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## Korean Life Under Japanese Rule: A Quest for Truth in History

Kevin Richins

*Western Washington University*

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Korean Life Under Japanese  
Rule

A Quest for Truth in History

Kevin Richins  
Senior Project  
Honors  
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## Introduction

In approaching the subject of Japanese Imperialism in Korea from 1910-1945, I have been tempted to try to take myself out of the examination, to make it as objective as possible. However, as I review the things that I have learned about this period, I realize that this is not possible. I am wrapped up emotionally in this most sensitive of issues between these two nations. My research has been motivated as much by a quest to make some sense of the accusations that I, myself, have heard, as to bring these events to light for others.

Stories abound about the tumultuous events of this time. Some of these are fantastic. It has been said that "when the Japanese ruled Korea, they took all the healthy babies, and killed them, to make the Koreans a weak people." "The speaking of Korean was outlawed by the Japanese." "More Koreans were killed by Japanese during their occupation, than Jews were killed by the Nazis in World War II." "The Japanese took the genealogies of the Koreans and destroyed them." "The Japanese saw Korea as the rice bowl of Japan." These were all statements that I received prior to my search

for a more accurate historical picture of Japanese Colonialism.

The facts were however often just as elusive as the rumors upon which I had sought clarification. Books often treated the Japanese occupation as a logical economic and political reality of Japan's expanding imperial strength. They outlined treaties, technology, reforms, and the terms of office for Japanese Governors-Generals in Korea. These books often neglected the human drama of a people oppressed by a foreign power, living in shame and fear. I thought that I might be able to find this side of the issue in Korean publications.

To my surprise these publications focused on similar subjects. In an attempt to balance the story, Korean scholarship focused on the activities surrounding different revolutionary movements, the unjust policies and reforms of the Japanese government, censorship, Korean patriots in exile, and economic effects of Japanese rule. The Korean works I came across also lacked the human element. What were the lives of people like who had to live in this environment? To what extent were the rumors I had heard true?

The only way I could see of getting a straight answer was to talk to some people who were there and ask them what

life was like. Therefore I took a trip to South Korea in August of 1999. I had a goal of seeking out those who were there, who grew up in this situation. I believed that this would yield a wealth of information that was largely lacking in this area of historical inquiry. I saw this as adding the human perspective to this history that I sensed was lacking from the record of the Japanese in Korea during the first half of the Twentieth Century.

## Background

An exhaustive background of Japanese/Korean relations is not necessary for understanding the occupation of Korea. I will attempt to describe the setting as simply as I can to give a frame of reference to these events.

Japan and Korea have had ties since the prehistoric beginnings of the two peoples. Archeology points to Korea as the source of the people known today as the Japanese<sup>1</sup>. Ever since, Korea has been the window to Japan of the greater Asian world. Korean monks are credited with bringing Chinese culture and Buddhist religion to the Japanese world<sup>2</sup>. Aggression between the islands of Japan and the mainland were always funneled through Korea. From the ill fated invasion

of Japan by Khubilai Khan in 1281<sup>3</sup> to the invasion of China through Korea by Hideyoshi in 1592<sup>4</sup>, thus as Japan sought to build her own imperial interest, based on the European model, she naturally turned to Korea.

Japan's goal was to unite Asia under Japanese rule in order to be on par with the European powers. Japan saw herself as uniquely qualified to do this in Asia. They named this venture the Greater East Asia co-Prosperity sphere<sup>5</sup>. They envisioned themselves as liberators of the East, building a society that could be economically and politically free from the West. Japan proved her determination to bring this vision to fruition by successive victories in the Sino-Japanese War of 1896 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. These two victories gave Japan the territory on which she began to build her empire, Taiwan and Korea<sup>6</sup>.

The state of Korean government at this time was one of confusion and shifting loyalties. Korea followed China's example in her reaction to contact with the West, she withdrew<sup>7</sup>. This proved to be a terrible mistake. As pressure increased from the outside for Korea to open her ports to foreign trade, she oscillated between relying on China, Russia, and Japan for protection. Each faction vying for power in the Korean government, allied themselves with a

different nation for protection. These palace intrigues were complicated by the pursuit of self interest of each of these foreign powers, and their attempts to manipulate the Korean court<sup>8</sup>. The fate of Korea was no longer in her hands, for her fate was determined not by her people, or even a war against her people, but the wars of Japan with China and Russia.

