The Enemy Within: Earthquake, Rumors, and Massacre in the Japanese Empire

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Abstract

The experience of violence has powerful consequences in the transformation of history. The 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake marked a moment of unprecedented material destruction and cultural rupture in the Japanese empire. The disaster soon became subject to human interpretation and political manipulation, for the trauma of the earth tremors and subsequent fire produced not only physical chaos, but also rumours and violence against the colonized in the metropolitan area. Such violence manifested itself in the massacre of Koreans immediately following the earthquake—triggered by rumours of arson, murder, and riots by Koreans in the Tokyo-Yokohama area. Despite the shock of rumours and mayhem, the lack of critical evidence and the contradictions in testimony have rendered the incident an historical enigma in modern Japanese and Korean history. Interestingly, precisely because of this unsettled nature of the violence - which thus defies any singular narrative that satisfactorily explains the incident empirically - the event illuminates the development of subjective narratives on collective violence. In an attempt to explore the relationships that weave together disaster, rumours, massacre, and narrative-making in the culture of empire, this paper explores collective violence through the lens of rumours and vigilante trial discourse in the context of imperial Japan.

Keywords: The Great Kantō Earthquake, the 1923 Massacre of Koreans, Rumours, the Japanese Empire, Vigilante, Collective Violence

Too many experts on Rwanda have shied away from this troubling fact, the “popular” agency in the genocide, by casting the genocide as a state project and not also as a social project.... It is this fact that needs confronting, not because of what it can tell us of Rwanda and Rwandans, but because of what it can tell us about ourselves as political beings—as agents with a capacity to tap both the destructive and the creative potential in politics."
The experience of violence has powerful consequences in the transformation of history and culture. The 1923 Great Kanō Earthquake marked a moment of unprecedented material destruction as well as cultural rupture in modern Japanese history. As the natural disaster soon became subject to human interpretation and political manipulation, the traumatic experience of earth tremors and the subsequent fire brought not only rumours and chaos but also vigilante violence against colonized people in imperial Japan. Such social violence and cultural contestation manifested itself in the massacre of six thousand Koreans involving thousands of ordinary citizens in the Tokyo-Yokohama metropolitan area, triggered by rumours of arson, murder and rebellious riots by the colonized people immediately following the earthquake. Despite the shock and memories of rumours and mass murder, lack of critical evidence and contradictions in existing documents have often rendered the incident as an “historical enigma,” if not “panic-driven aberration” or “imperialist conspiracy,” in modern Japanese and Korean history.

Interestingly, precisely because of the controversial and obfuscated nature of the violence - which thus defies any singular master narrative that satisfactorily explains the incident empirically - the massacre of Koreans effectively sheds light on subjective narratives of collective violence, arising in response to the earthquake, rumours, massacre and the aftermath. The multiple responses and patterns of choice over the course of the event provide an excellent lens to explore the webs of relationships among disaster, rumour, violence and narrative-making, while revealing dynamic aspects of the human spirit under such extreme circumstances. In particular, two powerful social phenomena, the rise and spread of rumours against Koreans and the controversy over legal prosecution of the vigilantes, opened up an unusual space for the development of subjective narratives concerning the massacre while stimulating debate on the meaning of the “Japanese public” to be protected and promoted in the midst of turmoil. In an attempt to understand the complicated context and broader implications of the violent incident, this paper explores the politics of rumour and competing narratives in trial discourses following the massacre of Koreans in the multiethnic Japanese empire. By examining these cultural terrains and the social impact of the experience of violence, I call attention not only to the dynamic presence of the colonized in the metropolis but also to the power of human imagination in producing and interpreting violence, thus the potential for both resisting and recovering from it.

1. Earthquake, Rumours and Massacre

As the hot air of the fire became unbearable in all directions, the refugees increasingly gathered in the
centre of the square. Some were carrying suitcases, moneybags, books or musical instruments. Others were holding food in fear of starvation. But, as the open space decreased rapidly making it hard to remain standing, people began to yell at one another, “What good are all your possessions?” Eventually, the things would be fed to the fire, piece by piece. When it was time for the refugees to turn themselves to the flame, they cried out to gods and Buddhas.

From an earthquake survivor’s memoir.

On September 1, 1923, the earth began to shake two minutes before noon causing the largest natural disaster in twentieth-century Japan. Violent wind and great fire followed, attacking the densely populated Tokyo metropolitan area and six other adjacent prefectures in the eastern part of Japan (Kanto). The calamity, resulting in 140,000 dead and missing, destroyed most homes in the city of Yokohama and over half of the homes in Tokyo. Like other great disasters, the earthquake brought out dramatic human stories of those caught up in it. The crisis effectively revealed people’s priorities. To many faithful families, servants and friends, it was time to rescue and help one another. To the politically ambitious, it was an opportunity for advancement by appearing before the imperial family inquiring about their safety before others. Han, an earthquake survivor and young student from Korea - a colony of Japan since 1910 - was delivering newspapers, as he had done for the past three years to pay his tuition. On that Saturday afternoon, the newspaper distribution manager asked him to circulate the special issue on the outbreak of the earthquake in the midst of the falling flames and all-consuming blaze. It did not take long for Han to stop and escape from the fire sweeping through the street where he was standing. Most newspapers in the capital area burned over that weekend, leaving the two million Tokyoites deprived of reliable sources of news in the midst of the catastrophe.

Even more frightening to many earthquake survivors - and to Han and other Koreans for a different reason - were the rumours of arson, rape, poisoning, and organized attack by Koreans immediately following the quake. As rumours reached villages, many inhabitants organized jiketdan (“self-defense associations” or vigilante groups) arming themselves for public security and self-protection. Their activities resulted in the violent lynching of Koreans that was most severe during the first week following the quake while exercising their authority in strict social surveillance. The townsmen expressed their fear of an impending attack by the colonized subjects, and many appreciated the vigilantes in a time of insufficient security after the breakdown of most public offices. At the same time,
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spectators of vigilante violence were intimidated by their own local men. Armed, they targeted passers-by, threatening or mistakenly mistreating them as Koreans.

