *Keijō nippō*, 18 Dec. 1931; *Chōsen denki jigyōshi*, ed. Chōsen Denki Jigyōshi Henshū Iinkai, 193–4.

⁹⁷ *Keijō nippō*, 20 Dec. 1931.

⁹⁸ *Chosŏn ilbo*, 21 Dec. 1931, evening edn; *Tōnga ilbo*, 21 Dec. 1931.

⁹⁹ *Keijō nippō*, 23 Dec. 1931.

¹⁰⁰ *Tōnga ilbo*, 22–23 Dec. 1931.

¹⁰¹ *Keijō nippō*, 25 Dec. 1931.

decided to resign their posts in protest after passing a vote of no confidence in the mayor on Christmas Day 1931.¹⁰² Not only ‘the path to realizing the residents’ long-standing demand for municipal electricity and gas has been completely blocked’, they fumed, but ‘the will of the city assembly as a legislative organ has become sidelined’. ‘We, the city assemblymen, as representatives of local residents, feel a grave sense of responsibility. At the same time, we cannot help but deplore that Korea’s constitutional (*hōchi*) system has now come under threat, and the city assemblymen have lost their *raison d’être*’. In response to their defiance, the mayor immediately summoned their leaders, Narimatsu Midori and Ye Chong-sök, and asked them to ‘reflect on’ their behaviour, but they ‘staunchly refused to comply’.¹⁰³

Their act of insubordination was replicated by the Keijō Society for Public Management of Electricity and Gas and the Federation of Community Heads (Chōdō Sōdai Rengōkai), each of which passed a vote of no confidence in the mayor a few days later. Echoing the assemblymen, the society’s resolution (delivered directly by its Korean and Japanese representatives to the mayor) denounced him for ‘not only obstructing the development of local self-government (*chach’ije*) but also ignoring the welfare of the city’s 400,000 residents’. And, in an effort to appeal to a still higher authority, the community heads dispatched six lobbyists to Tokyo.¹⁰⁴ The Korean vernacular press, too, joined the chorus of protest. When the mayor reneged on his promise to submit the proposal for public electricity to the governor-general, *Tonga ilbo* upbraided the municipal authorities for ‘ignoring the will of the general populace (*ilpan inmin*)’ and ‘blatantly defending’ the capitalists who represented Keijō Electric.¹⁰⁵

The outpouring of local reaction suggests that, by this time, municipalization had become an article of faith with most residents of Seoul, irrespective of the pros and cons that the committee had deliberated.

More fundamentally, the mayor’s back-peddalling, viewed as an arbitrary exercise of power and an affront to local self-government, called into question the sincerity of the state’s promise to uphold public opinion. If the mayor’s about-face (ostensibly

¹⁰² *Chosŏn ilbo*, 26 Dec. 1931; *Keijō nippō*, 26 Dec. 1931.

¹⁰³ *Ōsaka Mainichi shinbun, furoku Seibu Mainichi*, 26 Dec. 1931.

¹⁰⁴ *Tonga ilbo*, 29–30 Dec. 1931.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 19 Dec. 1931, editorial.

made in the face of pressures from above) was a reminder of the autocratic power of the colonial state, the votes of censure by his civilian advisers were also a telling commentary on the limits and dilemmas of a local bureaucrat caught between the daily concerns of ordinary residents and the official policy of industrial rationalization. Apparently the assemblymen had less trouble deciding on which side to stand. When the state authority tried to block their plan to municipalize electricity, the radicals took their cause directly to the residents by calling a rally, an act of defiance few elites would have dared a decade earlier. Overt gestures like this attest to a robust public sphere that the community leaders helped to forge, with a new sense of legitimacy as well as fear that the colonial state might fall back on its old abuse of power without popular oversight.¹⁰⁶

Worried that the situation might spiral into chaos (and most likely at the request of government-general officials), the Seoul Chamber of Commerce executives and prominent businessmen such as Han Sang-nyong stepped in to mediate. After a series of negotiations they eventually succeeded in persuading the dissenting assemblymen to retract their resignation on 13 January 1932.¹⁰⁷ But after their return factional divisions within the city assembly resurfaced, and even sharpened, in the course of discussing an alternative proposal (*daiian*). Drafted by a group of ten assemblymen who were willing to work across their divisions, and designed as a compromise with declared state policy, the revised proposal abandoned the original goal of municipalization, but laid out a list of specific demands for Keijō Electric to meet as preconditions for the renewal of its monopoly. Their demands included lowering electricity prices by more than 10 per cent and gas prices by more than 20 per cent at the forthcoming review in October; offering stocks for subscription in Korea when issuing new shares; donating 1.5 million yen to the city; and moving the company's headquarters from Tokyo to Seoul.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ The local media often contrasted the feistiness of city assemblymen with the docility of their counterparts in provincial assemblies: *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* (Apr. 1934), 85; (Apr. 1937), 74.