In 1905 Japan made the Korean Peninsula a protectorate. The Japanese proclaimed this move as one to "enable Korea to stand on her own feet and become strong enough to protect herself against all foreign encroachment."<sup>9</sup> When five years later Korea was annexed by Japan and renamed Chosen, Japan declared that her attempts to help Korea had failed, and that annexation was the only way to administer good rule to the Korean people<sup>10</sup>.

With annexation Japan possessed the power to pass and enforce laws upon the people living on the peninsula. This power allowed the new government to legislate what ever was deemed necessary to promote the good of Japan. This often ended up being at the expense of the Korean people.

## The Quest Begins



Gripping my passport in one hand, and my Korean dictionary in the other, I boarded a plane and headed for Korea and hopefully a truer insight into the events I had been studying.

I had lived in Korea before, and knew the people to be good natured, and willing to talk on almost any subject. I had never attempted to engage a senior citizen in the topic of Japanese Imperialism before. I knew that the issues that surround the subject were very sensitive. The thought of approaching an individual cold on this topic made me feel uneasy. I had been in contact with a graduate from Western Washington University, Kim Urban, with the purpose of having a good number of my interviews set up before I arrived. True to her word, she had several interviews scheduled for me. We met and traveled south of Seoul (서울) to Oe San (오산). There we met in a small realtor's office with Mr. Choi Jun-Gi (최준기) aged 66 and Mr. Kim Yong-Dok (김용덕) aged 76.

We got settled and introductions were made. I explained my purpose in interviewing them. I wanted to learn what life was like under Japanese Imperialism. Mr. Choi was very animated about teaching me the history of this period. For the first few minutes of the interview he gave me a quick background of the powers that had fought for control of Korea

one hundred years earlier. I understood that during the time of Japanese rule, both of these men would have been school age<sup>11</sup>. I inquired about their schooling. Mr. Choi had some schooling from the Japanese. He asserted that everything, "education, culture, History, all was done according to the Japanese perspective." Of course even the younger students chafed at this. "But what are they going to do? The Japanese they've got guns and swords! How is a student going to object (to what is being taught)?" He added, "The teachers went around carrying swords, all of them did!"

Mr. Kim's memories of the Japanese revolved around his experience serving in the Japanese military. He was stationed in Hokkaido. His duty was to watch for incoming aircraft, and to signal the people whether it was safe or not. But that is as much as I was able to learn about his personal experience. While Mr. Choi dominated the conversation, both he and Mr. Kim did not share many personal experiences. I learned a lot about the way these men felt about the development of History in modern times, but little about their role in it.

Yet these men held some great insights, even if they were not the personal anecdotes I had expected to get. They

told me how they felt about the collaborators with the Japanese. Mr. Choi said,

"How many were collaborators? In a sense, all of us were. We received everything from the hand of the Japanese. We all collaborated to get what we needed. Looked at another way, maybe one-third were collaborators, and one-third were not. Those that did collaborate were just as bad as the Japanese. They abandoned their own country and fought for another."

Collaboration with the Japanese is not something that wins any popularity contests in Korea. But Mr. Choi asserted that the need for the basics of life mitigate the circumstances to some extent.

After discussing these ideas at some length, Ms. Urban and I bid them farewell, and stepped outside the office to make our way to our next appointment. A few yards to the left of the office sat two old women. They were crouched in the shade by the gate of a house. We walked over and introduced ourselves.

Ms. Pak Mi-Ra (박미라) aged 74, and her friend (who refused to give her name) aged 78<sup>12</sup>. After receiving such a deluge of information from my first meeting I hoped that I would have a similar experience. In this I was disappointed. These women had seen hard times, that much was apparent, but sharing those hard times with a foreign student was not

something upon which they were too keen. We talked about America, about family, and about the future.

The subject of life under the Japanese elicited little response. They told me that schooling was not something that was part of their lives. They would not elaborate further than telling me "The Japanese were bad to the Koreans."

At the conclusion of these Oe San interviews I began to seriously wonder if I would be able to find the stories I was looking for. We returned to Seoul and I began to look for people on my own to talk to around the city.