Numerous survivors witnessed and testified to the rumours and subsequent massacre of Koreans throughout the Kantō region. Observing the vigilantes’ merciless hunting and persecution of Koreans, including women and children, some expressed mixed feelings of anger and sympathy toward the murdered Koreans. In fact, rumours against Koreans and the subsequent manmade disaster were so traumatic that many children top-listed the rumours among things that scared and frustrated them most. Fear of rumours as well as their experience of violence prevailed in their writings and paintings when the schools reopened after the earthquake. Remembering the first few nights she spent outdoors while watching the vigilantes running around, an elementary school child wrote that she would “die rather than endure the fear of attack by Koreans” once she thought she had survived the disaster. Mysteriously, however, it is not clear where the rumours began, nor do we know the names or the exact numbers of the victims of the massacre. Various reports by government, military, police, and individuals were either not able to provide the appropriate explanations or contradicted each other in their accounts of the event. As a result, responsibility was blurred, thus leaving many important questions about the incident unanswered.

When beginning my research, I anticipated critical findings that could fill the gap in my understanding of this strange incident where ordinary people massacred other ordinary men and women. However, further close analysis of existing primary sources revealed a lack of critical documentation and too much room for arbitrary interpretation. Indeed, as many of the textbook descriptions of the event and the surviving massacre memorial inscriptions reveal, the incident remains a social taboo or has often been dismissed in an overly simplified manner as an aberrational and panic-driven accident in the midst of chaos. Thus, although the fact of the massacre remained with tens of thousands of participants and witnesses of the violence, its social and cultural impacts have not been fully considered in the historical formation and transformation of modern Japan. What I found on examining historical documents and testimonies was that, precisely because of these sustaining yet discursive memories, and due to the lack of tangible empirical evidence to establish the case with an authoritative singular narrative, the event opened up an unusual space for various subjective, competing narratives to develop thereafter. Existing documents reflect that different people acted in different ways, not only going through each of the developmental stages of the event - such as hearing the rumours, witnessing the massacre, and facing the trials - but also interpreting and remembering the moment of collective violence.
In the following, in an attempt to understand mechanisms of producing competing narratives of collective violence in the context of Japanese empire, I examine the mayhem through the lens of rumours and the vigilante trials. The exclusionary rumours reproduced prevalent colonial representations of colonized subjects while reflecting subjective beliefs about the perceived reality based on colonial relations among members of the post-quake metropolis. The following violence and trials set up an effective stage where multiple narratives of the violent moment emerged in public discourse. Through contextualization of the controversies in massacre discourse, from the rise of rumours to the vigilante trials, I argue that rumour-mongering and violent outbreaks among citizens in the metropolis reveal social participation and popular agency in the practice and interpretation of the mass violence in the culture of empire. Simultaneously, I contend that the discourse of natural disaster and succeeding violence against colonized Koreans constituted and stimulated debate on the boundary of the “Japanese public” that was to be perceived and promoted in dealing with the destruction and reconstruction of the imperial centre of the empire. Thus, the 1923 massacre of Koreans provides an excellent lens through which the impact of the presence of the colonized in the metropolis can be explored. As the lived and narrated experiences of the massacre conflicted in their subjective understandings of the shared moment of violence within the structure of colonialism and imperialism, the incident and subsequent social discourse can be best located in this process of producing narratives of colonial violence and coping with the reality of a multiethnic Japanese empire. Now let me turn to the “beginning” of the tragic incident in early twentieth-century Japanese and Korean history.

2. The Metropolis between Rumours and Reality

... no information is passed on unidirectionally. All concerned parties converse with each other, the rumour being the final consensus of their collective deliberations seeking out a convincing, encompassing explanation. Rumours entail a subjective construction of reality... The dividing line between information and rumour is subjective, resulting from our own conviction.... Once a rumour is qualified as a “rumour” by the public, it stops spreading.... What is at stake here is an altogether subjective value judgment.12

The prevalence of rumours in the midst of immense social destruction is not unique to Japan. Although the detailed contexts may vary, there have been similar kinds of rumours against ethnic, racial, or
religious minorities at times of natural and social disasters throughout
human history. Nor were the rumours against Koreans the only kinds of
rumours following the outbreak of the earthquake in the Japanese empire.
The power of human imagination manifested itself in various kinds of
rumours that followed the capital area's massive destruction. For
example, there were rumours of forthcoming natural disasters, such as
impending aftershock, tidal waves and firestorms, as well as false
information and exaggeration of the damage created by the catastrophe.
Other rumours included those concerning imminent riots by liberated
prisoners, socialists, and religious cult groups. Apocalyptic interpretations
appeared as well, implying that survivors speculated on the causality and
meaning of the catastrophe: it was seen as divine retribution from the
heavens (tenbatsu or tenkaron). Some argued that Japan was being
punished because of its great gains in Asia despite nominal participation in
World War I, without having paid enough in costs for the war. Others
argued that the earthquake was sent by heaven to punish the arrogant
people of Tokyo for their increasingly materialistic and lavish life style.
These rumours aggravated social unrest while further rumours even
suggested the capital would be moved from Tokyo to another part of the
nation. Still others took it as an opportunity to express their
dissatisfaction with modern science and technology. They criticized a
rapidly Westernizing Japan, arguing to revive values predating the
country's modernization era.

