Part II
The colonial period
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The legacy that Japan’s assimilation policies had on colonial-era Korea (1910–1945) was perhaps felt greatest after the country’s liberation from Japanese rule. It was from this time that the Korean people faced the daunting task of separating those among their fellow compatriots worthy of patriotic honors from those guilty of traitorous crimes. Decisions regarding the latter group rested on criteria being established that determined the acts of collaboration that were serious enough to render punishment for betrayal of the Korean people. Similarly, liberation also required Koreans to rewrite their national narrative to incorporate the patriotic heroes of the past four decades of Japanese suzerainty: which acts of heroism merited their gaining immortality? While all periods of foreign occupation develop both supporters and detractors, it could be argued that assimilation policy produced deeper divisions among the people it subjugated as it preached an intention to develop a more intimate relationship between colonized and colonizer. Indeed, it challenged these people to abandon their “inferior” heritage for a more “advanced” one. Introduced as a gradual process, the Japanese accelerated their efforts to assimilate Koreans as Japan expanded its military adventures across the Chinese mainland and throughout much of the Pacific Ocean region.

Japan’s assimilation policy aimed to culturally absorb the Korean people into the Japanese race, at least this was the impression left by the colonizers’ rhetoric. If successful, it would mean the Korean people absorbed as Japanese, the borders of Japan redrawn to incorporate the Korean peninsula as one or a group of prefectures. Korea and Koreans, in other words, would cease to exist. In practice, however, the initial decades of colonial administration demonstrated a greater tendency to discriminate and separate than to accept and unify. The war years displayed signs of willingness to correct this contradiction between rhetoric and practice, leading some to conclude that Japan was ready to implement its assimilation goals (Fujitani 2011). However, the war’s abrupt conclusion prevents us from advancing this conclusion. Would the Japanese have continued the wartime advances that the Japanese allowed the Koreans had Japan retained the Korean peninsula after the war, or were they simply temporary (and progressively desperate) measures rendered necessary under total war conditions? Japanese might conclude its failure to assimilate the Korean people to be a result of the relatively short duration of Japan’s colonial rule: even under normal circumstances they saw this as a 50- to 100-year process. However, the available evidence also suggests that, like other similar
assimilation examples, the administration’s intention was not to assimilate Koreans as internal Japanese subjects (kokumin) but as peripheral imperial subjects (shinmin). They would be granted privileges as valued members of the empire but not at a level enjoyed by their Japanese counterparts.

**Goals of assimilation**

The Japanese establishment of assimilation as their colonial policy can be traced to even before the Meiji government appeared in 1868, to the late eighteenth century when the Tokugawa regime experimented with the policy in Ezo (present-day Hokkaido) to integrate the indigenous tribes on the island that was being explored by Russian adventurers. The Japanese rejuvenated this policy over the Meiji period (1868–1912) as Japan’s empire officially incorporated Ezo and later expanded to annex the Ryukyu Islands (present-day Okinawa) and Taiwan. Thus, by the time Korea entered the empire in 1910, the Japanese had accumulated a rather lengthy resume of applying assimilation to peoples it occupied. Still, Japanese writing at the time of Korea’s annexation felt compelled to justify Japan’s choice of administration. This was probably a reaction to the vicious attack that assimilation faced from the late nineteenth century, particularly by Social Darwinists and Scientific Colonial thinkers who argued it an illusion to expect that peoples of different breeds and culture could appreciate, much less absorb, advanced political and cultural institutions that assimilation policy introduced to them. Japanese countered by explaining that the racial and cultural similarities that they had long enjoyed with the Korean people would ensure them success where the European had failed. Japanese should have little problem assimilating Koreans.

The Japanese casually drew from these European examples. Writers listed examples of assimilation, occasionally as positive or negative models. They did not analyze the specific differences between approaches or consider why some European colonial powers enjoyed greater success than others. The English, for example, offered a political variety of assimilation that contrasted with that of the French and German culture-centered assimilation policy. Yet the Japanese listed these examples as if they were all applying a set policy in their colonies. While both forms experienced rebellions among the subjugated peoples, English efforts succeeded in strengthening internal security: the union arrangement England forged with these states prevented them from forming alliances with its enemies—first the French and later the Germans. This was not always the case with the French, whose relationship with the Algerian people was not nearly as cordial as that which the English held with the Welsh or Scots.