¹⁰⁷ *Kan Sō Ryū kun o kataru* [On Mr Kan Sō Ryū (Han Sang-nyong)], ed. Han Ikkyo (Keijō [Seoul], 1941), 331–2; *Chosŏn ilbo*, 15 Jan. 1932.

¹⁰⁸ *Tonga ilbo*, 22 Jan. 1932. Another demand for 'eliminating the system of separate train fares for suburban districts' developed into a residents' campaign of its own: see n. 125 below.

When formally submitted to the city assembly in January 1932, the alternative proposal was met with immediate opposition from members of the 'radical' faction, which consisted of ten Koreans and five Japanese. They dismissed the very idea of revising the original demand for municipalization as tantamount to 'suppressing the interests of local residents and destroying the autonomy (*chach'i*) of city assemblymen with their own hands'.¹⁰⁹ After three and a half hours of debate, the alternative proposal was passed by a narrow margin of three votes. Although the opponents 'indignantly left the assembly floor', ushering in 'a state of confusion', the revised proposal effectively won support from a total of twenty-five members (including those absent from the meeting). Armed with the new proposal, these assemblymen swiftly requested the mayor, Inoue, and the governor of Kyōnggi province, Matsumoto Makoto, to begin negotiations with Keijō Electric.¹¹⁰

Far from resolving the factional division among the assemblymen, the passage of the revised proposal served to prolong it.¹¹¹ Indeed, the radicals' opposition stiffened after the mayor announced his intention in late February to formally dissolve the preliminary committee for municipalization, which he had instituted back in August 1931. They criticized the mayor's move as 'an arbitrary decision'¹¹² as well as 'a violation of the rules',¹¹³ pointing at his failure to follow proper legislative procedures in dismantling the committee. In challenging the legitimacy of his action, the radicals pressed the mayor with a dozen questions that 'touched a sore point', such as 'Should the city assembly not be consulted when changing what has already been decided as municipal policy?' and 'Should the mayor not act according to the decision of the city assembly when conducting external negotiations regarding an alternative proposal?' In this way the radicals tenaciously prodded the mayor not to

¹⁰⁹ *Tonga ilbo*, 26 Jan. 1932.

¹¹⁰ *Chōsen shinbun*, 23 Jan. 1932; *Keijō shinbun*, 23 Jan. 1932.

¹¹¹ It resurfaced when the city assembly was in session in mid March, and again in late April, when the diehard radicals boycotted a meeting to discuss its content: *Tonga ilbo*, 19 Mar. 1932.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 27 Feb. 1932.

¹¹³ Specifically, they protested against the illegitimacy of dissolving the committee without having issued a new stipulation or established any municipal policy regarding electric trolleybuses and gas (which they considered as a separate issue from the state policy to unify control over electricity).

suspend preparations for public electricity, claiming that its possible implementation in Seoul was ‘not entirely foreclosed by the vice-governor-general’s statement’, which only outlined a general policy for Korea and was not necessarily applicable to every city.¹¹⁴

The firm actions of the city assemblymen, from their vote of no confidence in the mayor to their threat of resignation and provocative questioning of him, expressed their deepening conviction that the state had violated a compact it had made with the people. Moving beyond the issue of corporate monopoly or public electricity, their remonstrations with the mayor consistently boiled down to a fundamental political demand that the state respect the legislative power of the city assembly it had instituted in order to ‘solicit public opinion’. During the period of the residents’ movement, the colonial authorities in Seoul (and the central government in Tokyo) often appeared distant and even unmoved by the clamour for municipalization. This was perhaps not surprising considering that, by the time of Imaida’s announcement, the government-general had already drawn up a detailed plan to unify the generation and distribution of electricity for the entire Korean peninsula, well ahead of the metropolitan Japanese government’s decision to centralize control over electricity on the home islands.¹¹⁵ In the case of Seoul, moreover, the official decision to maintain the status quo suggests that the colonial state had simply no will or even ability to control a corporate behemoth like Keijō Electric,¹¹⁶ as Ōmura Momozō had correctly pointed out at the city assembly.¹¹⁷

Nevertheless, the cacophony of voices of the ‘people’ channelled by the city assemblymen, community heads and the media finally moved the local authorities to begin a new round

¹¹⁴ *Ōsaka Mainichi shinbun, furoku Seibu Mainichi*, 30 Mar. 1932.

