

Korea, A Unique Colony: Last to be Colonized and First to Revolt

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Abstract

This article discusses Japan’s colonization of Korea in the context of world time. Korea was a unique colony as it was one of the last to be colonized in the world. Japanese colonizers pushed a heavy-handed “military policy”, mainly because of the sharp resistance at their accession to power in the period 1905-1910. In 1919 when mass movements swept colonial and semi-colonial countries, including Egypt and Ireland, Koreans too rose up against Japan’s rule. Stung by wide resistance by Koreans in March and April 1919 as well as general foreign reproach, Japanese leaders adopted a “modern” practice by starting the imperial “cultural policy” in mid-1919. The most important consequence of the cultural policy was the integral role Korean industry soon had in linking the metropole with hinterland economies, and it is from this point that we can date Japan’s specific brand of architectonic capitalism that has influenced Northeast Asia down to the present.

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Several characteristics of Korea’s imperial experience distinguish it from other colonies.¹ First, it was “late” in world time. King Leopold of Belgium said in 1866 that “the world is pretty well pillaged already,” marking the violent spread of European colonialism across the globe. Japan’s annexation of Korea was almost half a century later. By that time anti-colonial ideas and movements had spread, particularly in England and the United States; Japan had barely got going with its colonial project when Woodrow Wilson issued his 14 points, calling for self-determination of all nations.

A second characteristic explains why Japan and Korea have a shared modern history so daunting and unnerving, like fingernails being scraped across a blackboard. It is because their relationship is more akin to Germany and France or England and Ireland, than it is to

Belgium and Zaire or Portugal and Mozambique. Global colonialism is often thought to have created new nations where none existed before, to draw new boundaries and bring diverse tribes and peoples together, out of a welter of geographic units divided along ethnic, racial, religious or tribal lines. But all of this existed in Korea for centuries before 1910. Korea had ethnic and linguistic unity and long-recognized national boundaries well before the peoples of Europe attained them. Furthermore, by virtue of their relative proximity to China, Koreans had always felt superior to Japan at best, or equal at worst.

Instead of creation the Japanese engaged in substitution after 1910: exchanging a Japanese ruling elite for the Korean yangban scholar-officials, most of whom were either co-opted or dismissed; instituting colonial imperative coordination for the old central state administration; exchanging Japanese modern education for the Confucian classics; building Japanese capital and expertise in place of the incipient Korean versions, Japanese talent for Korean talent; eventually even replacing the Korean language with Japanese.

Koreans never thanked the Japanese for these substitutions, did not credit Japan with creations, and instead saw Japan as snatching away the **ancien regime**, Korea's sovereignty and independence, its indigenous if incipient modernization, and above all its national dignity. Unlike some other colonial peoples, therefore, most Koreans never saw Japanese rule as anything but illegitimate and humiliating. Furthermore, the very closeness of the two nations—in geography, in common Chinese cultural influences, indeed in levels of development until the late 19th century—made Japanese dominance all the more galling to Koreans, and gave a peculiar intensity to the relationship, a hate/respect dynamic that suggested to Koreans, “there but for accidents of history go we.”

Third, quite apart from the anachronism of colonizing Korea, Japan had crucial great power support, particularly from Pres. Theodore Roosevelt. Japan got the empire the British and Americans wanted it to have, and only sought to organize an exclusive regional sphere when the other powers did the same, after the collapse of the world economy in the 1930s (and even then their attempt was half-hearted, and even then the development program was “orthodoxly western”);²

In the first decade of their rule Japanese colonizers pushed a heavy-handed “military policy” (budan seiji), mainly because of the sharp resistance at their accession to power in the period 1905-1910; even classroom teachers wore uniforms and carried swords. The Government-General stood above Korean society, exercising authoritative and coercive control. Its connections were only to the remnant upper class and colonial parvenus and even these were tenuous, designed to co-opt and thwart dissent, not to give Koreans a meaningful role in the state apparatus. The Japanese unquestionably strengthened central bureaucratic power in Korea, demolishing the old balance and tension with the landed aristocracy; operating from the top down, they effectively penetrated below the county level and into the villages for the first time, and in some ways neither post-colonial Korean state has ever gotten over it: Korea today is still a country with remarkably little local autonomy. Added to the old county-level pivot of central magistrate, local clerks and landed families, was a centrally-controlled, highly mobile national police force, responsive to the center and possessing its own communications and transportation facilities. For decades black-coated policemen kept order and helped “bring in the harvest,” manning the ramparts of the rice production circuit from paddyfield to middleman to storehouse to export platform, and thence to Japan.