Japanese rhetoric that preached the Korean future as Japanese suggested an intimate internal level of assimilation that the colonized were ill-prepared to honor, one that saw the Korean peninsula eventually becoming integral Japanese territory by a process frequently witnessed in nation-building efforts. Eugene Weber brilliantly traces one such occurrence of this intense level of assimilation in his history of nineteenth-century French efforts to amalgamate the “savages” of France’s southern provinces, peoples who the northern French claimed to be ignorant of their culture and language (Weber 1976). This effort was in part influenced by similar unification efforts taking place at France’s eastern border in the Prussian-led movement to unite territories that constitute the modern German state. Indeed, similar processes of nation building also were taking place at this time in Italy, post–Civil War United States, and Meiji, Japan. Though this process shared resemblance to that of colonial assimilation, it differed in intensity. The peoples involved all residing within long-established borders of the newly formed state, they already imagined to be of the same people even though an intense assimilation process was necessary.
to integrate them culturally, politically, and economically. Thus rhetorically it made little sense to describe this process as assimilation.

Rather, assimilation as a policy made more rhetorical sense when used to describe a peripheral people’s incorporation into the more advanced colonizer population, primarily because to the colonizer this hierarchical relationship clearly justified their imposing their culture on the colonized. The assimilation approach introduced by the Japanese in Korea resembled that seen in other peripheral colonial situations—those just off the traditional borders of the colonial homeland including Meiji-era additions of territories that surrounded the main Japanese islands. The Japanese in Korea advertised a gradual advancement of the policy that educated a minority of Koreans in the new, segregated school system the government-general created and elicited the assistance of a minority of the traditional Korean elite to assist the colonizers administer the territory. The differences in the school systems underline the inferior social position that the Korean was expected to fill. Compared to that arranged for the expatriate Japanese, Korean elementary education was shorter in duration, accommodated more students per class, and was funded less generously. The high concentration on Japanese language study stole valuable time from more important subjects that Koreans needed to compete with their Japanese counterparts. We can also assume that the inferiority of this education, along with the stigma of having attended a Korean school, dogged Korean youth as they sought employment or attempted to advance their education. Similar situations were also found among Ainu, Ryukyuan, Taiwanese, as well as Alsace and Algerian children residing in similar colonial situations at the time.

The most interesting debates among the Japanese regarding assimilation policy occurred soon after annexation, just before the government-general finalized its Education Act in 1911. Those contributing their thoughts on Korean education focused on curriculum particulars such as the language and emphasis of instruction but also touched on the overall purpose of the education: the product that the system intended to nurture. Many of the participants in this discussion, who included politicians as well as academics, warned against the government-general offering Korean students an inferior education. They questioned the bias that the Korean was inherently inferior, arguing that, just as the Japanese at the time of the Meiji Restoration had been behind, so too was the Korean of today. They too could catch up if given the chance. Still others criticized assimilation as a policy that simply attempted to clone the Korean as Japanese. One official believed that the Korean people would be unable to advance unless the Japanese dramatically adjusted their prejudices that viewed the Japanese–Korean relationship in terms of superiority–inferiority. Embedded in these discussions was the idea that Japanese were not appropriate assimilators and thus should consider a change in policy (Caprio 2009: 92–96).

The Japanese were forced to reform their general approach to governing Korea after the 1919 March First Independence Movement. On this occasion, Koreans, joining other colonized peoples empowered by statements by United States president Woodrow Wilson and Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin that condemned colonial occupations, took to the streets to demand an end to imperial rule. The protests, in which hundreds of thousands of Koreans in every province participated, were brutally suppressed by the police using heavy-handed methods that were widely condemned. These reforms generally offered the Korean people more cultural space, though the Japanese maintained, at least in their rhetoric, that their long-term goal remained assimilation. The reforms, pushed by Prime Minister Hara Takashi and Governor General Saitō Makoto, provided Koreans with the right to publish indigenous newspapers and assemble freely. They encouraged the Japanese to endeavor to learn more about Korean culture and even to study the Korean language. It has been argued that the purpose of this switch from the brutal “military rule” (budan seiji) to “cultural rule” (bunka seiji) served to co-opt the often illegal anti-Japanese
activities by Korean intellectuals by providing for them legitimate opportunity (Robinson 1988: 4). The government-general argued these reforms as harboring the purpose of allowing Japanese to more accurately read Korean sentiments as measures to prevent future March First demonstrations. Vice-Governor General Mizuno Rentarō used the value of indigenous newspapers to express this value as follows: They offered the administration “access to Korean thought as Koreans expressed their feelings in their newspapers.” Likening the newspaper to a chimney that spews smoke (Korean sentiment), Mizuno stated his belief that the reason why the March First Movement blew out of proportion was because the Japanese lacked the means of reading Korean intentions. Building a chimney (newspaper) to let the smoke escape from the kitchen allowed the Japanese access to Korean sentiment and intentions (Mizuno 1999: 52).