Nevertheless, not all rumours survived or had any significant
impact. Yet, despite the absence of usual means of communication and
media, rumours against the colonized Koreans spread throughout eastern
Japan conspicuously and with surprising rapidity. The violent earth
tremors stopped and the great winds and firestorms began to die down, but
people were still terrified, not by the natural disaster but by the imagined
impending attacks of arson, rape, poisoning, and organized riots by the
colonized people in the centre of the empire. Various records, including
police officer reports from various locations, government documents, and
individual testimonies and memoirs, indicate that the rumours began to
prevail in various parts of the Tokyo-Yokohama area as early as the first
night following the earthquake and spread to every town in the region after
the second day of the disaster. There was a cry in the streets that Koreans
were armed and had set fire to the city. Such rumours continued to spread
by word of mouth in neighbourhoods. They warned against poisoned
drinking water and the anticipated explosion of buildings and houses that
Koreans had supposedly marked with unusual symbols. Handwritten
posters and public announcements also spread the rumours, and the few
available newspapers began to print what was going around as soon as
they secured the means and facilities to do so. Until then, alarm had been
chiefly about surviving the earthquake and escaping the fires, but now people’s only concern was to counter the alleged invasion of Koreans.

Those Koreans persecuted during post-quake turmoil were often labelled “malcontent” or “rebellious” (futai senjin), a politically charged pejorative term for those colonized subjects that appeared frequently in newspapers, magazines, and official documents. Various forms of Korea’s independence movement were critical in shaping such negative images of Koreans in the urban centre, given colonial relations between Koreans and Japanese in the empire. The criteria for judging “malcontent” or “rebellious” Koreans were rooted in those Koreans’ desires and efforts to restore their national sovereignty from Japan, especially after the March First Independence Movement in colonial Korea in 1919. Yet the origin or spread of rumors was not publicly queried until a month or so later, once the vigilante trials had begun. How rumors registered in people’s minds was also discussed in relation to the public’s evaluation of violence at the trials to follow.

3. The Vigilante Trials: Contestation and Complicity

Official policy and procedure for prosecuting vigilantes began to take shape on September 9 when top government officials formed a special judiciary council to deal with the post-earthquake violence within the Emergency Earthquake Relief Bureau. On September 18, newspapers reported policy on the arrest and trial of vigilantes, and the arrests began toward the end of the month followed by actual trials begun in late October and November. The number of officially prosecuted vigilante violence cases reached 139, involving 735 accused individuals across the Kantō area. The total number of vigilante groups at the time of the earthquake is not clearly known, especially considering the arbitrary ways in which criteria were established to label a defence group an “organization.” There were vigilantes attacking Koreans following the spread of rumors not only in the Kantō area but also across the nation. As of mid-September, there were at least 1,145 vigilante groups within the Tokyo metropolitan prefecture alone, which increased to 1,593 by the end of October. The total number of vigilante organizations reached at least 3,689 throughout the earthquake-stricken area, close to half of them in Tokyo.

The activities of vigilantes, illegally armed with guns, swords or skewers, included setting checkpoints to single out Koreans among the passers-by, either by asking for Japanese pronunciation difficult for Korean speakers, demanding the lyrics of Kimigayo (a praise song for the emperor; the national anthem), or observing physical features such as the shape of the back of the head or the cheekbones, hair, and relatively tall height. Then the vigilante groups either brought the Koreans to the police, military, or internment camps, or killed them on the spot, thus making...
vigilante activities not “defence” of themselves but an offence against the imagined enemy within. In some cases, the local populace attacked not only the police stations where Koreans were either temporarily interned or had sought refuge, but also some Chinese and Japanese mistaken for Koreans. These violent deeds were the crimes of which the alleged vigilantes were accused at their trials. Nevertheless, the Kantō Vigilantes’ Association and sympathizers vigorously protested the arrest and trial of vigilantes. What were the issues at stake in the trials? What were the discourses on the in/excussability of the violence in this legal process? How did various participants in the event see themselves and narrate the moment of violence against the colonized? Above all, what does it tell us about the human imagination and historical agency in practicing, representing, and narrating collective violence in the empire?

Looking at the trials as a moment of public judgment of mass murder, the first controversy at court concerned the cause, focusing on the origin of rumours against colonized Koreans: Where did they begin, and how were they spread? Various records, including police files, government documents, and individual memoirs and testimonies, indicate that the rumours had begun to prevail in various parts of the Tokyo-Yokohama area as early as the first night of earthquake and spread to each town in the region after the second day of the disaster. The rumours moved quickly throughout the metropolitan area as waves of refugees escaped to the outskirts of the city along major roads. As many earthquake survivors testified, they learned about the rumours not only by word of mouth, but also through official and non-official channels such as posters and megaphones, as well as from newspapers. The origin of the rumours, however, remained vague, and the official record and other testimony were often confusing, if not contradictory. Discrepancies appeared; records named different sources in various reports. Many official police and military documents and the memoirs of political authorities cited different and obscure sources for the origin of the rumours. Furthermore, the authorities justified proclaiming Martial Law on the second day of the earthquake - in force until November 15 - as serving the interests of “public security” in response to rumours about Koreans. Many police files and Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department records recorded simultaneous and sporadic reports of crimes by Koreans in various parts of Tokyo and Yokohama, all of which were found baseless, thus implying the difficulty in locating the rumours’ exact origin in any logical manner. Nevertheless, this data suggests that the rumours began and spread naturally, and that they generally spread from Yokohama to Tokyo along the major routes that many refugees took. But these facts were never corroborated by clear evidence, nor was confession made by suspects who might have spread rumours in Yokohama in the first place.

