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Manchurian Legacy: Memoirs Of A Japanese Colonist



Synopsis

Kazuko Kuramoto was born and raised in Dairen, Manchuria, in 1927, at the peak of Japanese expansionism in Asia. Dairen and the neighboring Port Arthur were important colonial outposts on the Liaotung Peninsula; the train lines established by Russia and taken over by the Japanese, ended there. When Kuramoto's grandfather arrived in Dairen as a member of the Japanese police force shortly after the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the family's belief in Japanese supremacy and its "divine" mission to "save" Asia from Western imperialists was firmly in place. As a third-generation colonist, the seventeen-year-old Kuramoto readily joined the Red Cross Nurse Corps in 1944 to aid in the war effort and in her country's sacred cause. A year later, her family listened to the emperor's radio broadcast ". . . we shall have to endure the unendurable, to suffer the insufferable." Japan surrendered unconditionally. *Manchurian Legacy* is the story of the family's life in Dairen, their survival as a forgotten people during the battle to reclaim Manchuria waged by Russia, Nationalist China, and Communist China, and their subsequent repatriation to a devastated Japan. Kuramoto describes a culture based on the unthinking oppression of the colonized by the colonizer. And, because Manchuria was, in essence, a Japanese frontier, her family lived a freer and more luxurious life than they would have in Japan; one relatively unscathed by the war until after the surrender. As a commentator Kuramoto explores her culture both from the inside, subjectively, and from the outside, objectively. Her memoirs describe her coming of age in a colonial society, her family's experiences in war-torn Manchuria, and her "homecoming" to Japan; where she had never been; just as Japan is engaged in its own cultural upheaval.

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Customer Reviews

"Kuramoto's record of her journey is emotionally powerful and historically important."

Kazuko Kuramoto lives in Ontario, Oregon. She taught Japanese from 1979 until her retirement in 1992, when she returned to college and earned her degree from Eastern Oregon State University. She maintains a website that is a companion to her book: www.manchurianlegacy.com

As a native Dalianian, when I heard of this book, I felt this is the one I have long been looking for, the real story about my hometown. Born in one of its suburban counties, I moved to the City of Dalian at the age of eight in the 70's, though had travelled through it on my way to Beijing every year before. It's a unique city, different from any other one in China. Its European style architectures, its numerous public plazas, connected by tree-lined boulevards, all are such a contrast with a typical Chinese city, whether it's Shanghai, Beijing, or Canton. And the aroma of acacia filled the streets in early summer. Why is it so different. It's all owing to its colonial past. However, the Japanese colonists, who were central to its birth and rise, by then were all long gone. In the school, what we learned were just how bad Japanese colonists were. The official narratives were, they were all beasts and criminals, greedy rapists, and only after they were rid of the city got its life. However, little by little, I found out it's not the whole story, not even twenty percent true. This memoir, from a young Japanese Dalian native's perspective, recorded her last three years in Dalian. The end of the war, the Soviet invasion, the chaos, the famine, the struggle to survive and final repatriation, or rather the exile, to Japan. This book might be the first in its kind. With the old Japanese Dairenians diminishing every day, and this part of history still a taboo in China, and forgotten in the West, this may well be the last. I do recommend my fellow Dalianians to read this book, to learn about our hometown's real story, not be blinded by the ultra-nationalism which dominates people's mindset in China. On the other hand, I do wish the author could have provided more details, especially on the interactions between different ethnic groups in the city.

The life and times of Manchuria and Japan from the pre-war to post-war eras are made physically and emotionally real in one person's memory of life and love and loss. This book, while not a literary masterpiece, is still strikingly good as a memoir, a history, and a slice of human experience. At its best, Ms. Kuramoto's book is similar to, or even better than, "Gone With the Wind", functioning as a

tale, but a non-fictional one, of a uniquely determined woman survivor from the defeated and wrong side of a war. But in Ms. Kuramoto's case, the book is also of someone who is far more aware than the real Margaret Mitchell and fictional heroine Scarlett O'Hara that her own side was that of an oppressor. Even at its worst, *Manchurian Legacy* still holds up as an honest account reaching the level of penetrating journalism and biography.

Criticisms and weaknesses: I am perhaps overemphasizing the downside at this point to detail some issues that a reader may find off-putting or disappointing. For example, many interesting details from the author's childhood (e.g., interest in ballet, episodes in school) are only told after she is an adult and while she is remembering them during her adult period instead of giving us a full picture of them during the unfolding of the childhood part of her story. There is also not a lot of interpersonal dramatic tension in the narrative's style even though after she settles in Japan following the family's expulsion from Manchuria she faces social and economic deprivation, deep moral compromises, tense reunions, family alienation, bigotry, and abusive personalities. The story is a little too blandly told just at the point we can really get a "Gone With the Wind" sweep. There are also minor odd turns of phrase that sound like leftovers from English as a second (actually third for the author) language, or are simply bad edits. In general, though, her use of language -- English -- is mostly clear and rather compelling.)

Finally, on the more profound downside is a recurring sense that despite her intellectual realization of Japan's abusive rule in China (of which her father was a part despite being a decent and kind person in his own sphere, and respectful of the local Chinese), nevertheless the author did and does emotionally look down on the Chinese, and deeply resents their takeover of the place of her idyllic childhood. To a degree some of that emotion is understandable because expelling the Japanese of Manchuria, innocent and guilty, young and old, native and colonist may have amounted to one revenge too far. And worse, the direct terror and violence the Japanese settlers experienced from the newly liberated Chinese - and the author's family especially - was quite brutal. ("Colonist" in the title may contain a bit of willful irony as Manchuria was her only known home.)

The sense of a continued anger and even condescension towards the Chinese from the author is supported in an encounter she has just before she and her family leave Manchuria. In that episode, the author's anger causes her to snarl contemptuously at a Chinese customer to the point that he in turn unjustifiedly slaps her, while somewhat more justifiably calling her a Japanese snob b*tch. Her narrative shows no regret then or now at her own admitted provocative rudeness. Also, interestingly, she never apparently has tried to go back to the hometown of Dairen in Manchuria though the doors have been wide open for decades.

The above critical thoughts are ponderings that arise from the fact that this book is a profound and eminently readable one that makes you think and feel and

learn, and those issues do not detract from the book's powerful value as a collection of eye-opening and historically important memories. Ms. Kuramoto's memoir should be assigned in schools in subject areas ranging from literature to history to anthropology/sociology. It also should be read by anyone looking to capture, and be captured by, the different experiences of human lives throughout this world, today and yesterday.

How you react to this book depends on your ethnic background. I am a Chinese born during the Sino-Japanese war. My parents and their generation suffered immensely from the war, and some of them were burnt by personal experience under the Japanese occupation. There is a general anti-Japanese sentiment among them, which is being transmitted to the later generations. The current generation of Chinese are also greatly influenced by the anti-Japanese propaganda which are being viewed everyday in movies and TV series. In all these media, Chinese were depicted as courageous victims, and Japanese as brutal and somewhat inefficient invaders. This book allows us to see the world again from a different perspective. The author was one of the colonists in Japan-occupied Manchuria. She viewed Manchuko as much as a British would view Hong Kong at the height of the colony under British occupation. Just as the British at that time, she would view the Japanese occupiers as benefactors to the backward society of their Chinese citizens, upgrading their standard of living as well as education. This book is especially moving because the author also describes in very personal terms the changes of her feelings during the collapse of the Japanese empire, and her exodus to the U.S. She reminds us that each of us is an individual first, a nationalist second. This book would benefit all those who view themselves as being benevolent occupiers, as well as all those who consider themselves suffering from foreign intrusions.

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