Did this advancement of Korean language-based media detract from Japan’s assimilation policy? Michael Robinson’s research suggests it provided an avenue for advancing Korean identity that strengthened the people’s ties to Korean culture (Robinson 1988, 1998). This conclusion was also one reached by two late-1920s reports drafted by the government-general (Caprio 2009: 255–86).

The 1920 reforms also contained a provision for increasing the number of schools to allow more Korean children opportunity for education. However, a more important advancement was the integration of schools for Japanese expatriate children in 1920. Prior to this time, Korean children who wished to pursue advanced study were required to travel to Japan, where they first had to pass a two-year preparation course to allow them to “catch up” to the Japanese who had spent two additional years in elementary school. The reform granted admittance to the more advanced school system, provided the student had a sufficient capacity in the Japanese language. Statistics suggest that the Korean population in these schools remained consistent at ten percent up through the last few years of colonial rule, when the Japanese ceased to offer separate figures for Koreans and Japanese. Despite the integration of schools, the two populations often remained segregated outside of the classroom. According to one student at Suwon College of Agriculture, Japanese and Koreans lived in separate wings of the dorm; they formed separate versions of the same club; and they even had the university library carry separate volumes of the same book (Kang 2001: 54). On the other hand, there are elderly Japanese who still maintain contacts with Korean classmates from this time.

The March First Movement also had adverse influences on the views that Japanese residents held toward the Korean people. At the time of annexation, few outwardly expressed negative views toward annexation and their government’s decision to adopt an assimilation policy. Ukita Kazutami, editor of the popular magazine Taiyō, perhaps expressed a majority view in declaring, “The Japanese should have relatively few problems in assimilating Koreans” peacefully, as in the case of the English relationship with the Scots, and avoid the violent conditions that the English have experienced with the Irish (Ukita 1910). Yet the demonstrations of March 1919 left a deep and negative impression on the Japanese, some changing their views on assimilation as they observed Koreans marching down the streets of Seoul demanding Korean independence. The journalist and long-time resident of Korea, Hosoi Hajime, contributed the changes he experienced in an eight-part article that he contributed to the journal Nihon oyobi Nihonjin (Japan and the Japanese). He wrote: “[At this moment] I completely forgot the joy I experienced ten years previous when the lives of our 20 million Korean brothers and sisters were refocused as our compatriot siblings.” The “naïve” Japanese, he continued, had only themselves to blame for this disturbance as they neglected their “elder brother” responsibilities: “We treat [Koreans] as things at the bottom. . . . We show no signs of love, chivalry, but only menace.” The Japanese harbor a “stepchild mentality” toward a Korean people they vowed to advance by colonization (Hosoi 1919).
Hosoi presents a rare case of a Japanese expression of opposition to Japan’s assimilation policy, although the immediate post-March First Movement period produced more open dissent than at other times. It is thus difficult to ascertain the extent to which Japanese truly supported this policy. Jun Uchida’s work on the Japanese settler community suggests it to have been rather extensive (Uchida 2011: 132–36). Most telling were the situations that challenged Japanese to practice what they preached, such as a petition presented by the Chōsen sansei shingikai kōsein (The Korean Political Participation Deliberation Committee) that appeared in 1929 calling for Korean suffrage. At the time the Japanese government granted a limited number of Japan-based Korean residents suffrage privileges, calls came for these rights to be extended to the peninsula. The National Diet rejected one such petition on the grounds that Koreans were inappropriate for this right. They would sway the results and cause troublesome results to emerge. This response also noted that if Japanese could only offer Koreans partial rights, it was better to not grant them any rights at all (Caprio 2009: 138).

