

*Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee

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I remember the bright lights and roar of the pachinko parlors when I first studied abroad in Tokyo for a year at the Inter-University Center. Walking by the glass doors, I would see people sitting in a row, stationed before vertical pinball-like machines seemingly mesmerized by the sound of the small metal balls cascading down the shoot. The sound became even more deafening when customers opened the door to enter or exit. The word “pachinko” is often written in a script used for onomatopoeia, and this refers to the sharp sound of metal balls that, once ejected, bounce off various obstacles on the way down. In a rural area, one might even pass a solitary pachinko parlor standing alone in stark contrast to the green rice fields. These gaming arcades are ubiquitous in Japan. Since I had never been to a casino in the U.S., I found this fascinating. I had heard that pachinko was a form of gambling but could not quite figure out why there seemed to be an array of food and household items at the front of the store. One of my fellow students mistakenly thought the parlor was some sort of convenience store and went in to purchase some groceries, much to the great surprise of the counter attendant. She then learned that those items were the “prizes” that customers would receive as their pachinko winnings. These goods could be later exchanged off site for cash.

For me, reading Min Jin Lee’s best-selling novel “Pachinko” was an eye-opening experience in that it helped me understand the association of pachinko parlors with Koreans residing in Japan. In the end, of course, the novel is more about peeling back layers of Japanese society. “Pachinko” describes the immigrant experience and, perhaps surprisingly for many, the social injustice and discrimination that exists in Japan towards other Asian people. Ms. Lee’s masterpiece is about a multigenerational immigrant family experiencing the loss of their homeland—for some the loss of identity—and facing the crippling discrimination against Koreans. As Yoseb stated, “They’d make a tasty broth from stones and bitterness. The Japanese could think what they wanted about them, but none of it would matter if they survived and succeeded.” We see a darker side of Japan that does not appear in Olympic trailers or standardized textbooks. History recounts that Japan was “occupied” after World War II by the U.S. military. But few may realize that the reason for this occupation was that Japan had been an aggressor and colonizer in Asia.

It is all too common for students studying Japan to think of the culture as monolithic and its citizens as homogeneous. From student essays, I realize that students see samurai honor as permeating every corner of Japan. Like passengers boarding the famous Bullet Train, everyone seems to move in perfect synchronization, and, like an immaculate Japanese garden, life seems to be one of harmony and beauty. “Pachinko” helps shatter that myth. This compelling novel is all about living on the margins in Japan, whether one is a *zainichi* (Korean resident of Japan), poor and uneducated, part of the *Yakuza* (Japanese mafia), born into the *burakumin* (a social outcaste group), Okinawan, Ainu, or a single parent). Any nation’s majority tends to demonize the minority population with preconceptions that they are dirty, smelly, troublemakers, cunning and wily, and prone to be whores, drunks, and thieves. Some of the characters in “Pachinko” try to live an “invisible life,” always fearful of being found out. Others return to the homeland in

search of affirmation, although the return to North Korea would have been disastrous. Other Korean immigrants learn to make their home in Japan and live with three names, such as Isak Baek, who also went by Boku and Bando. For someone like me whose grandparents immigrated to the U.S. from Japan, it is almost unimaginable that I would not be considered a U.S. citizen and would have had to change my last name to an Americanized version. I wonder, what would it feel like to celebrate my fourteenth birthday and then have to register for an alien registration card in what was, after all, my country of birth? We need to understand that diversity, inclusion, and equity remain pressing issues in Japan today. I love taking W&L students for Spring Term Abroad in Japan for that understanding also. Our own diversity, both visible and invisible and riddled with imperfections, is manifestly American.