In 1919 mass movements swept colonial and semi-colonial countries, including Egypt and Ireland, and Korea was no exception. What made Korea special was the nonviolent nature of the March First Movement, anticipating Gandhi's tactics in India. Drawing upon Woodrow Wilson's promises of self-determination, a group of thirty-three intellectuals petitioned for independence from Japan on March 1 and touched off nation-wide mass protests that continued for months. Japanese national and military police could not contain this revolt, and had to call in the army and even the navy. At least half a million Koreans took part in demonstrations in March and April, with disturbances in more than 600 different places. In one of the most notorious episodes, Japanese gendarmes locked protesters inside a church and burned it to the ground. In the end, Japanese officials counted 553 killed and over 12,000 arrested, but Korean nationalist sources put the totals at 7,500 killed and 45,000 arrested.

It is also interesting that Koreans had provided a stark contrast with Japan's other colony in Taiwan. Even after the rebellion in Korea and the watershed May Fourth Movement in China, an observant American traveler noted that quite a few Taiwanese wore Japanese clothes, whereas "I cannot recall ever having seen a Korean in getas and kimono." There was a big "independence question" in Korea, he wrote, but "Independence, if it is ever considered at all in Taiwan, is evidently regarded as hopeless, not even worth thinking about."³ Perhaps the most revealing remark ever made about the differences between colonial Taiwan and colonial Korea was one official's statement that "what can be done with incentives in Taiwan must be done with coercion in Korea."⁴

Stung by Korean resistance, Wilson and Lenin, and general foreign reproach, Japanese leaders suddenly understood that they were colonizers in the wrong century: wanting always to be "modern," they found their repressive rule condemned as out of date. So mid-1919 marked the start of the imperial "cultural policy" (bunka seiji), of tutoring Koreans toward a distant day of independence. The new policy inaugurated a period of "gradualist" resistance to colonialism, in which Koreans took advantage of relaxed restrictions on their freedom of speech and assembly to organize a variety of nationalist, socialist and communist groups, some openly and some clandestinely. Now Korean newspapers could be bought once again, and many other Korean-language publications appeared in the early 1920s. Writers like Yi Kwang-su became famous for novels in a nationalist vernacular, and others like Chông In-bo and Ch'oe Nam-sôn deepened studies of Korean history, examining the Tan'gun legend and the historical "soul" of Korea.⁵

American missionaries were divided in their judgement of the March First Movement. All of them were appalled at the violence of the colonial authorities, but many also blamed radicals and agitators for provoking the violence. Most applauded the new "cultural policies" after 1919, and echoed Japanese justifications for the new course. The Resident Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Herbert Welch, wrote in May 1920 that while many Koreans still demand immediate independence, "some of the most intelligent and far-seeing" Koreans

...are persuaded that there is no hope of speedy independence, and that they must settle down for a long period to build up the Korean people, in physical conditions, in knowledge, in morality, and in the ability to handle government concerns....⁶

This, of course, was Japanese Premier Hara Kei's justification for the new "cultural policy," to

prepare Koreans “in due course” (Hara’s words) for a distant day of independence. A colonial administrator, Nitobe Inazō, explained the rationale this way in 1919:

I count myself among the best and truest friends of Koreans. I like them.... I think they are a capable people who can be trained to a large measure of self-government, for which the present is a period of tutelage. Let them study what we are doing in Korea, and this I say not to justify the many mistakes committed by our militaristic administration, nor to boast of some of our achievements. In all humility, but with a firm conviction that Japan is a steward on whom devolves the gigantic task of the uplifting of the Far East, I cannot think that the young Korea is yet capable of governing itself.⁷

Christian opposition to the Japanese is both a fact and a legend. The churches were sanctuaries in times of violence, like the 1919 independence movement, and many Western missionaries encouraged underdog and egalitarian impulses. But the post-1945 image of Syngman Rhee and other pro-American politicians as great Christian leaders and resisters to colonialism is false:

Men like Syngman Rhee and Kim Kyu-sik went to missionary schools like Pai Chai less for their Christianity than to look for political position through English. Enrollment at Pai Chai decline when English was de-emphasized; in 1905, within a day or two of enrollment, ‘half the school had gone elsewhere in search of English.’

It is the humble among Koreans who have truly been drawn to Christianity: at the turn of the century, “conversions among the 30,000 of Seoul’s outcast butcher class soon became ‘one of the most remarkable features of evangelical efforts.’”⁸ The hierarchy of Korean society pushed commoners toward the egalitarian ideal of everyone the same before God.