The relatively small number of Japanese-Korean marriages presents another measure for ascertaining the extent to which assimilation found acceptance among Japanese. Part of the reason behind this result may have been legal issues. Japanese women marrying Korean men would, as was customary by law, enter their husband’s family register and thus lose their status as Japanese. For that reason, many married couples did not officially register their marriages as was required. A second reason was social pressure: the Japanese community frowned upon mixed marriages. Recollections left by Japanese women reveal their being ostracized by their family and friends after marrying a Korean or being criticized for even considering such a move (Takasaki 2002: 178). Finally we see hesitation on the part of the Japanese for accepting Korean participation in the military. This reluctance persisted even after the war turned from Japan’s favor. Lack of trust in the Koreans eventually delayed the Japanese from including the Koreans in the universal conscription system until the final year of the war (Palmer 2013: 98).

The inferior education system established primarily for Korean children, although some Japanese children also attended these schools, contributed to their maintaining a lower social status. However, the Japanese’ generally negative attitude toward Koreans also contributed to this result. Even Koreans who had enjoyed academic success evidently had trouble making it in their own society. Professors of Keijō (Seoul) University noted as such in a roundtable discussion on Korean students: few employers would accept Korean job applications, and most people (Japanese and Korean) preferred Japanese to Korean doctors (“Jinkenka no Chōsen wo Kataru’ zadankai” 1939). Other Koreans reported their Japanese classmates securing employment at higher levels that paid higher salaries and gaining faster promotion upon entering the government offices (Im 2011: 211–13). The pay discrepancies persisted despite the 1920 reforms requiring both Koreans and Japanese to be paid equally for their services. This reform, however, targeted base pay, while neglecting “hardship” stipends established to encourage Japanese to work on the peninsula.

The wartime situation changed Korean status as young Japanese men were called from the peninsula to serve on the battlefield. Following the July 1937 Incident at the Marco Polo Bridge, the government-general explored different ways in which the Japanese could develop the proper attitude required of all Koreans under the wartime circumstances. The location of the peninsula, situated between the Japanese homeland and the Chinese war front made Korean cooperation particularly critical. From this time, the government-general initiated a Naisen ittai (Japan–Korea, one body) campaign to strengthen the relationship and to demonstrate to Manchurians the advantages that Koreans had gained by choosing cooperation with Japan. Toward this end, it compiled a 100-plus-page proposal and gathered a number of Japanese and Koreans to discuss how
to render practical this rather vague construct. Japanese participants tended to emphasize the status quo as well as the positive effect that the proposal would have on the Korean people. We find one notable exception in comments offered by Tagawa Jōichirō, who suggested the need to integrate the two family registration systems and ending Korean language publications. We shall see below how the Korean comments targeted more practical modifications to help achieve this goal (Caprio 2009: 162–63).

It was under these wartime circumstances that the Japanese instituted many of the policies that continue to haunt Japan-Korea relations to this day. In considering these practices against Japan’s assimilation ambition, we find a mixed degree of consistency between policy and practice. Key to this evaluation is to determine the extent to which the Korean participation the government-general demanded was consistent with that expected of Japanese subjects. Korean participation in the Japanese military, which began in 1938 with the formation of a volunteer corps and continued in 1944 with forced conscription, helped advance Korean assimilation as it advanced the colonized in an institution that Japanese men were expected to participate. Whether the recruits were afforded treatment equal to that afforded the Japanese recruit at a similar rank is an important question requiring further investigation.

Forced labor issues also require similar consideration. Did the recruitment and job allocation of Koreans resemble a similar practice directed toward Japanese subjects, or did the practice place the colonized in jobs deemed too dirty or dangerous for Japanese labor? The latter appears to be closer to the truth, particularly with those women forced into comfort women duty. Accurate numbers of the number of comfort women by nationality are apparently not available. However, although Japanese women did serve in this capacity, the majority of women were from among the colonized (Hicks 1994: 17–18). My purpose here is not to render moral judgment over any wartime institution but to measure the Japanese inclusion of Koreans against that of Japanese to ascertain the extent to which the policy was consistent with Japan’s assimilation goals as stated in its rhetoric. Inclusion of Koreans only advanced assimilation if it brought the colonized people closer toward an inclusion similar to that expected of the colonizers. In one case—conscription—it did, while in another—forced labor—it apparently did not.