When the Japanese took control of Korea they built a large governmental building directly in front of the old Korean Imperial Palace. Construction of the building was started in 1916, and not completed until 1926. It was meant to be a showcase of Japan's power, as well as displacing the symbol of Korean self rule of the Old Imperial Palace of Kyung Bok Gung (경복궁).<sup>13</sup> This administration building was converted to the National Museum after Korea gained her independence. It stood until the 1995, when this symbol of Japanese might was finally torn down.

I went to this site in downtown Seoul to see the palace grounds. I walked around the square where the Japanese Government Building had once stood. There was a gaping hole

where the foundation of the building had once been. Construction was underway in this hole. A new gate was being built. It would frame the pathway to the old palace, whose roof is visible peeking over one of the inner walls of the complex.

As I made my way around I met a woman, Kim Soon Ja (김순자) who was born in 1934. She was a teacher at Korea National University. When we met she was only days from retirement. As we talked about the history of the place we were, I inquired what life was like for her under Japanese rule. She remembered speaking Japanese in school. She said that they were forbidden to speak Korean at all, but they did at home, because they could not be monitored there. Her grandmother taught her how to read and write Korean at home. Story books were circulated called Chung Hyang Jon (충향전). She used these to learn to read.

Ms. Kim claimed that her grandparents were nationalists, as well as her extended family. Her father however was a disappointment to his father, he choose to work for the colonial government.

Ms. Kim continued her education after Independence. She studied abroad, in New Zealand and Sweden. She eventually obtained a position at Korea National University. I can't

help but wonder if the opportunity for her education did not begin with the Japanese school she attended. As I had learned in my interviews in Oe San, women were not usually allowed into school before the Japanese occupation.

I mused at the palace for a couple of hours and visited the sites where palace intrigue had taken place. The location of the assassination of Queen Min by Japanese troops on October 8, 1895 <sup>14</sup>. I left the palace grounds near closing time and pondered where I should go next in my search for information.

I headed once again for downtown. I knew that the senior citizens of the city enjoyed gathering in parks to socialize. I knew that on Chong No (중로), a busy street in downtown Seoul, there were a couple of large parks that would be good places to talk to people. I entered the park through a gate and heard the sound of a trumpet floating toward me. I looked around at a sea of graying heads of hair. There was a group gathered around a pavilion where a small band was playing songs that everyone knew the words to. Many danced and sang, and passed bottles of rice wine to each other. People were playing Pa-duk (바둑)<sup>15</sup>, talking, or watching a television that had been placed in the park.

I sat down next to an older gentleman and we started to discuss things. I told him the purpose of my trip. I asked about his feelings about the age of Japanese Imperialism. He looked at me and shook his head. "No, I don't want to talk about that. Let's talk about Jesus instead," he replied. So we did.

Later I had a similar experience with a group of women. They had huddled under the eaves of a building to escape from the sporadic rain bursts that were pelting the city at the time. I squatted down on my heels, Korean style, and worked the conversation toward the goal of my quest. One woman, "Grandmother Kim" (김 할머니), said, "I was in Japan during the occupation. I came back when we gained independence." That was all she would tell me.

There were many reasons why Korean people would be in Japan during the occupation. Most would travel to the islands for work. Some would be coerced to go, like Mr. Kim of Oe San. Some Korean women were sent off to be "Comfort Women<sup>16</sup>," or sex slaves, for the Japanese military. If this was the reason that "Grandmother Kim" would not tell me any more about her situation is unknown. It is unlikely that anyone would admit that to a nosy foreign kid anyway. I

would venture to say that she was there for legitimate work, and returned to Korea when it was expedient to do so.

I was running out of time to make the kinds of contacts that I hoped to make. I went to an area of Seoul called Chang Ahn (장안). I knew a couple of parks here where I might be able to find someone. One park in particular had mini-streets set up for children to ride their bicycles on. It was in this park that I met Hong Jae Bom (홍재범) born in 1928.

Mr. Hong had been a farmer in a North Korean town of Gae Song (개성). As the Japanese needed more and more food to supply the war effort, he had to pay more and more in taxes. Mr. Hong did not pay in cash, he paid in kind. The mandates of the Colonial Government had to be followed no matter what. "Their rules extended to people. They could conscript you into the army. They didn't care about your age, even little children were being sent off to the army. The girls were being taken and forced to be 'comfort women,'" Declared Mr. Hong.

