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History R1B

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# Japanese Korea

In 1910, after wars against both Russia and China, Japan annexed Korea. Forty years after the Meiji Restoration, Japan could finally announce itself as a major power to the world. Japanese colonialism in Korea lasted just thirty-five years, as Japan lost its empire when it lost the Pacific War. Many critics have addressed the differences between Japanese imperialism and that of European powers, but a larger question remains as to the motives behind Japanese imperialism. Was Japan playing from a defensive position, taking any opportunity they could get to increase its global reputation, with a "conquer or be conquered" mindset? Did Japan, much like Europe, simply want more resources and more money, and then looked to Korea to find them? Or did Japan wish to "modernize" Korea, be it for Korea's benefit or not? After considering the entirety of the Japanese colonial period, however, it appears the most important motive was to completely and forcefully assimilate Korea into the Japanese empire, a policy which did not go as planned.

Japan's first major involvement in Korean affairs was war against China, which resulted in a massive Japanese victory. Uchimura Kanzō, a well-known Japanese pacifist, wrote at the time that the war was "glorious," "righteous," and that Japan carried with it a "chivalric-spirit." Written like a true classical Christian scholar, he related Japan to Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, and Queen Elizabeth's England all in a single sentence when describing the Sino-Japanese war as a conflict with a "smaller nation representing a newer civilization lying near a

larger nation representing an older civilization" (Uchimura 72). However, for all his name-dropping and religious buzzwords, Uchimura's bias reveals itself throughout his work—China is "the incorrigible hater of Progress," a "panderly wretch," and "the world's most backward nation" (69, 74). Uchimura's hatred of China leaves doubts as to whether he truly wants Japan to fight this war for Korea's benefit, or only for China's detriment. He puts Japanese imperialism in a Rudyard Kipling kind of light, where the upstart Japan is off to free Korea from evil China.

In his chapter, scholar Marius B. Jansen mentions that "civilizing mission" rhetoric as a possible justification for Japanese imperialism. Jansen describes the "'moral' face of imperialism" in the West as "the promise of bringing civilization and Christianity to backward races," and uses this to show that Japan didn't face much foreign criticism for its new imperialist policies (Jansen 64). Uchimura Kanzo certainly embodies this line of thought. Yet Jansen gives no mention of any Japanese authority or any other public figure claiming that Japan was on a moral crusade by interfering in Korea, be they propagandizing or otherwise. The one example Jansen does provide is Japanese socialist Kotoku Shusui. "The goals of civilization, he argued, should be humanism, justice, and righteousness, but instead nationalism had liberated men from feudalism only to lead them into new forms of slavery" (65). These words also echo Uchimura, yet here this writer stands against Japanese imperialism. It is also not coincidental that after seeing the results of Japan's war with China, Uchimura wrote that he regretted ever supporting it in the first place. While Jansen tries to portray Kotoku as an outlier, this attitude actually may have been more common—it seems any outside observer regarding Japan's empire as "righteous" changed his tune by the end of the nineteenth century, before Korea was even annexed. While imperialism around the world certainly wasn't known for its morality, at least

that was how it was justified. However, in Japan, unlike the West, it seems nobody even pretended.

Yet Jansen may not be entirely wrong. The fact that Japan wasn't on a civilizing mission wasn't due to Japan seeing Korea as its equal, or the thought that Korea didn't need civilizing. Peter Duus writes that as early as the 1870s, Japan considered itself to be properly enlightened and the rest of Asia to be far behind. Duus filled his chapter, *Defining the Koreans*, with horrid descriptions of Korean life and politics written by Japanese travelers. One of the more outlandish pieces describes the "seven major products of Korea as shit, tobacco, lice, *kaesang* [courtesans], tigers, pigs, and flies" (Duus 401-2). While all of these depictions are very caricatural, and should not be considered entirely accurate, they definitely articulate the Japanese attitude of Korea. These observers saw Koreans as "passive and oppressed, unable to recognize or defend their own rights," an explanation for such lowly status. For Duus, this meant the Japanese saw the potential in Koreans to rise up to the supposed higher standard of the Japanese (411). This might sound exactly like what Jansen describes, but according to Duus, applying the notion of a civilizing mission to the Japan-Korea relationship doesn't work. As he writes, "the French notion of a *mission civilatrice* still recognized fundamental ethnic, religious, and cultural differences between the French and their subject peoples," differences which the Japanese did not have with Koreans (412). The difference between Jansen's and Duus's arguments may sound like a semantic one—both argue that Japan saw an opportunity to uplift what would become their new subjects in Korea, just like Europe did in Africa and Asia. Yet Duus brings up an important difference. Where French and Arabs had little in common, Japanese and Koreans were ethnically similar.