Additionally, other means of Korean participation were employed by the Japanese to argue assimilation’s success. Among the most notorious was the Name Order of 1940 in which Koreans were pressured into adopting Japanese names. Other measures were taken requiring Koreans to visit Shinto shrines, properly commemorate Japanese holidays by attending ceremonies, and to display the Japanese flag outside their homes. The government-general offices maintained meticulous records on Korean participation. However, the question remains as to whether these apparent displays of Japanese affinity translated in the Korean people advancing toward integration as Japanese. That the Japanese often tied participation to external reward (while punishing non-compliers) weakens confidence in the conclusions drawn by the colonizers. Specifically, often the administration used the Shinto shrine as a venue and name changing as a criteria for distributing wartime ration tickets. The government-general officially advised Korean name changes from 1939, and an estimated 80 percent of Koreans complied with this directive with the idea that they could more easily pass for Japanese if their names were Japanized. Indeed, Koreans had on occasion adopted Japanese names for this very reason, to counter discrimination. Ken Kawashima discusses this as a ploy adopted by Japan-based Koreans to fool landlords who refused to rent to non-Japanese (Kawashima 2009: 106). Did this measure succeed in its purpose: allowing Koreans to better integrate as Japanese? Perhaps it did at the informal level. But when Koreans were required to submit their family register, such as for school registration or job employment, they revealed their ethnic origins as the document registered when the applicant had adopted
a Japanese name. Indeed, one such Korean found the word “Chōsenjin” (Korean) stamped across her Japanese name on a document she required to secure employment as a teacher. Also, as Koreans began settling into Japanese communities, the police assumed the responsibility of distinguishing between the two peoples. For this purpose they devised a list of characteristics unique to Koreans that included their peculiar pronunciation of certain Japanese sounds, the way they washed their face, the way that men looked at women, and their walking style (Kang 2003: 63–64).

The apparent contradictions we find between Japanese words and actions regarding Korean assimilation can be best explained in a number of ways. First, Japan followed a rather common pattern, one observable in similar situations such as French Algeria and German Alsace and Lorraine. Like the Japanese, these colonizers never matched their idealist rhetoric with appropriate action, even toward the colonized who accepted their administration and fought in their wars. From this we can perhaps conclude cultural assimilation to have been a rather difficult goal to realize to the extent the colonizers maintained an attitude of superiority over the people to be assimilated. This was certainly the case shared by Japanese in Korea. These examples also share the consistency of the expatriate who has relocated to the colony holding the strongest feelings against assimilation lest the uplifting of the colonized compromise the relatively superior position they had gained upon entering this foreign society. Indeed, in general the lifestyles of Japanese residing in the urban environments suggest a conscious effort to avoid relationships with Koreans on a basis of equality. They could employ them as household help or factory hands but not socialize with them as fellow subjects of the empire. Thus from the Japanese standpoint, we can perhaps conclude that while the Japanese preached an internal assimilation that suggested eventual inclusion of the Korean as Japanese subjects, their policies over the duration of this period sought to maintain the people at the lower peripheral level. It teased the people with assimilation rhetoric while extending to them inferior examples of institutions provided for internal Japanese subjects that integrated the majority of Koreans at a level that would all but guarantee the preservation of differences that separated the two peoples.

**Korean responses to Japanese assimilation**

Japanese rhetoric of assimilation elicited strong polemic responses from the Koreans, primarily as it promised to, depending on one’s perspective, either take from or give to the colonized a people’s identity. The discrepancy between rhetoric and practice, however, could not have pleased anyone. Those opposed to the policy were thus given justifiable reason to exploit Japan’s promises of assimilation to strengthen Korean national sentiment. To the contrary, the policy’s supporters could criticize Japan’s apparent unwillingness to fulfill these promises. Indigenous newspapers provided the former with their most important medium for voicing their objections, at least until they were ordered to close under wartime reforms. Supporters enjoyed uninterrupted access to Japanese publications to put forth their views and were often strongly encouraged (or coerced) by the Japanese authorities to do so.

Cultural nationalists took advantage of the 1920 reforms to voice their general opposition to Japanese rule. The T’ong’a ilbo (East Asian Daily), one of the newspapers allowed publication rights from this time, took the lead in criticizing Japanese assimilation ambitions. It used its editorial section to directly attack the Japanese culture: Japanese footwear (geta) and traditional dress (kimono) were impractical. It attacked the schools that the Japanese established to develop Koreans as Japanese: the system accommodated but a fraction of children interested in attending school, and it forced them to study in a foreign language. The newspaper soon learned that any attack...
on the apex of Japanese culture and politics—the imperial household—would be severely punished. In September 1920 its publication rights were suspended for over a half-year when it argued the three imperial treasures (the jewel, mirror, and sword) to be objects of superstition.

