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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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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 is not a literary masterpiece but as a memoir, a history, and a slice of human experience it is strikingly good. At its best, Ms. Kuramoto's book is similar to or even better than "Gone With the Wind" as a tale of a uniquely determined woman survivor on the defeated and wrong side of a war, in this case World War II. But in Ms. Kuramoto's case, it is also of someone who is more aware than were the real Margaret Mitchell and her fictional heroine Scarlett O'Hara that her own side was that of an oppressor. And even at its worst, the book still holds up at a level equal to 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 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.

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