¹¹⁵ *Chōsen no denki jigyō o kataru* [On the Electricity Industry in Korea], ed. Sasaki Yoshio (Keijō [Seoul], 1937), 206–7. For details of the official plan to control electricity in Korea, see *Chōsen denki jigyōshi*, ed. Chōsen Denki Jigyōshi Kenshū Inkai, 83–220.

¹¹⁶ For example, the colonial bureau of communications, in accordance with the new official policy, negotiated with major electricity companies, and decided to create one large holding company, the Korea Electric Power Transmission Company (Chōsen Sōden Kaisha), placing it in charge of supplying electricity. But Keijō Electric (its president in Tokyo, to be precise) refused to join, reasoning that ‘there are no decent conglomerates’ and predicting that the new company would yield lower dividends. *Keijō nippō*, 20–27 May 1934.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9 Aug. 1931.

of negotiations with Keijō Electric. After a series of protracted discussions (whose details were never publicly disclosed) between the governor of Kyōnggi province and Keijō Electric's managing director, Musha Renzō, by the spring of 1932 the company executives had come to accept as a compromise much of what was outlined in the alternative proposal.¹¹⁸ The colonial government extended the company's franchise as planned from July 1932 to August 1935 but, in accordance with the proposal, the headquarters of Keijō Electric was moved from Tokyo to Seoul in May 1932. As token compensation, Keijō Electric also donated a million yen to Seoul and a hundred thousand yen to other cities, towns and villages where the company had branches.¹¹⁹ Moreover, the company agreed to reduce gas and electricity prices as far as possible at each review.¹²⁰ Short of achieving the goal of municipalization, the residents' movement managed to win significant concessions, at least from the standpoint of gradualists within the city assembly.

Not only did the campaign manage to exert pressure on Keijō Electric to respond to public opinion, it also compelled the colonial state to look at itself 'through the eyes of the public'.¹²¹ The advocates of municipal electricity continually enjoined the quasi-state Keijō Electric to focus on community (Japanese: *kōkyō*; Korean: *konggong*) rather than corporate interests, urging greater self-awareness as a company in charge of managing utilities that affected the daily lives of residents. That the campaign enabled the voice of the people to be heard, as the chief of the Electricity Section of the government-general's Communications Bureau later acknowledged, served to shake up the entire industry and its supervising state authorities by 'awakening' them to the fundamental 'mission of electricity as a public utility'.¹²² In arguing that city planning must proceed in dialogue with public opinion, the residents' campaign for municipalization broadly

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 Apr. 1932; *Chosŏn ilbo*, 29 Apr. 1932.

¹¹⁹ Son, *Ilche kangjŏnggi tosi sahoesang yŏn'gu*, 427–9. The one million yen was used to build a low-fee clinic and a residents' hall.

¹²⁰ *Chosŏn ilbo*, 29 Apr. 1932. The Seoul Chamber of Commerce and Industry also appears to have responded to the residents' campaign by requesting a reduction in prices at the time of Keijō Electric's review in May 1935, stressing 'the urgent need' to reduce the charges for household usage and small factory operations in Seoul: Keijō Shōkō Kaigisho, *Chōsen keizai geppō*, ccxxxiii (1935), 95–6.

¹²¹ Bhattacharya, 'Notes towards a Conception of the Colonial Public', 156.

¹²² *Chōsen no denki jigyō o kataru*, ed. Sasaki, 200.

served as a referendum on the colonial state's exercise of power.¹²³ And, as the ultimate outcome of the campaign showed, the colonial government made significant concessions to the power of public opinion that problematized governing processes over which the state authority had hitherto exercised a near-monopoly.

III

CONCLUSION

Scholars of colonial Korea have long held that political life on the peninsula attenuated from the late 1920s, but the evolution of local politics suggests a more complex story. As the residents' campaign for public electricity showed, a vibrant public sphere appears to have existed under the authoritarian regime — a space where diverse segments of the local population, though largely disfranchised, could engage in political debate and collective action in their relations with the accepted structures of power. Even as state control over everyday life increased in the 1930s, the public did not tolerate the presumed immunity of rulers to their opinion. Within officially sanctioned parameters of action, residents' rallies and debates forged a new political space 'where leadership was scrutinized and disciplined by criticism',¹²⁴ in short, a colonial public sphere. If such a space did not cohere into an institutionalized form of dissent, the campaign for public electricity at least illustrated a people anxious to influence official policy through public opinion, and to make the state accountable to its 'citizens' (Japanese: *shimin*; Korean: *simin*), in their populist parlance.

