Selling Smiles: Emotional Labor and Labor-Management Relations in 1930’s Colonial Korean Department Stores
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Department stores were the most luxurious retail institutions in colonial Korea, in terms of their architecture, interior design, and product offerings. While Korean department stores closely resembled their Western and Japanese counterparts in terms of form and function, the Korean department stores were unique for their position in developing retail practices and policies within a colonial context. Specifically, department stores hired young female workers to provide emotional labor to both customers and managers, which illustrated the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist modes of emotional labor. Furthermore, the creation of a corporate culture and employee training program that demanded a specific type of emotional labor resulted in various reactions from the employees, including complaints, criminal acts and violence, and the rise of class and political consciousness. Consequently, the evolution of the labor-management relations in 1930’s Korean department stores offers a gendered perspective into the economic and cultural aspects of Japanese control over life on the Korean peninsula, particularly through the bottom-up view of female department store workers.

Keywords: department stores, colonial Korea, emotional labor, retail industry, labor management relations