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The Centre for Korean Research is pleased to present:

“The Spectographies of Asian Divas: Focusing on the first Korean Colonial Diva, Lee Erisu and Unclaimed Memory”



**By Yongwoo Lee
New York University**

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3:30-5:00 pm**

Room #120, C.K. Choi Building
1855 West Mall

Abstract: Lee Erisu, often referred to as the “Diva of the Century,” was the one of the first popular singers and Shinpa actresses in Korea under Japanese rule with the release of Ruins of Hwangsoŋ in 1927. She recorded popular songs in both Imperial Japan and Korea which confirmed her status as a cultural icon of inter-Asian colonial modernity. A legendary recital of Ruins of Hwangsoŋ in 1933 instigated collective mourning for Korea as the “ruined country” and provoked anti-Japanese patriotism. Lee also typified the modern woman figure and the concept of free love. In 1932, at the pinnacle of her career, Lee disappeared from the entertainment industry and tried to commit a suicide with a married man she loved. As a study of cultural memory, this paper focuses on Lee Erisu’s life and the ways in which her records addressed embedded structures of Japanese colonialism, the impact of Lee’s stardom on socio-cultural values, and the invention of a modern, female subjectivity. By tracing untouched narratives of Lee’s career and music, this paper articulates various discourses of acoustic modernity, modern free love as an ambivalent sense of desire and reversion, and accounts of audience reception to her music as both passive resistance to, and ambivalent desire for, colonial modernity.

Bio: Yongwoo Lee is an Assistant Professor/Faculty Fellow of East Asian Studies in the Department of East Asian studies at New York University. His primary research and teaching interests focus on media and cultural studies of modern Korea, critical theory, popular culture in East Asia, film studies, critical musicology, intellectual history of wartime Japan and postwar Korea, Korean contemporary art, and post/colonial historiography. He received his Ph.D. from the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University (2010) and an M.A. in Media and Cultural Studies from Seoul National University (2002). He taught East Asian media and cultural studies at Cornell University (2010-2013) as a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Society for the Humanities, and research fellow in Interdisciplinary Information Studies at the University of Tokyo (2006-2007).