To be sure, this public sphere was limited and fragmented, as well as truncated. Like its metropolitan counterpart, it was inherently conservative and never free from state control: after all, the Korean and Japanese bourgeois elites who led the campaign were not autonomous individuals struggling to free themselves from

¹²³ The campaign also affected the way the colonial administration managed society. New awareness of the need to incorporate civilians into the governing process translated into a 'corporatist' approach adopted by the government-general to manage local communities in the 1930s. Gi-Wook Shin and Do-Hyun Han, 'Colonial Corporatism: The Rural Revitalization Campaign, 1932–1940', in Shin and Robinson (eds.), *Colonial Modernity in Korea*.

¹²⁴ Berry, 'Public Life in Authoritarian Japan', 139.

the clutches of state control. Just as the colonial state tolerated public action in the name of ‘cultural rule’, the public (except for the far left) as represented by these elites tolerated the authoritarian structure of rule as endemic to colonial life. In other words, there existed a tacit compact with the state about the possibility of launching political action without crossing the threshold. And this public sphere was weighted against the majority of Koreans, who were excluded from formal politics by voting qualifications.

Nonetheless, such rigid boundaries of participation erected by the state failed to contain popular dissent fully. Nor did the public remain neatly riven by ethnicity. In agitating for public electricity, Seoul’s Korean and Japanese residents demonstrated some capacity to organize by uniting across their differences against Keijō Electric even where such an action ran foul of official policy.¹²⁵ And both community leaders and local residents who rallied behind them came to view this sphere of voluntary action as a popular check on the power of the colonial government.

Pivotal to the construction of the colonial public sphere was the role of local elites as intermediaries between state and society. The leadership of city assemblymen in the residents’ campaign reveals the extent to which bourgeois elites were able to engage in voluntary political action and temper the features of state authoritarianism, even as they became more fully integrated into municipal governance in the 1930s. They protested Keijō Electric’s monopoly as not only misguided state policy but an affront to local self-government. And at the height of the campaign they rallied a heterogeneous crowd behind their cause, and recognized only those authorities that heeded public opinion, as symbolized by

¹²⁵ A study by Sō Hyōn-ju which focuses on the role of community heads also notes that the residents’ campaign ‘transcended ethnic and class differences and sought to advance common regional interests’: Sō Hyōn-ju, ‘Kyōngsōngbu ūi chōng tōng ch’ongdae wa chōnghoe’ [Community Heads and Community Assemblies in the Seoul District], *Sōulhak yōn’gu*, xvi (2001), 146. In parallel with public electricity, residents of Seoul and its environs also demanded the abolition of separate train fares on the suburban lines operated by Keijō Electric. Although this campaign had a nationalistic hue as more Koreans lived on the outskirts of the city, it unfolded in much the same manner as the campaign for public electricity: it involved co-operation between Korean and Japanese residents, utilized the media and public rallies to mobilize public opinion, deployed the language of ‘public interest’ and evoked links with the construction of Greater Keijō. See Jun Uchida, ‘Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1910–1937’ (Harvard Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2005), 449–55.

the vote of no confidence in the mayor.¹²⁶ Through a repertoire of strategies — petitions, the press and public rallies — local leaders forged a new space of political contention within and outside the parastatal institutions they serviced, and brought the governing authority under wider scrutiny. And, in bringing the state and society into dialogue, they helped to create a public that was both politically aware and diverse in constituency.

To be sure, Korean and Japanese public officials, much as they joined ranks in challenging state authority throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, frequently aligned themselves along ethnic lines on issues ranging from education to bureaucratic employment and urban planning.¹²⁷ Nonetheless, the residents' campaign for public electricity adds another layer of complexity to the familiar tale of domination and resistance, showing how old ethnic divisions could be reshaped, if temporarily, into new forms of solidarity in their opposition to the governing authority. Rather than seeing the public as exclusively Korean or inherently antithetical to the state, an assumption persuasively challenged by Berry and others in the context of metropolitan Japan,¹²⁸ we can conceptually broaden its parameters to account for a variety of local actions that may count as signifying a contestation with, if not a wholesale rejection of, authoritarian rule. Accounting for such diversity merits further scholarly examination.

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¹²⁶ This mode of operation is reminiscent of how members of the Diet in inter-war Japan mobilized and drew on the energies of a heterogeneous crowd to advance their political agendas: Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan*, ch. 2.

¹²⁷ See *Saikin ni okeru Chōsen chian jōkyō*, ed. Chōsen Sōtokufu Keimukyoku, 35. The Pusan city assembly was reportedly rife with ethnic conflict: Son Chōng-mok, *Han'guk chibang chedo, chach'isa yōn'gu* [A Study of the History of the Local Government System and Local Self-Government in Korea] (Seoul, 1992), 293–7.

¹²⁸ See n. 1 above.