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CHID 485 Comparative Colonialisms

The Epistemology of Japanese Colonialism:

Lines of Identity and Power

In December of 1871 the government of Japan sent a delegation of nearly forty top scholars, scientists, diplomats, and writers—supported by a staff of cooks, translators, and guards to bring the total party count to well over 100 people—all led by the Ambassador Plenipotentiary Iwakura Tomomi on a whirlwind tour of the West.[1] For the next two years, the majority of the mission would remain away from home visiting, and studying: the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, and France. The purpose of such a large delegation, outfitted with not only notebooks for observation but a mission to renegotiate Japan's treaties with Western powers under the new direction of the Meiji government, was to study the theoretical and material worlds of the powerful West for beneficial adoption by Japan. The Meiji Revolution[2] that would drive Japan to become the only major power of non-Western origin was still five years away, the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" nearly fifty years in the future. What was it that Japan was looking for in this mission, to send the second-highest ranking official, Iwakura, away on such a potentially dangerous and far-flung chase? And what did this mission mean for the development of "Japaneseness," for Japanese [inter]national identity?

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1 Thorne, Ben. "The Iwakura Mission in Britain, 1872," (Preface) n.d. London School of Economics 98, 349 (1998): 2

2 This is alternately called a "Revolution" and "Restoration," seemingly dependent on the writer. I have selected "Revolution" here to better capture the upheaval and turmoil of the period—much more revolutionary than the socio-political equivalent of patching old trousers.

It is not the aim of this essay to examine in detail the reports generated on, by, or about the Iwakura Mission. Rather it is important to think about the Iwakura Mission in the context of the decades that followed it—which saw Japan establish a Western-style nation-state and, in the twentieth century, colonies of its own in the European model. None of this is to suggest that Japan merely copied Western institutions, customs or ideas in pursuit of modernity and material development, including military, consumer, and industrial goods; but that the path of modernization itself locked Japan into something akin to Westernization. The ordering of the Japanese Imperial project was more than informed by Western Empire, the former was very nearly a perfect clone of the latter, they shared highly similar DNA. Likewise, the systems of identity that arose after the Meiji were shaped through their interactions with the colonial system and action.

The Western nation, its physicalities and modalities, were and are often still seen and presented as the only way towards human modernity. That is, as Thomas Lamarre put it, the concept of modernity is conflated with the process of modernization, itself interchangeable with and taken, by the West especially, to stand for a material and cultural Westernization.[3] Theories that explained the phenomenon of Western preeminence were themselves products of a system of dominance, that is to say a dominant West decided itself to be superior—in a myriad of ways, some now popularly discredited, others still in force—due to some inherent and unique feature of Western civilization. Western dominance was the natural order of things, the East, a convenient foil, was then the object there to be constructed out of the tiniest of fragments, pieced together and made sense of. As first argued by Edward Said in his seminal 1978 work, *Orientalism*, the

3 Lamarre, Thomas. Introduction to *Impacts of Modernities*, ed. Thomas Lamarre and Kang Nae-Hui. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004.

West was as much made by contrasting itself with the East, as the East was by the West.[4] The exact same process, with some exceptions, is found in Imperial Japan's annexation, study, and management of the Korean peninsula in the early to mid-twentieth century.

In the past few decades, scholars concerned with the critique of Empire have begun to emphasize less the totalizing aspects of Empire, arguing that to focus incessantly on the domination and subjugation of colonized peoples is to effectively remove their power; they pointed out that violence and oppression are always met with resistance and that [Japanese] colonialism was no different. Along with viewing the subjects of various colonial enterprises as variegated and autonomous, scholarship has also begun to view the colonizers themselves as a diverse set of individuals—all working within and perpetuating a shared structure for sure—with a multiplicity of understanding about their dominated-subject.

Crafting a nationalistic history of the early twentieth century after the end of the second World War, Korean scholars (and many scholars in the United States and elsewhere) took to task the Japanese imperial project; nationalist movements offer the under-appreciated historian a chance to become a national hero in creating a favorable backstory for the nation. Scholars focused on the brutality, violence and prejudice of the Japanese army, including the infamous human experiments of group 731.[5] The first ten years of Japanese rule in Korea are called by the Japanese "military rule," (*budan seiji*) while the Koreans refer to that period as the "dark years."

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4 Said, Edward. Introduction to *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978.