The largest split, however, brought Korea into the mainstream of world history after World War I: it was between liberal idealism and socialism, between Wilson and Lenin. Liberals had the advantage of association with Wilson’s ideals of self-determination, and the disadvantage that the U.S. was not interested in supporting Korean independence; furthermore their social base within Korea was very slim. The socialists had the disadvantage of Japanese police action, which targeted and walked off to jail anyone espousing “Bolshevik” ideas, and the advantage of a potentially large mass base and a spirit of sacrifice on behalf of Korea, so that by the end of the 1920s they were leading the Korean resistance movement. As the leading scholar of Korean communism, Dae-sook Suh, put it, leftists and communists

...succeeded in wresting control of the Korean revolution from the Nationalists; they planted a deep core of Communist influence among the Korean people, particularly the students, youth groups, laborers and peasants. Their fortitude and, at times, obstinate determination to succeed had a profound influence on Korean intellectuals and writers. To the older Koreans, who had groveled so long before seemingly endless foreign suppression, communism seemed a new hope and a magic touch.... For Koreans in general, the sacrifices of the Communists, if not the idea of communism, made strong appeal, far stronger than any occasional bomb-throwing exercise of the Nationalists. The haggard appearance of the Communists suffering from torture, their stern and disciplined attitude toward the common enemy of all Koreans, had a far-reaching effect on people.⁹

By the same token, the 1930s were much more polarized than the previous decade; Japanese put immense pressure on prominent Koreans to collaborate; the tragedy of Korean collaboration can be seen in a person like Ch'oe Rin, a key leader of the March First Movement, who by 1938 was giving speeches lauding "the Yamato people" and "the eternal, single-family lineage of the [Japanese] Imperial Household,"¹⁰ or a great modernizer and nationalist like Yun Ch'i-ho accepting a position in the House of Peers, or the alacrity with which the leaders of business like Kim Sông-su threw their lot in with the big Japanese **zaibatsu** and profited from the war.

These were people who would have been natural leaders of an independent and self-confident Korea, harbingers of a middle-class revolution. But because of their collaboration (under tremendous Japanese pressure to be sure, but then others continued to resist in spite of that) the Japanese succeeded in compromising the emergence of a modern, liberal elite.

One of the longest-running influences of the March 1 Movement is also the least appreciated. It convinced Japanese leaders to try and co-opt moderate Korean leaders and isolate radical ones. Under the new "cultural policy," Korean commerce began to grow. One source argued for "a tremendous increase in the number of Korean entrepreneurs," but by the end of the decade Koreans still held only about three per cent of total paid-up capital. Most Korean capitalists were still wholesalers, brokers and merchants dealing in grain or grain-based liquor transactions, with this activity mushrooming in the new ports.

The most important fruit of the cultural policy for Korean industry was the integral role it soon had in Japan's "administrative guidance" of the entire Northeast Asian regional economy. Now Korea was to play a part in plans linking the metropole with hinterland economies, and it is from this point that we can date Japan's specific brand of architectonic capitalism that has influenced Northeast Asia down to the present.¹¹ Stefan Tanaka has argued that as Japan embarked on imperial conquests on the mainland, in the discourse of *tōyōshi* (Oriental or East Asian history, a kind of nativism) Korea and Manchuria became mere "regions", often lumped together as *mansen* (Manshu and Chosen). If this had primarily a political-economic aspect until the Sino-Japanese War began, this concept soon changed into a "metanational greater regionalism:" for scholars like Hirano Yoshitarō, *tōyō* could extend beyond the East Asian nation states, but was still to be distinguished from imperialism, where "the mother country is pitted against the colony."¹²

Japan is among the very few imperial powers to have located modern heavy industry in its colonies: steel, chemicals, hydroelectric facilities in Korea and Manchuria, and automobile production for a time in the latter. According to Samuel Ho, by the end of the colonial period Taiwan "had an industrial superstructure to provide a strong foundation for future industrialization": the main industries were hydroelectric, metallurgy (especially aluminum), chemicals, and an advanced transport system. By 1941, factory employment, including mining, stood at 181,000 in Taiwan. Manufacturing grew at an annual average rate of about 8 percent during the 1930s.¹³

Industrial development was much greater in Korea, perhaps because of the relative failure of agrarian growth compared to Taiwan but certainly because of Korea's closeness both to Japan and to the Chinese hinterland (see tables 2 and 3). By 1940, 213,000 Koreans were working in industry, excluding miners, and not counting the hundreds of thousands of Koreans who migrated to factory or mine work in Japan proper and in Manchuria. Net value

of mining and manufacturing grew by 266 percent between 1929 and 1941.¹⁴ By 1945 Korea had an industrial infrastructure that, although sharply skewed toward metropolitan interests, was among the best developed in the Third World. Furthermore, both Korea and Taiwan had begun to take on semiperipheral characteristics. Korea's developing periphery was Manchuria, where it sent workers, merchants, soldiers, and bureaucrats who occupied a middle position between Japanese overlords and Chinese peasants; as Korean rice was shipped to Japan, millet was imported from Manchuria to feed Korean peasants in a classic core-semiperiphery-periphery relationship. As for Taiwan, its geographic proximity to Southeast Asia and South China made it "a natural location for processing certain raw materials brought in from, and for producing some manufactured goods for export to, these areas."¹⁵