In the midst of this confusion and turmoil concerning the
beginning of the massacre, the trial in Saitama prefecture revealed an important fact concerning the origin and spread of the rumors. As early as the day after the earthquake, a government telegram had ordered appropriate measures and urged local officials in each town to organize vigilantes against rebellious Koreans. It indicated a potential source of the rumors within the government, and also its significant role in spreading the rumors to each town in the prefecture. Many survivors remembered the warning against armed rebellion of Koreans delivered by police and military officers as well as local leaders in their towns. Consequently, tremendous controversy attached to the involvement of political authorities in the origin and spread of the rumors.

Questions and heated debate concerning the origin of the rumors were not limited to the metropolitan areas. As contemporary newspaper reports indicated, news about the controversial post-quake rumors and massacre had already spread throughout the entire country from Hokkaidō to Kyūshū as well as to the colony and some other parts of the world - however limited and inaccurate the news might be - by the time the actual prosecution and vigilante trials took place. Thus, controversy and debate about causality continued in parliamentary inquiries later that year, but without producing any satisfactory answers. In fact, the enigma remains today.

Those who protested the trials and supported the vigilantes did not miss this point, leading to the second contentious issue: responsibility for violence against Koreans. They pointed out that, in fact, many of the vigilante groups had been organized and encouraged to participate in maintaining social order under police control when there was insufficient police force in the post-quake turmoil. In addition, from the very first day of the earthquake, the military had already been mobilized in Tokyo by the Superintendent-General of the Metropolitan Police, and often worked with vigilantes in town to maintain public security. In fact, the massacre took place under Martial Law that had begun the day following the tremors and lasted for the next two and a half months; the scope of military mobilization under martial law reached to a force of 52,000 soldiers and 9,700 horses. The trials made it clear that some military and police officers as well as local government officials had encouraged or condoned armed vigilante organizations as well as their lynching of the alleged malcontent Koreans, especially during the first several days following the quake. Indeed, the contradictory and confusing policies of government and military in the early days were manifest in prohibitions to the press not to report rumors while they were circulating emergency telegrams against Koreans to local governments across the nation as well
as to the colonies of Korea and Taiwan. Furthermore, political authorities circulated posters and announcements about the rumours before making an appropriate investigation, and never publicly denounced them as false and groundless when it was soon discovered. To many townsmen, the dispatch of the military and their warning against the potential danger to local communities posed by the rumours seemed not only to verify the credibility of charges against the colonized minorities, but also to condone the killing of alleged “rebels” against their nation.

The trials ended, however, without presenting key government or military officials as witnesses, neither national nor local. And although army involvement in the massacre as well as in distributing weapons to the vigilantes became clear from evidence introduced in the trials, their actions were deemed “appropriate.” Furthermore, when over twenty thousand Koreans had been interned in police stations beginning on September 3 - and in various intern camps across the country two days later, with imprisonment lasting for over a month in the name of “protection” - the internment often functioned as precaution against or persecution of the “rebellious Koreans” while forbidding them to go back to Korea. Overall, only the vigilantes were officially accused and had to defend their actions by exposing to public view the government’s or military’s link to the violence through the trials.

This contestation raised the question of responsibility for the massacre among the military, police, cabinet, right-wingers, local village leaders, socialists, Koreans, as well as the vigilantes and townsmen themselves within the complicated political, economic and social context of the Japanese empire in the early 1920s, aggravating the tension between, as well as within the state and society. As a result, unintentionally, the trials attributed responsibility for the massacre not only to the vigilantes but also to various other parties in society while presenting an open challenge to public authority concerning the government’s involvement in rumour mongering and the massacre.

4. For the Sake of the Japanese Public

One of the most interesting and conspicuous idioms that appeared in these controversial trial debates was “the spirit of kō” (the public) or kōkyōshin (“public-spirited mindset”). The vigilantes claimed that their activities were based on their “public-minded” and “patriotic” motives in an attempt to protect their communities and the nation at a “time of crisis” (hijōjī). One of the earliest uses of this rhetoric came in a September 13 public announcement from the Superintendent-General of the Metropolitan Police, in an appeal to the people facing increasing vigilante violence. The message showed appreciation for vigilante activities that stemmed from a “patriotic spirit” (aikōkuteki seishin) as well as from public-mindedness (kōkyōshin). The rationale behind their rhetoric was that their actions were “for the sake of everyone” (minna no tame) or “on
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behalf of the town” (mura no tame). Because they took up arms against Koreans out of zeal to protect their communities, the vigilantes on trial were “victims” on behalf of their community, town, and the “Japanese public.” According to contemporary newspaper reports and testimony of earthquake survivors, not only the accused but also their townsmen appealed for pardons based on this reasoning. Financial support was provided for the vigilantes from the town’s budgets as well as personal care for their families during the trials. Indeed, Yoshikawa indicates that thousands of people were either watching or participating in many of the vigilante crime sites. While the rumors and massacre had primarily and specifically targeted Koreans, thus leaving them victims of mass murder, the scope and identities of the Korean victims or their families and the location of their corpses did not appear in most trial cases. The dead could not speak: They appeared only as senjin, a pejorative term for Koreans in the trial records. The discrepancy in verdicts between killing Japanese and Koreans clearly demarcated the boundary of the community to be imagined and promoted. Vigilante aggression was justified by a clear double standard. With this publicly shared logic behind the trial discourse, there ensued not only an official pardon of vigilantes’ violence on the occasion of the subsequent Crown Prince’s marriage the following winter but also positive evaluation of vigilantes’ sacrifice during the post-quake social turmoil. The killers were praised for their “public spirit” at such a critical time for the nation.