5 Tomiyama, Ichiro. "Colonialism and the Sciences of the Tropical Zone: The Academic Analysis of Difference in 'the Island Peoples'." in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, ed. Tani Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 200

[6] Korea was controlled by the Japanese Imperial Military via the Government-General of Chosen (GGC), and the law required the General Director to be a military officer.

The Imperial project as it unfolded in Japan bears striking resemblance to that carried out by Western nations, particularly those of the British and French empires, which dominated the globe at the time of Japan's transition into modernity. Explicitly informed as it was by the overt adoption of Western systems, this is not wholly surprising. What is more interesting are the ways in which Japan's experience of modernization differed in practice. Japan adopted a racialized view of the world along European lines, differentiating themselves from the "Asians" present in Korea, China, and the South Pacific. But a racial understanding of the world also positioned the Japanese much closer to their colonial subjects than any Englishman would ever be to someone from the Indian subcontinent. The temporal distinction thus became a much stronger feature of Japanese colonialism, with similar echoes in post-war American discourse about "bringing peoples into the modern world." Japan's civilizing mission, the "Japanese burden," was to lift the long-lost and backwards Asians from their squalor into the modern age. The Korean people, however different they were made out to be to aggrandize the Empire's vast conquests, were still seen as having common stock with the Japanese; cousins separated by chronological rather than temporal distance.[7] In this way, the Japanese colonization was framed as more than a simple rescue-the-savages, it was a family reuniting for mutual benefit. The British famously claimed to be spreading civilization, but there was no sense of a shared past with the peoples of the Queen's Empire, except in the most abstract and, later on, racialized evolutionary terms.

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6 Atkins, Taylor E. *Primitive Selves: Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910-1945*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 26

7 Ibid. 59

Those states victorious in the second world war tended to portray Japan as haughty and contemptuous of anything and everything not Japanese. The Japanese Imperial project, especially the policy of "making Japanese" all Imperial subjects, was more monstrous, totalizing, and threatening for this lack of human curiosity. We can imagine, at the close of the war, the uncomfortable position those Western powers still in possession of colonies were put in. To vilify Imperialism ran the risk of criticizing those practices they themselves employed, whereas to deem it "Japanese Imperialism" with the extra signifier allowed them some moral distance. The image of a Japanese Imperial administrator filled with nothing but inhuman contempt for the Korean subjects of Empire is, sadly, not historically impossible, however, there is ample evidence that many Japanese scholars, administrators, soldiers, and common people took enjoyment in the traditions and material culture of the colonized.

Rather, as Taylor Atkins argues, the positioning of Korea and Korean things, within the Japanese Empire was a much more complex process, and produced a corpus of imperial knowledge that was not directly used for the nefarious ends of subjugation. The collection of Korean material culture and traditions Atkins dubs "Koreana," drawing lines from the popularity of contemporary K-pop artists in Japan to imperial fascination with the "primitive cousins" off Japan's western coast. Atkins' first argument that Japan viewed Korea with nostalgic longing finds expression in the ethnographies and surveys conducted by the GGC throughout the Imperial era.[8]

8 Atkins. 52

Japan annexed Korea in 1905, fighting Russian forces for control of the peninsula and later Manchuria.[9] After the ten years of military rule, the GGC announced a new policy of "Cultural Rule," or *bunka seiji*, a term incredibly ominous in a contemporary understanding. The term *bunka* was a popular term in Japan's *modan* (post-Meiji, pre-war) period, which encompasses the more famous *ero-guro-nonsensu* (erotic grotesque nonsense) era of the late nineteen-twenties.[10] People went to see *bunka* films, there were *bunka* restaurants and *bunka* clothes, television, colors, and activities. The term was more often than not coterminous with "Western," used so heavily in advertising and as a descriptor as to become effectively meaningless.[11] So while the term "cultural rule" may seem to connote a policy of totalitarian monitoring, it is more likely to have been understood by the issuing Japanese authorities as a "modern" method of control that would curry favor with the West and proponents of humane Imperialism, that is, Imperialism with the appearance of a conscience.

