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Unhealed Wounds: Japan’s Colonization of Korea

Aaron Skabelund

Introduction

Second only to English, Japanese is the language most studied by Korean students. Cultural and intellectual exchanges between South Korea and Japan, separated by only the narrow Korean Strait, are wide and varied. Business is brisk between Japan, the world’s second largest economy, and South Korea, a rising industrial power. In fact, Japan is South Korea’s largest source of imports with 29% of all imports in 1990, and the South’s second largest export market with 21% of all exports in 1990 (Bridges 1992, 155). Despite the existence of the usual trade imbalance in Japan’s favor, business and trade relations are healthy. The two nations are also linked in a security relationship via the United States, and both have urged the United States to stay in Asia as a stabilizing influence to balance China’s rising power, and especially to temper North Korea’s new nuclear threat. Looking at these cultural, geographical, economic, and security relationships between South Korea and Japan, one might be led to think that these two countries have a cozy and solid relationship. However, history haunts Korea and Japan.

Japan’s colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945 is the primary cause of this historical legacy. Despite the tight cultural and economic links, deep distrust is the still the rule, not the exception, between the two countries. For example, “[O]n the South Korean side, Japan is usually placed as the next most disliked country after North Korea” (153).

Many other former colonies of European imperialist powers have long since forgiven, if not forgotten, the wrongs they had to endure at the hands of their former colonizers. Was there something unique about the colonization of Korea by Japan? If so, what? Also, why have the political wounds been so slow to heal between South Korea and Japan? Will these bitter wounds undermine the security alliance against the rising nuclear threat of North Korea?

This paper will seek to answer these questions. It will also examine how the change of power in Japan from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to the coalition government led by Morihiro Hosokawa has affected Japan’s political relationship with South Korea.

When examining the history and current situation, the significant role of Japan is evident in causing the original problems and not taking the necessary steps since then to lessen the level of distrust. Although South Korea is not free from criticism, this paper will concentrate on Japan’s role in the development of the political relationship with South Korea. A detailed examination of Japan-North Korean relations will be bypassed here except for its current influence on the Japan-South Korean political relationship, because North Korea’s relations with Japan have been plagued by communism’s influence as well as the colonial legacy.

History

Japan’s efforts to invade Korea were not isolated to the modern era. In the late 1500s, Japan’s ruler, Hideyoshi, led an invasion to take Korea, but he was unsuccessful. Even today, this "invasion has been emphasized in the historic memories of the Koreans and still contributes to the
bitterness between them and the Japanese" (Reischauer 1990, 65). However, during the Tokugawa period from the early 1600s to the mid-1800s, Japan maintained good relations with the "hermit kingdom," as Korea was sometimes called. Also, Japan continued trading with Korea despite the Tokugawa policy of isolationism that meant a ban on almost all trade and contact.

Soon after the Meiji restoration in 1868, Japan contemplated an invasion of Korea, but it was rejected in favor of strengthening the new government and the nation. The chief proponent of the invasion was Saigo Takamori, a samurai of samurais, who was so enthusiastic about the invasion that he offered himself to be assassinated in order to provide an excuse for the aggression. Although the Meiji oligarchs were hesitant about an immediate invasion of Korea, they were confident enough to force Korea out of isolation and into an unequal treaty in the same manner that had been dealt to them by Matthew C. Perry. This action caused the beginning of a series of showdowns between Japan and China, and then Japan and Russia for control of the "hermit kingdom."

Japan came out the winner in 1905, after defeating Russia to secure international recognition of its supremacy in Korea. Korea's fate was then completely sealed by the Taft-Katsura Agreement with the United States. It gave the United States free reign in Philippines while "acknowledging Japan's right to take appropriate measures for the 'guidance, control, and protection' of Korea" (Eckert, 238-39).

Japan immediately began to take control of Korea that year. It forced Korea to sign the Protectorate Treaty, which gave Japan absolute authority to take "control and direct the foreign relations and affairs of Korea" by placing a Japanese resident-general just below the Korean emperor (McKenzie 1969, 309). In 1907 the emperor, Kojong, was tricked into relinquishing the throne to his son, and by 1910 the Japanese had enough power to coerce the son to resign and allow Japan to annex Korea. Thus, the sovereignty of Korea was gradually weakened by the imperialist rivalries among the surrounding countries, and then it was systematically demolished by Japan.