Originally, the pre-determined purpose and rationale for the arrest of vigilantes were two-fold: First, official arrest and trials were aimed at avoiding international criticism for the massacre. Second, they were designed to promote smooth rule over Korea as well as to strengthen government authority within the Japanese empire. On September 11, as chief prosecutor Yamashita reports on official policy toward vigilante prosecution, the authority wished to appeal for “their innocence since they did not have any evil intention. [But since] it is impossible to bend the law, it[s] policy [would be to] seek extremely light penal servitude for the
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accused [in light of] extenuating circumstances.\textsuperscript{54} In other words, the incident could not be overlooked due to the great degree of public brutality, but considering the “excusable” circumstances, the scope of arrest and prosecution would be limited to absolutely unavoidable cases with clear evidence of crime while postponing trials until more favourable times. While the special circumstance in the public announcement referred to the natural disaster, policy and discourse at the trials revealed the need for an agreeable general consensus to pardon violence against colonized subjects, and promote and solidify the meaning of a collective Japanese community delineated by an ethnic boundary.\textsuperscript{55} Indeed, not coincidentally, when the actual trials took place, a reporter in the courtroom described the atmosphere as exhibiting no seriousness at the site: The judge and accused were laughing and smiling throughout the proceedings.\textsuperscript{56} The incident’s development thus reveals a series of choices made along multi-layered fears of the subjugated people and the crowds, as well as political rivalries between the state and society within the structure of Japanese imperialism. Above all, regardless of the original intentions of the vigilante trials, trial discourse reflected wide-ranging public and private efforts to both obfuscate and reveal the nature of the event. In the process, post-earthquake trial discourse effectively served to establish the excusability of the massacre while testifying to the powerful rhetoric of “for the sake of the Japanese public” in the multiethnic Japanese empire.

5. Conclusion: Practice of Violence, Choice of Interpretation

The trials played a significant role in bringing controversy to the surface of public discussion in the Japanese empire. Intentionally or unintentionally, the courtroom rhetoric revealed crucial aspects of the incident which would never have been exposed had there not been such a public outcry, reflecting: one, the recondite nature of the event itself, thus followed by controversial debate on the cause of and responsibility for the violence\textsuperscript{57}; two, a clearly differentiated treatment of the victims based on ethnicity; three, extremely light sentences for such a massive scale of killing the innocent; four, compromise of the criteria for moral and legal judgment of mass murder cases, thus, making arbitrarily relative social justice and the value of human lives\textsuperscript{58}; last, and most important, the emergence of a general consensus on vigilante crimes as sacrifice out of loyalty to the Japanese public which was clearly demarcated by an exclusionary ethnic boundary against colonized subjects. The trials also shed light on the dynamic forces at work in creating such an intertwined relationship among the various actors and spectators of the event, especially reflecting the tension and contestation between and within the state and society.\textsuperscript{59} Simultaneously, debates to justify the massacre revealed a shared mode of rhetoric called public good as a powerful excuse for violence, defining what the public meant and whom it should
include. Interestingly, by condoning aggression against the colonized, government propaganda for assimilation policy was strengthened in the empire, but only ironically and as a dilemma, not only within the municipal government but also in the Governor-General’s Office and in the lives of colonial subjects.60 And such competing narratives and shared rhetoric of “public” space demarcated by an ethnic boundary continued into wartime as well as the postwar era in Japanese society.61

In this paper, I focused on controversy in vigilante trials following the rumours and the ensuing violence against colonized Koreans in the post-quake Japanese empire. Competing narratives and the process of justifying collective violence have revealed how the colonized were imagined and utilized while the socially transformative categories of “Korean-ness” and the “Japanese public” were constructed. In my larger project, I examine the context, competing narratives, commemorative activities and controversial production of historical knowledge concerning the colonial violence in the Japanese empire.62 The continuous narrative-making process reveals that different responses and multiple choices prevailed over the course of the event’s unfolding from the moment of hearing rumours, practicing and witnessing violence, to interpreting and remembering the episode. In the process, individuals responded to circumstances in different ways by constantly choosing to practice culture and history, and their choices collectively constructed and solidified the boundaries of identity. Consensus centred this identity in an ethnically exclusive Japanese public. At each stage in this developing history and historical knowledge of the moment of collective violence, these multiple choices and responses testified to the power of human imagination, which ultimately produced competing narratives. The case of the 1923 massacre of Koreans in the Japanese empire therefore challenges us to reconsider broader issues of historical agency and social choice in the practices of culture and history. We can see in these cultural terrains and social impacts not only the dynamic effect of the colonized in the metropolis, but also the power of human imagination to produce and interpret violence, along with the potential for both resisting and recovering from it.

Notes

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research in Japan. Throughout the text, Japanese and Korean names appear in the order of last name followed by first name. Except for well-known places and personal names, all Korean and Japanese words appear following the McCune-Reischauer and the Hepburn styles for transliteration, respectively. All translations are mine unless specified otherwise.

2 Eguchi Kan, Kikaina nanatsu no monogatari (Kyoto, Japan: Sanichi shobō, 1956); Yamada Shōji, “Kantōdaishinsai: chōsenjin bōdōsetsu ha doko kara detaka,” in Hyakumon hyakutsu nihon no rekishi, ed. Rekishi kyōikusha kyōgikai (Tokyo, Japan: Kawade shobō, 1988).
3 Yoshikawa Mitsusada, Kantōdaishinsai no chian kai ko (Tokyo, Japan: Homubu tokubetsu shinsakyoku, 1949).
6 For further information on the scope of the material damage by the earthquake, see various reports on the calamity, including Kaizōsha, ed. Taishō daishinkasairoku (Tokyo, Japan: Kaizōsha, 1924); Keishichō [The Metropolitan Police Department], Taishō daishinkasai (Tokyo, Japan: Keishichō, 1925); Naimushō shakaikyoku [Ministry of Home Affairs, Bureau of Social Affairs], Taishō shinsai (Tokyo, Japan: Naimushō, 1926); Nihon sekijūjisha [The International Red Cross Society of Japan], ed. Taishō jūni nen kantōdaishinsai nihon sekijūjisha kyōgōshi (Tokyo, Japan: Nihon sekijūjisha, 1925); Tōkyōfu [Tokyo Metropolitan Prefecture Office], ed. Tōkyōfu teashop shinsai shi (Tokyo, Japan: Tōkyōfu, 1925); Tōkyōshi [Tokyo Municipal Office], ed. Tōkyō shinsai roku (Tokyo, Japan: Tōkyōshi, 1926-1927).
8 The history and context of forming vigilante organizations in Japan around the time of the earthquake vary depending on the conditions in each town and region. However, many of them took concrete shape as an organization under local leadership, often encouraged or sponsored by the police and the government, sharing the members of Young Men’s Associations (seinendan), Fire Brigades (shōbōdan), and War-veterans...