Those academic disciplines whose interests are closer aligned with those of empire are always more politicized than those whose pursuits have little or no immediate practical relevance.[12] Ethnography, inasmuch as it was thought to provide an accurate picture of those destined for colonization, was seen as a useful tool by the nineteenth-century empires, becoming even something of a proxy competition among nations. Whichever empire's Anthropologists

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9 Uchida, Jun. *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876-1945.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2

10 Silverberg, Miriam. "Japanese Modernity Within Modernity: Erotic Grotesque Nonsense." (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007)

11 Atkins. 36

12 Said. 10

could discover, tame, and make useful the most bizarre savage took home the prestige. The era of cultural rule brought with it a renewed governmental interest in Korean folk-lore, marriage ceremonies, courtship, and of course material culture including music. To rule the cultural landscape of Korea, the GGC employed a technique borrowed from the European elite but as old as empire itself: ethnography. Ethnographies are, at their most basisc, an account of the Other in the perfect sense of an Other distinct from, and categorically inferior to, "Us." The "Us" is generally understood to be a bond between author and reader, a sort of high-minded gossip about "those people over there" between superiorly cultured individuals. In its employment of a scientific discourse to create, bind, and manage the Korean peninsula, Japan was no different from any other empire at the time.

Imperial ethnographies, compiled as they were with the explicit aim to understand the native for purposes of control, fit perfectly into the Orientalist framework. We could ask for no clearer parallel between the European colonial projects and the Japanese in Korea than the ethnographies, and the attitudes they express, from the Government-General of Chosen. The Annual Report from the GGC of 1907, remarking on the gendered state of education, had this to say about Korea: "The Oriental idea of respecting the education of boys while underrating the education of girls is still prevalent among Koreans."[13] This snug fit into what we could recognize as a peculiarly Western imperialism is no mere accident of translation, it was an important act of distancing. We can tell the author presumed a similarity with the reader, set up and above the Oriental Korean subject, the backwards and temporally distant peoples.

13 Atkins. 64

Ethnographies and the distance they implied tread a different line in the Japanese context than perhaps any other empire, precisely because the Japanese identification with the Korean people as “lost cousins.” The British never made pretense to be related to the Indian, nor did the Dutch in Southeast Asia. Indeed, it is no secret that racial ordering in more contemporary imperial thought was buffered by scientific racism—natural and objective proof that non-Europeans were inferior, savage, and destined to benefit only from being ruled. Metaphorical distance in the case of Korea from Japan served two functions identified by Atkins: 1) to make Japan’s imperial conquests more impressive by showing the Korean to be a strange, distant, and wholly non-Japanese character and; 2) to situationally, strategically, paint the Koreans as temporally distant cousins of the Japanese, who could be brought into the future and made grand by the vast power of the imperial state.[14]

The first function is increasingly apparent in ethnographies published later during the war, when Japanese researchers made names for themselves in the newly acquired “Pacific Territories.” In the Pacific, difference was an imperfection read onto the subjects of the Islanders, a diagnosis produced from the symptoms of difference via a process that “always returns practical relations, which are never unrelated to colonial conditions, to the epistemological world.”[15] In this way too were Koreans read: an overabundance of evidence pointed to their temporal distance from Japan, their backwardness was therefore an unassailable fact. The second function was a unique rationalization present in the case of Korea. It is also this point that was more explicitly useful to the Government-General of Chosen, part of a larger international trend

14 Atkins. 56

15 Ichiro. 205

at the time to paint colonial enterprise as necessary, if not liberating for those living in the colonies. Bringing the cousins "in from the cold" of backwardness was Japan's version of the White Man's Burden; painting the imperial power as being pure-intentioned and even somewhat hapless in the whole matter. The most acceptable type of domination is one that vehemently denies itself to be anything of the sort, wrapping itself in the cloak of justice and goodwill despite the reality of the situation.

Expansionary justification, with its attendant positioning of the powerful as mere agents of an overwhelmingly inevitable process, was always one of the epistemological mechanisms of Empire. However, justifications made in the name of assimilationist "saving" or "democratizing" were not part of Japanese policy in the Tokugawa (pre-Meiji) era. The formation of Japanese identity, an "Imagined Community of Japaneseness," was not a salient feature of either the everyday nor the political realm before modernization.[16] That sense, the notion of statehood and individual identity as being joined to people of a nation, has been part of the global formation of nation[-states] over the past century, nearly all of them driven by the colonial projects of European countries. Many nationalisms arose as an explicit rejection of colonial rule, still containing within them however the notion of "this place" (the current or former colony) as distinct and somehow set apart from the unitary world of "elsewhere." Japan was likewise once a site of pre-colonial identity formations. To investigate the changes wrought in the Japanese system by the Meiji restoration and modernization, then subsequent rise to imperial power, it is useful to examine identity as it existed, functioned, and reasoned in the Tokugawa era.