Before 1868, Japan was in much the same place Korea was in 1905. Because of the racial similarities Japan claimed to have with Korea, it is possible that Japan saw a bit of its own history on the peninsula, and therefore wanted to ensure that it didn't fall prey to the Western powers, like Japan very well could have earlier. Duus comes to the conclusion that Japan's interference and eventual annexation of Korea was completely natural. Japan just wanted to help out its fellow neighbor—"the result of a long and complex historical process of separation and reunion that stretched back into the realm of myth" (423). Jansen also concludes that Japanese imperialism was logical, but for a completely different reason. Here, Jansen does provide support for his argument, bringing in journalist Tokutomi Soho, who in 1913 argued "[imperialism] is a policy born out of necessity if we are to exist as a nation and survive as a race" (65). A key emphasis of the Meiji Restoration was the invention and vitalization of a Japanese nation, and what would be the point of this new nation if it still stood subservient to Western powers? Many argue that the Restoration itself was born out of Commodore Matthew Perry bullying Japan with warships in 1853. It could seem natural that Japan would become imperial abroad to ensure its own survival, or as Jansen says, "To expect deviation from a Japan that was explicitly modelling its international behavior on that of its peers is unreasonable" (66).

If two scholars are reaching the same end from two separate paths, with one even explicitly criticizing the other, maybe they're both right. Maybe imperialism, whatever the intent, was simply the only foreign policy Japan could ever have had during this period. That reasoning could easily have held true right at 1910, but the entirety of Japanese imperialism has to be considered, not just the beginning, but right up until the end of World War II.

The colonial period in Korea began with Japan making an attempt to *modernize* the Korean state. Terauchi Masatake, early Resident-General of Korea, claimed that intervention in

Korean affairs began "after having given the Koreans ample opportunity to prove their fitness for self-government, and after having found them wholly unprepared for the task" (Terauchi 220-1). While clearly not as egregious, this sounds very similar to the characterizations of Koreans that Duus provides. To the Japanese, Koreans were far below their standard, but because they had some things in common, they decided to help them out. Terauchi then proceeds to list all the reforms Japan put in place in Korea, from everything from taxes to communications. On the surface, it might seem like that that was Japan's goal, to "fix" Korea. However, somewhat predictably, all of these reforms have one thing in common. They all benefit the Japanese. For example, in Teracuhi's own words, "the issuing of title deeds of land, and the collecting of rents or land taxes in the foreign settlements, hitherto done by Korean Superintendents at treaty ports, have all been entrusted to the Japanese Residents" (228). Japan could spout all the propaganda it wanted about a shared race and shared nation, but it was all for Japan in the end.

What can be inferred from Terauchi is explicitly laid out by Bruce Cumings. For Cumings, despite Japan's talk of *positive* modernization reforms, Korea was "blinded" by an "ascendant country strong and determined enough to take its measure" (140). Rather than the "creation" that other European powers instituted, Japan's policy was "substitution." Where Duus looks through a Japanese lens, such as when he claims that Japanese avoided using the term "colony" to avoid putting Japan above Korea, Cumings looks through a Korean lens. As he writes, "Japanese imperialism stuck a knife in old Korea and twisted it ..." (140). When using such emphatic language, it might seem like Cumings is strictly anti-Japan, yet he's merely describing the Korean attitude towards Japan today. He does give Japan credit for some positive outcomes of Japanese rule. For example, when referencing the economic reforms Japan

instituted, Cumings describes Japan as having taught Korea a lesson, a lesson that Korea would later follow itself during its 1970s boom.

With all of his simple recounting of history, it's hard to establish exactly what Cumings's argument is. It seems as if he's arguing that Japanese colonialism, which split Korea into wealthy *chaebol* against poor peasants, or Japanese collaborators against Korean patriots, sent Korea on the path to civil war. This isn't much of an argument—the vast majority of the time an event, in this case the Korean War, is largely caused by what happened before, Japanese colonization. Although his argument isn't worthwhile, Cumings does provide deep insight into Japanese policy in Korea, and confirms what Terauchi skirted around. Yes, Japan sought to reform Korea, but, as with any other colonial power, they only did so to benefit themselves.