Individual writers, a number who had apparently integrated to varying degrees into Japanese society, also voiced criticism of Japan’s Korean policies. One Yi Yong-sun offered his remarks to the Japanese magazine Jiyū (Freedom) in May 1937, just months before Japan’s war in China escalated. Yi focused his commentary, titled “Japanese-Korean Unity” (Naisen yūwa), on areas where the Japanese failed to live up to their assimilation promises. If, he argued, the Japanese were serious about creating this unity, “why were Koreans not offered military-duty rights? Is it because Koreans do not have patriotism? Why can’t the Koreans participate in elections? Is it because they are uneducated?” He continued by highlighting the contemptuous attitude he had experienced in his interactions with Japanese acquaintances. He personally had invited Japanese to his house and lent them money, only to see them leave without even saying goodbye and without repaying their loan. Yi believed this attitude to be typical of a people in similar shoes, likening it to that which separated blacks from whites in the United States. Perhaps American blacks could understand the euphoria experienced by Koreans upon hearing of Son Ki-jong’s victory in the marathon at the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin—for they too no doubt had felt a similar joy in seeing Joe Louis score knockout victories over white opponents. Yi’s attitude thus placed assimilation’s failure on Japanese shoulders. Rather than Koreans rejecting their assimilation advances, it was the Japanese who rejected their successes (Yi 1937: 90–92).

Other Koreans were more proactive in their support of Japan’s assimilation policies, particularly during the heat of Japan’s wars from the 1930s. As emphasized in the 1938 Naisen ittai strengthening report, Korean support was vital to Japan’s success in its continental plans. Perhaps due to the expanded opportunities that the wartime situation produced, an increasing number of Koreans agreed to cooperate with the Japanese at this time. Some of these Koreans were rather prominent, including the educator Yun Chi-ho, independence leader Ch’oe Rin, female educator leader Kim Hwal-lan (Helen Kim), and Korean historian Ch’oe Nam-sŏn. These Koreans appearing in newspapers where they offered advice on how best to support Japan’s cause surely carried tremendous influence among their readers given their name value. Japanese also used these Koreans to assist in the recruitment of Koreans for the volunteer military, to solicit monetary donations to the military, and to join Japanese at rallies held to commemorate war victories.

Cooperative Koreans, many of whom sat on advisory committees for the Japanese, were given the chance to voice their views on a number of occasions. One venue was the committee meetings held in conjunction with the Naisen ittai strengthening proposal mentioned above. Though a minority among the participants, transcripts demonstrate their active participation in these gatherings. There suggestions appear to have been more practical than those expressed by the Japanese. Koreans advised an increase in the number of Shinto shrines to allow Koreans more convenient access to them, a leveling of the tax system to permit Koreans to contribute their fair share to the colony’s revenues, and increased integration of Koreans and Japanese in the residential areas. Yi Sung-u, however, introduced a more fundamental problem: the Japanese failure to recognize the Korean as a potential national subject (kokumin) of the empire. To many Japanese, he explained, Koreans remained hopelessly backward, a people stranded in an ancient time due to inferior government management of the colony (Caprio 2009: 189–93).

A minority of Koreans offered extreme views of support for the Japanese that left little doubt over their belief that the superiority of the Japanese way left little if any room for Korean identity. One such view was presented by Hyŏn Yŏng-sŏp³ in his The Path that the Koreans Must Take
(Chōsenjin no susumu beki michi). Describing himself as “one Japanese national” (Nihon kokumin no hitori), Hyŏn emphasized the optimism that the Naisen ittai movement had injected in the Korean people. Much work remained, however, before Koreans completely understood their imperial responsibilities. Tracing Korea’s transition from the “hell . . . [of] colonial Han Chinese” rule prior to 1910, he saw Japan’s annexation as opening the door for Korean rejuvenation, for the emergence of a shin Chōsen (new Korea) that would replace the people’s previous han Shinajin (half-Chinese) existence. The Korean people, however, to date had failed to take advantage of the opportunities that annexation presented them. They continued to maintain their traditional culture while resisting the “majestic existence” (genzen to sonzai) of Japanese culture. Koreans must endeavor to “become Japanese” by “widely accepting the Japanese culture.” This required their accepting the fact that Korea would never again retain its status as an independent country. If Koreans wished to enjoy the benefits of this people—compulsory education, military service, and freedom of residence—they would have to demonstrate their commitment to adopting the Japanese spirit. Contrary to the views held by Yi Yŏng-sŏp saw the ball as resting in the Korean court. The keys to their destiny lay in their accepting their inescapable fate as Japanese.