It should be made clear that Japan had long had contact with civilizations beyond its borders—no doubt helpfully delineated by the very physical end provided an island nation—

16 To use Benedict Anderson's famous phrase (*Imagined Communities*. Brooklyn: Verso Publishing, 1983)

including Western powers from the mid-sixteenth century. There was China to the West, a source of much influence on Japanese philosophy and writing, other peoples known to be to the North, and the Europeans from a world away across the seas. There was a sense of Japan as a distinctive culture: a shared language and religious practices, a set geographic range and other markers present for all human groups. However, there was no necessary sense among those in the language or geographic area that they comprised a system set against another, more different Other. Rather, in Tokugawa Japan, identity was a function that was mainly focused around the status-group of an individual, that is his or her position within society *set against members of the same society*.[17] [18]

David Howell's argument from his book *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* lays out three geographies of identity: 1) the geography of polity and the Tokugawa state, contrasted for example with the power of the outlying daimyo and Monastic temples; 2) the geographies of status within Japan's early-modern status system, between peasant and samurai, daimyo and *eta* (outcasts) and; 3) geographies of civilization, or the border of what was understood as "Japan" during the Tokugawa. It is number three that we would draw a line from to the modern constructions of the Japanese self as a citizen and later imperial subject of the Emperor.

Under the Tokugawa administration, people were subject to various claims by those groups whom they belonged to, with each person being simultaneously part of several groups. A

17 Howell, David L. *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 3

18 The Tokugawa Shogunate was the name of the government that ruled Japan before the Meiji period from 1603-1867, with daimyos (powerful warlords) from other clans all deferring to the Shogun ruler, who hailed from the Tokugawa clan. It is also called the Tokugawa or Edo Bakufu. The Shogun was the individual ruler, the Tokugawa his clan name.

peasant, for example, would be a member of the peasant class, with responsibility to the local lord to turn over a portion of grain each year as taxes (of which the Lord would then owe to the imperial court) based on the size of land allotted. But that same peasant might also raise livestock for sale, and perhaps have a side-business providing the carcasses to the local outcast group to be made into leather and meat goods. The overriding sense of self was, to any individual at this time, tied to their position in the status-system, not to any notion of "Japan" or even as subject of the Tokugawa.[19] Borders, imagined as real and read onto the physical plane, are a good place to begin investigating identity. What is "within" is known, and that which is "beyond" is the unknown, the land of the foreign Other.

The Tokugawa shogunate, like the pre-modern and medieval governments before it, had nominal control to "all of Japan," but the power of the central court was tenuous at best in the daily management of not only peripheral lands but also in the central region over people's actions within their status groups. Samurai at the periphery may have thought themselves subjects of their local ruler, with the central authority of the shogunate a "remote and in many ways 'foreign' entity." [20] As long as the periphery acknowledged the imperial court's superiority and kept paying their equivalent taxes, they were allowed virtual autonomy. Subjects, for example a petty samurai, of any domain would identify more readily with those—even from different status-groups—from their own domain before samurai that served other rulers. Yet in the functioning of the system as a whole, it was *more important* that they were samurai as a status than the peculiarities of who they served. Status, Howell stresses, was not the way in which an individual made their economic livelihood, but was rather the duties they were required

19 Howell. 5-7

20 Ibid. 199

to perform in support of the imperial court in the abstract and the local governing body for their status group in particular. Thus, a samurai may in theory serve as a retainer in arms for a local ruler, but in effect make money for his household (and it was almost invariably a he, Tokugawa Japan was very much a patriarchy; a whole household's status would follow the male head of the house, wifes and children were not allotted their own status separate of their husband or father) by doing construction work in the village or guarding mail deliveries for the monasteries.[21]

As identity was located in the performance of duties for the Tokugawa Shogunate, it lacked an essentializing element in the way of race or ethnicity. Status was in general inherited, but could be changed depending on one's abilities or fortune. The missing ethnic component meant that peoples on the periphery of the Tokugawa could in practice enter into the status system and become "Japanese" by virtue of their obtaining a place performing duties in support of the Shogun. The notion that Ainu were essentially incapable of becoming Japanese was the outcome of an essentializing notion of citizenship brought about during modernization.[22]