We see the kernel of this logic in the Government-General's Industrial Commission of 1921, which for the first time called for supports to Korea's fledgling textile industry and for it to produce not just for the domestic market, but especially for exports to the Asian continent, where Korean goods would have a price advantage. This was by no means a purely "top-down" exercise, either, for Koreans were part of the Commission and quickly called for state subsidies and hothouse "protection" for Korean companies. The nurturing of a Korean business class was a necessity if Japan's new policy of "gradualism" was to have any meaning, and this was in effect its birthday party—although a controversial one (three days before the Commission opened, two bombs were thrown into the Government-General building).¹⁶ That Japan had much larger ideas in mind, however, is obvious in the proposal for "General Industrial Policy" put before the 1921 conference:

Since Korea is a part of the imperial domain, industrial plans for Korea should be in conformity with imperial industrial policy. Such a policy must provide for economic conditions in adjacent areas, based on [Korea's] geographical position amid Japan, China, and the Russian Far East.

One of the Japanese delegates explained that Korean industry would be integral to overall planning going on in Tokyo, and would require some protection if it were to accept its proper place in "a single, coexistent, co prosperous Japanese-Korean unit."

In conclusion let me ask a question that rarely gets voiced: when all is said and done what did Japan get out of its takeover of Korea? With the benefit of more than a century of hindsight, was it worth it? Eleven decades later, Japan's relationship with the Republic of Korea is still fraught with issues left over from the colonial period, particularly the ultimate fate of the sexual slaves or "comfort women." But what Japanese colonizer could have imagined another half of Korea, formed in 1948 as an anti-Japanese state, led by the colonial resistance, with which Japan still has no formal relations in 2019 and this country is now armed with nuclear weapons and missiles. This is how colonialism produces utterly unanticipated nightmares.

In Japan, a unitary and free country, the unwillingness of most historians honestly to assess their imperial history is a constant insinuation that the imperial impulse may still not be dead. With Japan's record in China, perhaps there is some sincere reflection. There is almost none in regard to Japan's activities in Korea. The twentieth century began with Japan's defeat of Russia and its slow rise toward global stature, that, as it drew nearer, also drew Japan toward disaster like a moth toward a flame. England and America were the Pacific powers of the first half of this century, and they welcomed Japan as a junior partner but not

as a hegemon. Japan still has to deal with lingering apprehensions about its ability to live comfortably with the rest of the world, and those apprehensions are nowhere greater than among its near neighbors. Japan is Icarus, running toward the sun.

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This article is a part of The Special Issue: A Longue Durée Revolution in Korea: March 1st, 1919 to the Candlelight Revolution in 2018. Please see [the Table of Contents](#).

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Notes

¹*For the symposium on the March 1st Movement held in Seoul March 28-29, 2019, I was asked to give a PowerPoint speech. Since I came to certain firm conclusions about March 1st many years ago, I asked myself if I still thought these generalizations were true. I did. So what follows is mostly drawn from my 2005 book, *Korea's Place in the Sun*. Had they asked for a paper, I would have been obligated to say something new.

²Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941-1945*, pp. 3-4, 15, 20, 25-27. Iriye dates Japanese plans for an exclusive Northeast Asian regional hegemony from 1936, but according to him it still did not have a blueprint in 1939, and was still dependent on the core powers in system until the middle of 1941.

³Franck, Harry A., *Glimpses of Japan and Formosa* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), pp. 183-84.

⁴Ramon H. Myers, and Mark R. Peattie, eds., *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 42.

⁵The best account of the post-1919 changes is in Robinson, Michael. *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920-25*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988.

⁶Quoted in Alleyne Ireland, *The New Korea* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1926), p. 70.

⁷Quoted in Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 248.

⁸Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 207.

⁹ Suh, Dae-sook, *The Korean Communist Movement, 1918-48*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 132.

¹⁰ Carter J. Eckert, *Offspring of Empire: The Koch'ang Kims and the Origins of Korean Capitalism*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991, p. 231.

¹¹ Bruce Cumings, "The Origins and Development of the Northeast Asian Political Economy," *International Organization*, winter 1984

¹² Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient*, pp. 247-57.

¹³ Samuel P. Ho, *The Economic Development of Taiwan, 1860-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 70-90; Lin Ching-yuan, *Industrialization in Taiwan, 1946-7: Trade and Import-Substitution Policies for Developing Countries* (New York: Praeger, 1973), pp. 19-22.

¹⁴ Edward S. Mason, *The Economic and Social Modernization of the Republic of Korea* (Harvard University East Asian Monographs, 1981), pp. 76, 78.

¹⁵ Lin, *Industrialization in Taiwan*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Eckert, *Offspring of Empire*, pp. 44, 82-84.

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