There are three distinct factors that were unique about the colonization of Korea by Japan, as compared with other colonial situations. First, Korea was an established state with a monarchy that had reigned for hundreds of years before its unquestioned sovereignty was destroyed by Japan. Second, Japan and its colony were closely related by geography and culture. Third, the colonization was marked by the usual intensity and harshness politically, but there was also an effort made to destroy Korea culturally through forced assimilation. Although each of these may not be entirely unique as compared with other colonial situations, the combination of the three made the colonial experience especially severe for the Korean people and is part of the reason why it remains an issue even today.

Demolition of a Longtime Sovereign State

In contrast to many Western imperial powers, Japan began its colonizing late. Thus, when it took over Korea in 1910, the Japanese:

did not have the luxury of carving out an artificial state entity in a political vacuum. They had to establish their control over an ancient state and society with a long historical experience and high degree of racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity. Moreover, responding to external pressures, Korea had already begun the process of transforming its traditional institutions, and in consequence the annexation disrupted the indigenous political movement to create a modern Korean nation-state. (Eckert 1990, 256)
Because of these well-established institutions and traditions, Korea’s opposition to the takeover was stiff for the entire occupation. This gave Japan the option to either try to crush the resistance or assimilate the Koreans. They tried both approaches, and both produced frightening results for the Koreans.

Geographic Proximity and Cultural Contiguity

Japan was able to take over not via a bloody invasion in a distant land but through a series of quietly coercive treaties with a neighbor. Unlike most colonized countries that are thousands of miles from the imperial power, Korea is located only about one hundred miles from the Japanese island of Kyushu. This geographic proximity prompted Japan, which saw outside dominance of Korea as "a dagger pointing at Japan’s heart," to take over its neighbor (Bridges 1993, 8); and because of this proximity, Japan was able to completely dominate and integrate Korea into its economic and political system.

The Japanese colonization of Korea is also unique because it is one of the rare examples of non-European colonialism in modern times. Not only was Japan a non-European country, it was a close neighbor and was still a developing country. These factors combined to make Japan’s policies (regarding Korea as well as Manchuria) unlike those of the more developed, distant Britain. Thus Japan’s "control and use of its colonies were much more extensive, thorough, and systematic; the economic structure of the colonies had to undergo radical and brutal transformation tied to the needs of rapidly growing Japan" (Woo 1991, 21).

This meant exploitation. Japan first exploited Korea as a "rice basket" and then as a source for natural and human resources. By "the land owned by the Japanese . . . amounted to . . . about 60 percent of the arable land" (Chan 1977, 54). Hundreds of thousands of Japanese moved across the Korea Strait to administer the colony, and "as many as 4,000,000 people, an astonishing 16 percent of the Korean population was living" either in Japan or in other parts of the Japanese empire (such as Manchuria and Sakhalin) by 1944 (Eckert 1990, 322). These four million Koreans were mostly laborers, but they also included "comfort women," young women who were forced by the Japanese Imperial Army through kidnapping or trickery to become prostitutes.

Cultural contiguity combined with geographic proximity to deepen the wounds. Japan and Korea, both recipients of Chinese cultural influences, had many cultural similarities. There is something uniquely unsettling about being conquered by your neighbor and then being ruthlessly exploited by that nation.

Political and cultural repression

Japan’s exploitation of Korea was complete. It extended from economic to political and cultural repression. Traditional government in Korea had been somewhat decentralized, but with Japanese rule came increased centralization; even the most local "trivial matters became issues of public concern" (258). Also, "Japanese control was as total as it was brutal . . . ; the Japanese tried to crush the Korean national identity" (Bridges 1990, 153). Political repression was constant during the entire colonial reign. By 1941, there was a combined Japanese-managed, Korean-staffed police force "of over 60,000 . . . [that] represented one policeman for every four hundred Koreans" (Eckert 1990, 259). From the beginning in 1910, "[T]he right of assembly and of free speech were abolished; the
holding of non-political public meetings and the gathering of crowds out-of-doors were also prohibited except for religious gatherings or school excursions" (Ku 1985, 11).