The status system arose not from a conscious ordering of the Tokugawa—or even pre-Tokugawa—state, but rather grew out of the need of the Shogun to maintain perpetual military readiness. As the Tokugawa was formed in military conquest of numerous warlords, the state was formed in the process of continuous war, with institutions remaining long into the three-hundred year rule of the clan, albeit with a morphed functionality.[23] Daimyo were allowed autonomy so long as they provided material support on both a continuous and as-needed basis, sending grain

21 Howell. 27

22 Ibid. 6-7

23 Ibid. 21

to the center each season and maintaining a fighting force of samurai. The potential for mass mobilization was always retained, although rarely used in the three-hundred years of relative peace until the Meiji government. But whereas the Tokugawa government had been working for hegemony within its own borders, the Meiji government after the revolution was seeking hegemony over its population and those peoples in the lands beyond the new Japanese nation-state.

The role of the Daimyo as semi-autonomous actors whose power in effect supported the goal of the Shogunate, was similarly played out under colonial administration in Korea by what Jun Uchida refers to as "brokers of empire."[24] These men (and not only a few women) served as both agents and pawns of the Japanese state in Korea. As settlers, they were the "boots on the ground" in Japan's quest to "Japanize, nationalize, and imperialize" Korea (*Nihonjinka, kokuminka,* and *kominka*).[25] Japanese settlers, like the French in Algeria, dominated the local political and economic landscape in a three-way power triangle accompanied by local Korean elites and the metropole (imperial government) in Tokyo. The settlers, like the daimyo before them, could draw strength for themselves at either the expense of the local Korean elites or the metropole (rival daimyo and the court), in a complex set of alliances that saw them both arguing for Korean independence and supporting colonial policies that further subjugated the Korean population while increasing the strength of the state. These settlers saw themselves as immutably Japanese, citizens of the Emperor and representatives of the "pan-Asian" future that they were helping to make, and profit from, right here in Korea. Uchida paints a picture of the settlers as a

24 Uchida. 5

25 Ibid. 360

diverse cast of characters, from wealthy businessmen like Kobayashi Genroku, founder of the Chojiya company, whom Uchida opens the book with; to Jinnai Mokichi from Seoul Chamber of Commerce who advocated strongly for a railway linking Japanese Korea with those territories in Manchuria to be worked by Korean laborers.[26]

This delicately balanced interplay of power was eventually subsumed during the war years, as the Imperial state came to dominate completely all aspects of administration and push full-ahead with the plan to make Koreans Japanese. The formation of the modern state at the end of the 19th century had redrawn the lines of distinction both within and beyond Japan, lines which blurred for the settlers as they lived, worked, and "creolized" away from the metropole and which were haphazardly redrawn onto the settlers during and after the war. The GGC formed the National Spiritual Mobilization, a quasi-official amalgamation of statesmen, generals, merchants, and academics who supported whole-heartedly the Imperial state and took up calls for everyone —now subjects of an empire at war—to take up "patriotic service to the nation on the home front."[27] In much the same way that individuals a hundred years earlier had been defined by their participation in contributing to the well-being of the state, now identity (and one's life under the militarized regime) depended on support for official action and thought. Support for the colonial project, for modernization, made one a Japanese citizen; and to be Japanese was to support the process of modernization and behave in a manner conducive to the workings of the colonial project.

26 Uchida. 1-3, 316

27 Ibid. 357

After the Japanese surrender in 1949, virtually all of the former settlers were repatriated back to Japan, where they were considered neither fully Japanese nor entirely Korean—former settlers and especially children born there had been creolized.[28] The sense of loss felt so poignantly in Japanese modernity was transcribed into the histories, both personal and official, of these people who had once been invaluable to the project of Japanese expansion and yet were now viewed with suspicion, if not outright hostility, by those who had remained firmly in the metropole and were therefore uncontaminated.[29] The act of remembering, highly political even today, has been fraught as former settlers claim innocence along with the rest of the Imperial citizenry, victims of state power merely doing what was necessary to ensure their own well-being; while other memoirs decry the hiding behind innocence, either taking to task their own role in the violence and horrors of the era or, somewhat more rare, supporting the Imperial state retroactively.

In all of the transformations of Japanese identity and power, those adopted systems that allowed a person to *be* Japanese, a conception of duty to the state has played a large role. From the Tokugawa era and the binding status-system requirements of grain and service to the Meiji identification with citizens as part of a nation-state tools for Imperial grandeur, Japaneseness and identity has remained intricately linked to institutional and state power.

28 Uchida. 400 (“Creole” term not used by Uchida, this is my addition)

29 Atkins. 59

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