9 For example, see the students’ survey result of March 1924, concerning their earthquake experiences in Tokyo Nihonbashi Higher Elementary School. Rumours about the alleged armed attacks by Koreans were among the top in the list of the sources of their fear along with the earthquake and fire. See Tōkyō shiyakusho and Yorozu chōhōsha eds., Shinshai kinen jīichi jīgoja chi fun (Tokyo, Japan : Yorozu chōhōsha, 1924).

10 Quoted from a student writing in Kyōbashi Higher Elementary School in Tokyo, reprinted in Kūm Pyōng-dong, ed. Kantō daishinsai Chōsenjin gyakusatsu mondai kankei shiroyō 1 Chōsenjin gyakusatsu kanren jidō shōgen shiroyō (Tokyo, Japan: Ryokuin shobo, 1989), 393. Various children’s accounts on the earthquake and the massacre in their writings and paintings testify to their traumatic experiences of the violence. While many of them expressed their shock of the natural disaster, they also revealed the mixed feeling of fear, anger, and sympathy toward Koreans in their description of the rumours and the violence that followed in their neighbourhoods or refuge shelters.

11 Although the event itself entered most public school history textbooks in Japan since the late 1970s, the descriptions are often found in a marginal “column” section, and not in the main text. They also lack concrete and coherent explanations providing no clear accounts of the cause, process, and consequences, thus blurring the issue of responsibility. Likewise, most of the existing massacre-related memorials in the Kantō area refrain from mentioning the identities of the perpetrators or the victims, often dismissing the incident as an unfortunate “accident.”


13 For example, Rome, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and London, to mention a few, also had similar kinds of rumours against minorities after great fires or natural disasters. However, the particular kinds of rumours that survived and worked in particular societies demand further contextualized and interdisciplinary analysis in order to understand the
implications, shared social values, and concerns at the time of mass social destruction.

14 Various records of rumours in post-quake Tokyo can be found in Keishicho, 1925.
15 Ch’ae, 165.
16 A contemporary Christian leader Uchimura Kanzō, an entrepreneur Shibusawa Eiji, and a novelist Kōda Rohan as well as many other writers, religious leaders, and public figures took such a view. For example, see Ham Sŏk-hŏn, Chugol’tae kkajī I gŏrũmīro (Seoul, Korea: Hangilsa, 1996).

Many writers, artists, politicians, activists and religious leaders interpreted the meanings of the disaster through numerous written accounts of their earthquake experiences in various popular magazines, journals, and special collections on the earthquake experiences, especially when the publication industry became ever more vigorous and competitive in the process of post-quake reconstruction of the metropolis.

18 For example, see Keishicho, 1925.
19 Ch’ae, 163.
20 The Korean independence movements were manifested in the establishment of the Interim Government of Korea in Shanghai, attempts to assassinate the colonial ruling authorities, and armed struggles in the colony and the national border area such as Manchuria. For examples of the colonial authorities’ prevalent use of the term futei senjin in the late 1910s and 1920s, see Kim Chŏng-ju, Chosŏn tōchi shiryō series 8 Futei senjin (Tokyo, Japan: Kankoku shiryo kenkyûjo, 1971).
21 It was a large-scale peaceful independence movement that was violently crushed by the police and the military authorities resulting in six to seven thousand deaths of Koreans.

22 For the records of the official security policy and the legal procedure in prosecuting the vigilantes, see Yoshikawa, 1949. Most of the important vigilante trial records, including those of Tokyo and Yokohama, and many crucial documents in preparation for the trials are not available today since they were either destroyed or burnt during the Asian-Pacific War (1931-1945). In this regard, this confidential document, prepared for the purpose of future reference for post-disaster security issues for internal circulation within the Ministry of Justice, provides crucial information concerning official policy and procedures of the vigilante prosecution based on various original documents from the pre-trial investigation to the arrest of the vigilantes. Nevertheless, it does not provide information on the actual trials or the following discussions and results of the trials. The document ends with the initial arrest procedure. Also note that this record presents a
Ministry insider’s point of view, rendering the scope and attributing responsibility for the incident exclusively to the people rather than the government or military. Yoshikawa, 32-33.

23 *Yomiuri shinbun* reported on the first public trial on November 6, 1923.

24 The statistics appear in Yoshikawa, 225-228. The trial transcripts that I was able to obtain thus far include the records of seven vigilante trials from the Prosecutor’s Offices in Saitama and Gunma prefectures, which took place between November 1923 and June 1924. There are also a limited number of newspaper reports and a few available official documents concerning the trials, which often summarized the atmosphere and courtroom outcomes. I would like to thank Professor Yamada Shōji and Kōm Pyōng-dong for their help in obtaining these valuable trial records.

25 Yoshikawa, 43; Gendaishi no kai, 274.

26 Yoshikawa records 3,412 for the number of Koreans whom the vigilantes handed over to either military or police. Yoshikawa, 52.