Repression spread even to religion and education. The Japanese used "State Shinto or nationalistic Shinto ideology" as a "so-called peaceful offensive" in Korea (Palmer 1977, 141). Japanese was established as the national language in Korean schools, as was a Japanese dictated curriculum. This "provided a mechanism . . . to legitimate Japanese rule" and spread Japanese [M]orals education, the Japanization of Korean history and culture, . . . the Japanese language and values that subtly eroded Korean cultural identity and confidence" (Eckert 1990, 262-63). In 1939, the Japanese passed an edict that strongly pressured all Koreans to change their names to Japanese-style surnames and given names. By the end of the war, "over eighty-four percent of the population complied with this cruelly insensitive edict" (318). In this way, because the Japanese chose to obfuscate their policies with the rhetoric of benign assimilation [the policies were] subtly confusing and psychologically damaging. To have cast off one's primary identify for that of the colonizer demeaned Korean culture in a profound way. It was, at bottom, a harsh and brutal system of colonial rule. (319)

Contemporary Review of the Problem

The colonial period ended nearly forty-eight years ago with Japan's defeat in the Second World War. Almost thirty years ago, in 1965, Japan and Korea signed a treaty that normalized relations. The treaty was adamantly opposed by many in both countries. With the treaty, Japan and South Korea legally settled all war claims. At that time, Japan provided "South Korea with a total of 300 million dollars in grants, and 200 million dollars in low-interest loans, while South Korea waived further claims for war damages" (Mainichi, 30 August 1992). So why is the colonial era still a political issue between Japan and Korea? Of course, history still lingers—the brutality inflicted by a neighbor does not dissipate quickly. The 1965 treaty "included neither a formal apology or a reparation clause" to account for the colonial wrongs committed (Bridges 1993, 11). There are also fears that Japan's latest rise to power— economically—threatens Korea and the rest of Asia with a new kind of imperialism. However, there are two more important contemporary problems that exist. Both are connected, like the fears of economic imperialism, to the colonial period. First is the treatment of Japan's largest minority population, Koreans. Second is the denial of the Japanese government of wrong doing in its aggression against Asia, and in particular its colonization of Korea, in the first half of the century.

Koreans in Japan

According to the Japan Ministry of Justice statistics, Koreans in Japan now number about 680,000 (Hoffman 1991, 480), and they continue to be a sore spot between Korea and Japan. These are Koreans who chose not to return home after the war. They are "[g]eographically concentrated . . . and economically restricted, they suffer from a number of societal and legal disadvantages" (Bridges 1992, 157).

The Koreans in Japan have continually been the victims of official and unofficial discrimination. As part of Japan's "benign assimilation," they were considered Japanese nationals during the colonial period, but like their fellow-Koreans on the peninsula, they found Japanese promises empty and life hard. After the Great Kanto
Earthquake of 1923 that destroyed Tokyo, they were the victims, along with Chinese and socialists, of mob violence. It is estimated that some six-thousand Koreans were massacred in the days after the earthquake (Mainichi, 1 September 1993).

While usually not so violent, discrimination against Koreans has remained government policy and is often backed by popular feelings. Both are starting to change. Michael Weiner wrote in 1989, before the changes began to take place:

Although the vast majority were born in Japan and speak Japanese as their first language, relatively few possess Japanese citizenship. Most are classified by the Ministry of Justice as aliens, and Koreans compose more than 85% of the total foreign resident population. This limits their legal rights in the broadest sense. (1)

In 1988, during Prime Minster Toshiki Kaifu's visit to Korea, the Japanese finally "agreed to replace the alien registration system for Korean residents with a family registration system by 1992" (Bridges 1992, 157). The most controversial step of the previous system, the requirement for all Japanese-Koreans to be finger-printed, was finally dropped for most. But there is still deep criticism that the new laws are only cosmetic (Mainichi, 31 May 92).

The Japanese government has been making progress on the Korean-Japanese issue, but such criticism shows that it will continue to be a source of controversy that brings back colonial-era memories. Other complaints include those about Koreans deserted on the Russian-held island of Sakhalin who are unable to return due to political differences in the area (Mainichi, 23 December 1990); Korean victims of the A-bombs dropped at the end of the war, who have received almost no financial compensation from the Japanese government compared to Japanese victims; and for the Korean women forced into prostitution for Japanese soldiers during the war (Bridges 1993, 131-133). Also, although there have been some substantive legal changes made lately to end discrimination, the attitudes of the Japanese public still lag far behind.