Regardless of Japanese motives, the question still remains as to whether Japan actually modernized Korea. Some say no, that modernization requires a nation developing on its own. Others point to the railroads Japan built and the products they made and say yes, Japan certainly modernized Korea. However, according to Chulwoo Lee, the entire basis of either side is wrong—they both presuppose that modernization is inherently a good thing. "Should, however, the question of modernization continue to possess such heavy political implications?" (21). His chapter then lays out an entirely new definition of modernity, one more focused on colonial governmental power rather than industry or ideology. In Lee's eyes, the specific laws implemented and enforced by a strong central authority that controlled everything from police, the judicial system, and land ownership are all signs of a truly modern government. With the examples Lee gives, down to the exact number of liquor and tobacco violations, Lee provides a pretty convincing argument that the Japanese government was in fact modern. However, all of that doesn't actually address the original acknowledged issue—"the question of whether

Japanese rule contributed to the modernization of Korea"—from Lee's very first sentence (21). Soon after the end of World War II and Japanese occupation of Korea, Korea fell into civil war. Cumings argues that the big effect of Japanese rule was Korean division. Sure, Japanese government might have been modern, but what does that say about Korea today? Lee offers nothing, and leaves it to his audience and other scholars to connect the pieces. Perhaps, if Lee could have pinpointed certain elements from Japanese times that can be found in Korea today, he might have actually been able to answer the question he told us he would answer.

In the introduction to the same book that featured Lee's article, Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson take the same path of presenting two opposite arguments, and disagreeing with both. In this case, one side says that everyone in Korea resisted Japanese conformity. Shin and Robinson don't need to tell us that's not true. Kim Sa-Ryang's fictional story, *Pegasus*, tells of a washed-up Korean writer who tries his best to become Japanese in order to stay relevant. The other side is the theory that it is impossible for a colonial government to modernize a nation. This can't be true, as Japan clearly brought in new technology to Korea, or, to use Lee's idea, instituted a modern form of government. Disagreeing with two absolutes isn't saying a whole lot, but real insight can be gained from what Shin and Robinson do agree with. "Japan sought to obtain cultural hegemony..." begins a paragraph on page eight. "The uneven spread of colonial modernity created a potential for constructing diverse and competing forms of identity within the complex field of *cultural hegemony maintained under Japanese rule*" is how the reading concludes (14, emphasis added). "Diverse and competing forms of identity" is a nice fluffy way to say what Cumings wrote, "It was thus this pressure cooker of a final decade that loosed upon postwar Korea a mass of changed and disgruntled people who deeply disordered the early postwar period" (183).

Why didn't this cultural hegemony work? Mark Caprio, Japanese historian, characterizes the Japan-Korea relationship as "peripheral colonization," an interesting choice because in spite of all of the talk of similarity, Korea and Japan were still not one and the same. For Caprio, this is why Japan's cultural assimilation policy didn't work—Korea stayed on the periphery. Japanese cultural policy was often contradictory. "The Japanese stubbornly continued practices that accented Japanese-Korean difference even while making efforts to reduce these differences by unifying school systems and having Koreans adopt Japanese names" (Caprio, 206). The big example Caprio provides is that Koreans living in Japan were forced to keep their family name on a government register. Tracking a certain ethnic group must run counter to the *naisen ittai* ideology that Japan constantly preached. In addition, the negative attitudes Japan held towards Korea prohibited Japan from succeeding. Duus spends a lot of time on these perceptions from before the colonial era, but Caprio mentions at least one example from the period where Koreans and Japanese were supposed to be on equal footing. Duus argues that these ideas contributed to the desire to reform Korea, but Caprio claims that they eventually held those reforms back. Caprio's argument is mostly based on the fact that Japan stubbornly pushed and pushed for assimilation without actually fully assimilating Korea. Japan did just enough to make Korea angry, but not enough for the policy to actually succeed. Perhaps the biggest indicator of this was Japan's insistence on limiting Korean political participation, in a country that was supposed to be unified.

Duus explains the extremely poor perceptions Japan had of Korea early on, but also the number of claims that Japanese and Koreans were of the same race. Cumings, Lee, Shin and Robinson all explained the effects of Japanese rule, generally agreeing that Japan modernized Korea, in large part because of the idea of "cultural hegemony" Japan pursued. The idea of "one

Japan" during the war years is well known, but perhaps that was the true nature of Japanese imperialism in Korea all along—a desire to integrate Korea fully into the Japanese state, in order to preserve Japan's place in the global hierarchy. Other factors common in imperialism like resource-taking played their role, but Japan's true aim was to turn Korea into just another part of Japan, culturally, although as Caprio points out, maybe not politically. One final article confirms this idea. In a history of archaeology, Hyung Il Pai writes, "The Korean Peninsula was the only Japanese colony where the colonial government and academics spent more than four decades conducting annual surveys and nationwide excavations, building museums, and launching massive tourist restoration projects ranging from burial mounds to Buddhist temples and palaces" (93). Why? Japan wanted to prove that Korea was Japanese.