27 For detailed accounts of the vigilante activities, see various earthquake reports published by different organizations in note 6 as well as newspaper reports during the first several months after the disaster, especially after October 20 when the official publication censorship was lifted following the Japanese government’s public announcement concerning the postquake violence related to Koreans.

28 For example, Fujioka and Yorii cases are the examples. On the conflict between police and the crowd in provoking the violence, see *Tōkyō asahi shinbun* October 17, 1923.

29 For example, Fukudamura case.

30 On the basis and rationale for the Vigilante Association’s protest to the Ministries of Law and Home Affairs, see *Tōkyō nichi nichichi shinbun* October 22, 1923.

31 For the vigilantes’ criticism of the role of the police during the turmoil, see *Hoichi shinbun* October 29, 1923. Also, for expression of the prevalent sentiment of strong objection to the arrest policy for the vigilantes, see a letter submitted by an anonymous “scholar of law” in *Tōkyō nichi nichichi shinbun* October 21, 1923 (evening edition).

32 For the detailed initial reports on the rumours in various parts of the metropolitan area, see Kaizōsha, 1924; Kanagawa ken keisatsubu [Kanagawa Prefecture Police Department], ed. *Taishō daishikasaishi* (Yokohama, Japan: Kanagawa ken keisatsubu, 1926); Keishichō, 1925; Nainushō, 1926; Tōkyōshi, 1926-1927 and other reports on the 1923 earthquake. For the political and military authorities’ accounts of their initial reactions to the disaster and rumours, see their memoirs in Kang and Kūn, 1963 and Kūn, 1991.
For example, Kaizōsha recorded some liberated inmates’ violence in Yokohama as the origin of the rumours while Naimushō reports showed a similar view but added another element of social unrest caused by socialists and Koreans. While the top police and government officials did not specify the source of the rumours, the Tokyōshi and Kanagawa-ken keisatsubu versions attributed it to the misunderstandings of various trivial crimes in the area under the exceptional social circumstance after the quake. However, these speculations on the true beginning of the rumours were never clearly verified by concrete evidence.

For example, see Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun November 8, 1923. Also, the transcripts of the vigilante trials in Jinbohara and Yorii in Saitama clearly indicate such warnings against Koreans and orders for self-defense from officials. See Urawa District Court records, November 26, 1923.

For the reports of the telegram warning, see Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun October 19 and November 8, 1923.

See congressman Nagai Ryūtarō’s inquiry in the 48th Diet session in Kōtō, 1991. Also, see Jiyū hōsōdan, ed. Jiyū hōsōdan monogatari senzen hen (Tokyo, Japan: Nihon hyōronsha, 1976) for criticism of the lack of appropriate investigation by government offices made by contemporary lawyers, Yamazaki Kesaya and Fuse Tatsuji’s, the points of which still remain unresolved today.

There were continuing debates on this point in postwar Japan as well. For example, see the debates between Kang and Matsuo in Rekishi hyōron in October 1973. While many Korean and Korean descendent (zainichi) scholars of Japan highlight the government officials’ hatred toward Koreans, and thus, their conspiracy in creating and spreading the rumours against Koreans for the purpose of their political manoeuvring, Matsuo emphasizes the responsibility of the general populace, pointing to the lack of critical evidence that supports this “conspiracy theory” of government officials’ involvement in creating the rumours.

Many local history publications, police departments’ records and newspaper articles indicate that the actual history of many of the jikeidan can be found in the national and local governments’ promotion of such self-defence organizations in each town even before the earthquake as well as during the event. See Higuchi, 1984; Obinata Sumio, “Keisatsu to minshū: daishinsai o meguru keisatsu to minshū,” Hōgaku semina 379 (1986): 134-137.

For example, a navy officer in Funabashi in Chiba prefecture confessed that he asked for the vigilantes’ help to defend the local military facility and gave them “permission” to kill Koreans when necessary. Cited in Yoshikawa’s record on the preliminary examination report concerning the
navy officer's prosecution in Yoshikawa, 72-73. Also, see the case of a local government official's condoning in Saitama prefecture in Ibid, 74. Naimushō, 392.

40 For relevant government and military documents, see Kūm, 1991.

41 For example, see Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun November 13, 1923.

42 The official record on the number of Korean internees reached 23,715 all over Japan, including a thousand in a distant region such as Hiroshima. For further statistical information on Korean internees, see Yoshikawa, 182-184.

43 A recently discovered military police officer's diary in Narashino indicates that the military was keeping a close eye on the Korean internees for fear of a possible riot or rebellion, and dispatched Korean-speaking military spies into the camps. On the discovery of the document in Nagoya with an excerpt from the original diary, see Matsuo Takayoshi, “Kantōdaishinsai to kenpeitai,” Ronza (November 2003): 172-187. The Kūbono Diary also testifies to military involvement in the massacre in Narashino. See Pae So, Shashin hōkoku kantōdaishinsai chōsenjin gyakusatsu (Tokyo, Japan: Kage shobō, 1988). Note that the government and the army employed special security measures for close surveillance on Koreans and other non-conformist dissenters on the government blacklist (yōchū' nin), immediately after the outbreak of the earthquake.

44 In fact, there were reports on a frustrated vigilante and a Korean who committed suicide in relation to the post-earthquake persecution of Koreans. Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun October 25, 1923 (evening edition); Fukuoka nichinichi shinbun September 21, 1923.

45 Reported in Yomiuri shinbun September 15, 1923.

46 For support for the vigilantes' appeal and their claim of innocence, see Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun October 21, 1923. For the rhetoric of “the victim of the community” and “for the sake of the town,” see Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun October 22, 1923 and November 13, 1923.

47 For instance, vigilante violence was largely excused in Saitama with the prefectural government officials' remarks on the occasion that justified their crimes with their motive in “the spirit for the public” (kōkyō no seishin). See the speech of the former governor of Saitama in Kūm, 1991.