Japanese denial

In 1991, a group of elderly women came forward after a half a century to tell of being "forced to serve as 'comfort women,' the euphemistic term used by Imperial Japan" (Jones, 11 March 1993). This was just another incident in a series that showed how slow the wounds were to heal. The Japanese had a history of censoring what was published in the nation's textbooks. Examples of propaganda in Education Ministry approved textbooks have raised controversy, such as "references to 'anti-Japanese resistance' in Korea being changed to difficulties in obtaining 'the Korean people's cooperation'" (Anger, 27 May 1993). Also the Korean leader in 1989, Roh Tee-woo refused to attend the funeral of Japan's wartime emperor, Hirohito (Fararo, 18 February 1989).

In the early nineties, the Japanese tried to apologize, but at the same time continued to deny that the army had actually coerced the Korean and other Asian women into sex-slavery. The LDP, which had ruled Japan for over thirty years, seemed to have no desire to dig up old dirt. Its apologies, including those made by Akihito, the new emperor and Hirohito's son, in 1991, and by Prime Minister Miyazawa in January 1992, were undermined by the fact that it had taken so long to face up to Japan's war guilt and the apologies themselves were vague and indirect. Even after Miyazawa admitted that Japan had used "comfort women" he continued to deny the use of force. This evoked bitter reactions in South Korea, who questioned "whether Japan is willing
to come to grips with its past, and whether it can gain enough trust from its neighbors to take a greater leadership role in the world" (Blustein, 10 July 1992). Pressure to apologize in Japan rose as well. Asahi Shinbun, Japan's second largest newspaper after the Mainichi, blasted the government, declaring that:This is the time to squarely face our troubled past blemishes . . . . Otherwise, we will be repeating an undesirable practice in Japanese diplomacy—taking piecemeal measures only when pressed. It will be impossible to fraternize with other Asian nations as an ordinary country without expressing our genuinely national contrition" (13).

Nevertheless, Miyazawa only admitted to "coercive action" on his final day in office.

Change

The coalition government that forced out the LDP for the first time in over thirty years is headed up by Morihiro Hosokawa. From the start, the new government made it clear that it would act decisively without being pressed. In a series of remarkable statements that even went too far for some within the coalition, Hosokawa apologized again and again in a "simple and straightforward" way uncharacteristic of the LDP (Bussy, 16 August 1993). He called the Second World War "a war of aggression" (Jones, 13 August 93) and added in a statement to the Diet that he "would like to take this opportunity to express our profound remorse and apologies for the fact that Japan's actions, including acts of aggression and colonial rule, caused unbearable suffering and sorrow for so many people" (Reid, 24 August 1993).

The new government also seems set to be more open about the past in the schools. Hosokawa’s foreign minister, Tsutomu Hata, stated that "We should tell our children what their forefathers did in waging war on the Asian continent" (Schlesinger, 5 August 1993). The government signaled its seriousness to put its words into actions quickly "when only four members of the new cabinet attended annual ceremonies at Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo to pay respects to Japan's war dead. In 1992, when the LDP controlled the government, 15 cabinet members attended" and in 1985, LDP Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone even attended, which brought a wave of criticism from Korea and other countries (Bussy, 16 August 1993). In this way, the coalition government is taking steps toward warmer political relations with Korea that match their strong economic ties. Korea, who has always privately given business ties priority while publicly supporting its victims (such as the "comfort women"), seems to have little to gain from continued bitterness. However, the Japanese government must continue to match its words with the appropriate actions in such areas as textbooks about the colonial period and compensation for the former "comfort women."

North Korea

Hosokawa and the new coalition government’s efforts to mend relations with South Korea is also a response to the role of a third player, North Korea. Primarily because of ideology and security arrangements, and secondarily because it is further hampered by colonial memories, Japan and the North have never been able to establish relations. Several times the North Koreans have met low-level Japanese officials and made attempts toward relations, but they have been unsuccessful partly due the insistence of the North, and the South, on an "either/or" type of policy. This means that if Japan establishes relations with the North, it must drop its relations with the
South. There is no chance that Japan will do this. However, North Korea's efforts to develop nuclear weapons may test the tenuous political relationship of South Korea and Japan. This may be in part be why Hosokawa is diligently seeking to resolve lingering South Korean grievances.