How successful were the Japanese? As mentioned above, officials were able to point to increasing numbers of Koreans participating in ways that suggested their acceptance of Japanese assimilation policy. As the number of Korean children attending elementary school increased, officials estimated that the number of Koreans competent in the Japanese language increased (1933, 760,000; 1937, 1.2 million) (Caprio 2009: 145). The Japanese could also point to the increasing numbers of Korean men volunteering for enlistment in the imperial military (2,946 [406], 1938; 303,294 [6,300], 1943) (Kang 1997: 370), despite low acceptance rates, as further evidence of their success. These rather impressive numbers, however, required scrutiny rather than blind acceptance. Can we accept as fact, as the Japanese did, that Koreans simply finishing elementary school produced Japanese fluency? To what extent was the Korean’s decision to “volunteer” for military service his own volition? Indeed, other criteria such as name changes, marriages, and shrine visitations require similar consideration before conclusions can be drawn.

The question of colonial-era collaboration remains unresolved to this day as contemporary Koreans compile lists of those deemed guilty of traitorous crimes more than a half-century in the past. The question also remains why heroes of the March First Independence Movement—Ch’oe Rim and Ch’oe Nam-sŏn helped organize the movement—would turn to supporting the Japanese a little over a decade later. One possibility is that they had no choice should they choose to remain in Korea: only those who left the country or chose prison life enjoyed the luxury of non-cooperation. More recent research has suggested that collaborator efforts were influenced by pan-Asian ideas that the Japanese had been advanced since the beginning of the century. Koreans considered collaborators supported a regional Asian identity over a more traditional Korean nationalist one (Shin 2006; Moon 2013). The geopolitical situation that the Korean peninsula confronted suggested the advantage of alliance with Korea’s Northeast Asian neighbors, China and Japan, on a basis of equality to provide the country with its most promising chance at regaining a sense of sovereignty. The hopes of such Koreans may have been raised following Japan’s incorporation of Manchuria, which was followed by calls for Koreans to be used as an example of the benefits that the Manchurian people might enjoy should they cooperate. The flying geese image, with Japan leading the twin rows of Asian states advancing in V-formation, suggests otherwise. Like assimilation policy rhetoric, the direction of the co-existence and co-prosperity promised by the Japanese would be directed from the colonial homeland at the apex, with little input from the rear.
Conclusions

Kim Chanjung, in his review of the 100 years of “zainichi” under Japanese imperial rule, advances the idea that Koreans have of recent made significant advances in assimilating into Japanese society. Over the past few decades, more Koreans have admitted that their more significant friendships are with Japanese, rather than fellow Japan-based Koreans. Significant increases are also seen in these Koreans marrying with Japanese and their choosing to naturalize as Japanese. Likewise, Japanese as well are more accepting of this minority than in the past, as witnessed by restrictions in education and employment being relaxed. This is not to say that Japanese have completely overcome their negative impressions of Koreans and that Koreans live free of prejudice. However, after seven or eight decades following annexation, attitudes are progressing in a positive direction toward successful annexation (Kim 2010, 222–52). These advances have encouraged one zainichi scholar to foresee in the near future the end of this minority population (Chung 2001). Although the circumstances are very different, Kim’s analysis of contemporary successes enjoyed by Koreans lends clues as to why the colonial and immediate postcolonial eras did not succeed in advancing Korean assimilation. First is the time factor. As noted above, the three-plus decades of direct Japanese rule was simply too short a time span to except extraordinary results. Korean populations that Kim discusses have passed through three to four generations of Japanese influence. The 60 to 80 years corresponds roughly to the estimates made by Japanese who envisioned assimilation as a 50- to 100-year process.

A second factor is the change in attitudes that Japanese and Koreans hold toward each other. Unlike the years of colonial occupation, arguments can no longer be sustained that claim absolute superiority of the Japanese over the Korean, as they were in earlier decades. The present assimilation process assumes a level of equality not possible up through 1945, particularly against the backdrop of economic advancement by both Japan and South Korea. The arrogance of superiority that most Japanese assumed during the decades of colonial rule was perhaps the most important roadblock to realizing successful integration with the Korean people.