48 Yoshikawa, 56-57.

49 Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun November 29, 1923.

50 In the special edition of October 20, 1923, Ōsaka mainichi shinbun reported that the vigilantes visited Ōmiya police station on September 4 after their murder of Koreans, and told the officers what they had done expressing their wish to be rewarded for their contribution to public security. This information came out in the process of investigating the case for the prosecution of the vigilantes a month after the crime.
51 For example, note the discrepancy in various investigation results concerning the number of the massacred: the Ministry of Justice (275), the newsletter of the Interim Government of Korea Tongnip shinmun [Independence] (6,661), Tokyo Imperial University professor Yoshino Sakuzō (2,613), combined newspaper reports (1,464), and Kokuryūkai (722, Tokyo only). Cited in Kang Tōk-sang, Seikyū bunka sōsho series 9 Kantō daishinsai gyakusatsu no kioku (Tokyo, Japan: Seikyū bunkasha, 2003), 288-293.

52 Newspaper reports often indicated that the names and identities of the massacred Koreans were not known, as in the special edition of Osaka mainichi October 20 and 21, 1923. It is extremely difficult to track down the exact Korean population in the Kantō area at the time of the disaster. Most informed and widely accepted speculation among historians indicates approximately 20,000 Koreans living in the area as of the fall of 1923 out of 60,000 in total across Japan. The number of the massacre victims is known to be close to 6,000 considering the estimated total population of Koreans in the area, the number of internees as well as returnees to Korea. Since the time when Korea became an official colony of Japan in 1910, the material and human resources in Korea filled needs of the rapidly industrializing and increasingly militarizing Japanese empire. Many victims of the massacre were manual labourers responding to the labour shortage while suppressing the wage level in the metropolis.

53 Nevertheless, concerning commemorative activities for massacre victims in the empire across the metropolis and the colony, “the dead” were powerful enough to evoke various responses and memories, which often opened space for political projections onto the present participants and the audience, and still resonate discursively constituting historical narratives of the event in Korea and Japan to this day. For example, see Lee Jin-hee, “Jinken o kangaeru madoguchi to shite no zainichi Korian no rekishi to kikan,” Sai 48 (2003b): 12-16.

54 Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun November 2, 1923.

55 In his response to the earthquake and the massacre on September 23, the Governor-General of Korea Saitō Makoto expressed his primary concern with any detrimental effect of the event on Japan’s rule over Korea with no mention of relief policy for the Korean disaster refugees in the metropolis. His writing also indicated that he did not understand the scope of the incident nor the general number of Korean population in the area (his speculation on the Korean population in the disaster-affected area was not even close to the number of Korean internees in a single camp.) See Saitō Makoto, “Daishinsai to ryūgen,” Chosen chihō gyōsei 2:10 (1923): 2-3.
After October 20 when the official publication censorship was lifted, newspapers were filled with reports concerning the post-quake vigilante and Korean violence across the country. However, most of the names and identities of those Korean suspects appeared as “unknown senjin [Koreans].” For example, see Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun October 21, 1923.

For example, the vigilantes’ challenge to the political authorities and their murder of Japanese were treated more seriously than the cases of mass murder of Koreans. Whereas the rates of getting actual prison sentence for killing Japanese or attacking police officers were over or close to 50 per cent, it was only 16.5 per cent for killing Koreans. See Yunada, 2003, 100-107.

It is important to note that, despite the general consensus on excusing vigilante violence, there were efforts to record vigilante aggression and to express oppositional voices against the double standard against Koreans both by Koreans and Japanese. For example, see the protests following the massacre by Koreans in Tang-a ilbo September 9 and December 28, 1923; Chosŏn ilbo September 24, 1923; Tongnip shinmun December 5, 10, and 11, 1923, and, by Japanese in Jiyū hōsōdan, 1976 and Lee Jin-hee, The Massacre of Koreans through Paintings (Tokyo, Japan: Korai hakubutsukan, 2003a). These non-conformist voices testified to the social contestation as well as the internal subjugation within the structure of imperialism and colonialism not only in the colony but also in the metropolis.

Various post-earthquake policies indicate the efforts of the Governor-General’s Office to effect a greater degree of assimilation of Korea to imperial Japan, which include giving compassionate allowance to the bereaved families of the Korean victims, and making a propaganda film on the Japanese government’s generous treatment of the disaster refugees in the intern camps. See Tōkyō nichinichi shinbun October 15, 1923; Osaka asahi October 26, 1923; Osaka mainichi November 7, 1923. The Metropolitan Government increased its social surveillance also under the Emergency Imperial Ordinance No. 403 since September 7, which was to continue as the chian iji hō (Peace Reservation Law) within next two years for the sake of “public order.”

For continuation of an ethnically bounded sense of “public good” and fear of futei senjin in imperial Japan, see the resurgence of similar kinds of rumours against Koreans in Japan in Kyūshū nippō August 18, 1924; Chūgoku shinbun and Keijō nippō September 2, 1928; Osaka asahi September 3, 1928. Nevertheless, critique of the justification of the incident also survived and continued into the postwar era as well. For example, see the appeal that the Japanese Lawyers’ Association submitted

I take the politics of rumour as a window on the complicated context and meanings of the massacre, for rumour proved a powerful social phenomenon, both motivating and justifying the collective violence. Thus, I take the rumours against Koreans as an important site to examine the layers of fear within the social body against the colonized, the crowd and political authority in imperial Japan. Commemorative activities also manifest this complicated structure of fears and multiple meanings of the massacre in the discursive construction of collective identities and massacre memories in the post-quake Japanese empire. These sites of analysis allow me to contemplate the meaning of the violent event beyond the limits of colonial archives in modern Japanese and Korean history.

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