Most likely the South Korean-Japanese alliance will hold strong, backed by the military might of the United States. However, there may still be problems that have their roots in the colonial period. The Koreans in Japan are far from united in their support for the South in the duel over the Korean peninsula. There is considerable support for Kim Il Sung and considerable illegal trade and money-laundering between the Korean-Japanese and the North. Money generated from this trade "has allowed the bankrupt North Korean government to build its huge nuclear weapons complex" (Sanger, 1 November 1993).

As the nuclear facility inspection crisis heated up in early 1994, it was revealed that old Russian attack submarines were being sold to the North via a Japanese company owned by a Korean-Japanese (Sanger, 20 January 1994). However, Japanese officials are unenthusiastic about cracking down on the exchange of money between Korean-Japanese and the North (especially the estimated $600 million to $2 billion supplied to family members and government officials), or participation in an embargo that would have the same effect. The Japanese are "worried about causing . . . 'an eruption'—perhaps including riots or terrorism—among the roughly 150,000 Koreans [later estimated at 300,000] in Japan who are sympathetic to Mr. Kim's Government" (Sanger, 1 November 1993 [20 January 1994]). Such incidents would certainly worsen Japan's already poor relations with Koreans in Japan and also with a concerned South Korea. Resolution of this domestic problem, in order to meet decisively and wisely with the North Korean threat, requires that the Japanese government work closely with the South Korean government and the United States.

Conclusion

Two of the historical factors that make the colonial period unique, the violation of Korea's long held sovereignty and the proximity and contiguity of the two countries geographically and culturally, are both products of situation, uncontrolled by individuals or states. The imperialist drive was an international tendency of the time that may have influenced the rising Japan (looking for new markets to keep the Meiji industrial revolution rolling) to crush Korea politically and economically. However, Japanese imperialism into Asia was initiated by a shift in government policy that changed the emphasis from internal modernization and industrialization to external expansion to aid continued industrialization. Using the favored vehicle of the era, Japan adapted imperialism backed by militarism. The almost complete cultural repression was a government-led policy.

Japan was forced to open itself up to outside influences with the Meiji restoration. Then, as its industrial strength increased due to adaptation and hard work, its confidence grew and it sought expansion to foreign markets and looked to become an international power. The post-war period has brought what many believe is a repeat of that cycle in a new world system. Japan's economic influence has expanded across the world. It is now looking to become a world political power. This has been initiated once again by a shift in government policy, this time due to an upset election that brought in a new generation of younger, more internationally-oriented leaders. Hosokawa is seeking to change decades of LDP foreign (and domestic) policy. Japan is looking to
mend relations with South Korea (and other Asian nations) so that Japan can once again become a regional and world political power. This time the means are not imperialism and colonial exploitation, but internationalism (great power politics) and economic opportunism. The results are different as well; now there is foreign aid, financial compensation, and apologies.

For Japan to deal effectively with regional challenges of the present, Japan must face up to the past. In order to meet the security challenges of the North Korean nuclear threat, the Hosokawa-led coalition government must continue to build stronger relations with South Korea. Japan has maintained that the 1965 treaty legally provided for all compensation to South Korea. Yet to symbolically, psychologically, and politically heal the wounds and lead a reluctant Japanese public to recognition of its past wrongs and an end to current prejudices, the Government needs to continue take positive steps. Such steps as direct monetary compensation for the "comfort women" (who continue to protest in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul in early 1994 [Associated Press, 27 January 1994]) and other groups such as the A-bomb victims, completely fair treatment of the Korean minority, and continued sincere signs of Japanese contrition and recognition of its past colonial policies are needed in order to strengthen the relationship between the two countries. If Japan continues to make progress in these areas, then South Korea will have no excuse but to forgive if not forget. While it may be well for the Koreans to not entirely forget Japanese aggression, it would be beneficial for both countries if Korea stopped perceiving Japan as its former colonial master, and thus a current economic imperialist threat, and instead saw Japan as a partner in maintaining regional security and as a valuable trading partner. Only then will the colonial memories stop haunting Japan and South Korea.

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