Attitudes of Koreans in Japan have also been influenced by the above factors. They entered a new relationship with the Japanese following Japan’s defeat in World War II by assuming a touch of arrogance themselves. Japan, as defeated nation, no longer commanding the position as global power, Koreans, as a liberated people sought to demonstrate their independence while residing in Japan, once even demanding a slice of Japanese territory to be administered by Koreans. This attitude was short-lived, and Allied occupation forces demonstrated little sympathy for Korean anti-Japanese sentiment. This helped rejuvenate antagonistic attitudes between the two peoples and a quick return of the colonial-era discriminatory practices. More recent generations find themselves a minority in Japanese society but hold increasingly less affinity with their ethnic homeland. With discrimination practices easing, and a Japanese population increasingly more acceptable of them as Korean, these generations of Japan-based Koreans have less incentive than their parents and grandparents to remain at the peripheries of Japanese society.

Problems remain. Times of political discord between peninsula and archipelago over both present and past issues remind us that Japanese-Korean assimilation remains a work in progress. The progress that the two peoples have realized, however, is that which could only come through a rethinking of the attitudes that Japanese held toward Koreans over the decades of colonial rule. Indeed, the illusion of superiority that Japan’s contemporaries brought to their colonial administration, rather than the inability of the colonized to understand or accept this policy, prevented the successful assimilation of any foreign people. Prime Minister Hara Takashi, a devout assimilationist, perhaps said it best in his criticism of Japanese administration policy in Korea following the March First demonstrations: you cannot expect a people to change while administering them as fools (Hara 1998). This advice continues to hold to the present.
A note on historiography

Research entertaining questions posed in this chapter has increased remarkably as of recent. General studies that consider the sincerity behind Japan’s intentions in promoting assimilation rhetoric have examined this issue from a policy level (Caprío 2009) as well as at a cultural level (Henry 2014). These studies have also considered the Korean reaction to this policy, although a dedicated examination of the effect that Japan’s assimilation policy had in encouraging collaboration remains to be written. Translations of Korean literature written during this period by Japanese (Kajiyama 1995) and Koreans (Yuasa 2005; Yom 2005) have added a direct interpretation of participant reaction to our understanding of Japan’s assimilation policy and Korea’s reaction. Studies that isolate various aspects of the colonial relationship that indirectly touch on various assimilation questions have divided on their evaluation of Japanese views toward Korea and Korean culture. On the one hand, two studies on Japanese exploitation of Korean labor (Kawashima 2009; Driscoll 2010) adopt a critical neo-Marxian that emphasize Japanese atrocities. On the other hand, two studies that consider cultural exchanges under this colonial relationship (Atkins 2010; Yecies and Shim 2011) view the relationship on more benevolent terms. Two further studies that focus on Korean acceptance into the Japanese military (Fujitani 2011; Palmer 2013) suggest that the wartime period (1931–1945) encouraged more positive views among Japanese of this colonized people. Finally, pioneer research on the attitudes of Japanese settlers in Korea (Uchida 2011) has demonstrated the negative reaction to assimilation that expatriates adopted, one similar to resistance that Europeans in French Algeria displayed to this policy. The chapter that remains to be written is the residue that Japanese policy in general, and assimilation policy in particular, left on the Korean peninsula following liberation in 1945.

Glossary

Kokumin 国民 national subjects
Shinmin 臣民 imperial subjects
Budan seiji 武断政治 military rule
Bunka seiji 文化政治 cultural rule
Chōsenjin 朝鮮人 Korean
Geta 下駄 Japanese traditional shoes
Kimono 着物 Japanese traditional dress
Naise n yūwa 内鮮融和 Japanese-Korean unity
Naise n ittai 内鮮一体 Japan-Korea one body
Han Shinajin 半シナ人 half-Chinese
Shin Chōsen 新朝鮮 new Korea
genzen to sonzai 優然の存在 majestic existence
zainichi 在日 Japan-based [Korean]

Notes

1 This is not to say that the English believed the Celtic culture that dominated these states was superior to, or even on a par with, their culture. The Welsh remember one such attack on their language as the “Brad y Llyfrau Gleision” (Treachery of the Blue Books) (Roberts 1998).
2 The violent confrontations that the English faced with the Irish more closely resembles this French-Algerian relationship, a result of centuries of mistreatment of the Catholics in general and Irish in particular.
3 Hyôn Yongsûp’s cousin, Peter Hyôn, authored *Mansei*, the classic novel about a boy growing up under Japanese colonial rule. Peter introduces his cousin as the black sheep of the family when he married a Japanese woman. The family remained under lock and key in an isolated house in the back when guests came to the house (Hyôn 1986: 62).

References


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