He asserted that the reforms of the Japanese were hollow. For instance in 1919 the Japanese Government declared that whippings were to be abolished as a punishment. This was in response to massive protests by the Korean people



in March of 1919<sup>17</sup>. Mr. Hong said that whippings continued in his day at least ten years after the reform was made.

I wondered if Mr. Hong thought that the Japanese had done any good for Korea. They had after all built tremendous amounts of infrastructure. Technology was leaps and bounds ahead of where it had been when the Japanese took control. I wondered if Mr. Hong saw the legacy of Japan's industrialization in Korea's modern style of life. He thought about this and said, "While the Japanese were in control they weakened the Korean people. When they came to our land we progressed quickly. But for 36 years we were not able to learn for ourselves. If we had that opportunity we would probably be in a better position today."

With that statement the clouds above us opened up and we were obliged to part ways and seek shelter from the storm. Mr. Hong was the last one I was able to meet who would talk to me about life under Japanese rule. I was able to speak with three men and three women about their lives and how they were effected by the international ambition of the Japanese. I was not able to learn as many unique stories as I had hoped, but I had come closer to finding the truth about what happened during the age of Japanese Imperialism.

## Conclusions

My goal in going to Korea was to find clarification of the things that I was reading in books and things I had learned from rumor. I was not able to bring light to all of my concerns, but I was able to come closer to an understanding.

My discussions with these senior citizens confirmed that Korean culture was under attack by the Japanese. Speaking Korean was in fact illegal during the last years of the Japanese Occupation. According to Richard Kim's autobiographical stories, the government even legislated what style of clothing could be worn<sup>18</sup>.

The image that I had gotten from the history books written by Koreans did not match what I was being told in my interviews. The books described independence movement after independence movement. But most of those with whom I spoke balked at the thought of openly opposing the rules of the Japanese government. Mr. Choi's statement about everyone being a collaborator, is especially illustrative of this point.

None of those with whom I spoke mentioned the wholesale slaughter of Koreans by the Japanese. I can not conclude

that it couldn't have happened, but the only evidence that I have for it is from a rumor and tiny article published in Current Opinion in 1919<sup>19</sup>.

I could generalize on one point, the subject of the Japanese Occupation of Korea is a sensitive area of history that the people are trying to move beyond. The Korean people are actively trying to forget the injustices of the past. Highlighting the strengths of the history of Korea seems more important to them. The Koreans are not grumbling about their tough times, they happened and they survived.

It may be impossible to get a clear picture of what happened during the time when "Korea" did not exist. Time clouds the facts. Political wresting of history distorts this already fuzzy image. "People's memories change," said Don Baker<sup>20</sup>, "some memories get destroyed under peer pressure. Many remember there being no benefits from Japanese rule." Baker cited a long list of things that the Japanese had done to preserve Korean history and culture. These range from recording comprehensive histories to development of Archeology. The Japanese showed the glories of ancient Korean culture and sought to discredit the more recent Choson Dynasty.

My quest for the truth is not complete. I still have questions. I struggle with what I could have asked, but did not hear the opportunity in the conversation. My search yielded results that were different than I had expected. I learned another lesson on Korean culture. I learned that the search to understand History can not be accomplished with just one project.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989) page 326
- <sup>2</sup> (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989) page 334
- <sup>3</sup> The Mongols nationalized the merchant marine fleets of Korea and China to invade Japan. It was during this invasion that a great storm arose and destroyed the Mongol forces, preserving the Japanese from invasion. This storm was called "Divine Wind," or "Kamikaze." (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989) page 367
- <sup>4</sup> Much like Genghis Khan, Hideyoshi knew that he could only maintain his power if he continued to engage his armies in military conquest. Having conquered Japan, he turned his attention to China. Korea was to be the pathway to China. Korea's refusal to allow Japanese troops to march unhindered through their land, brought Japanese aggression on their heads. It was during this conflict that Admiral 이순신 (Yi Sun Shin), one of Korea's national heroes was born. His decisive victories against the Japanese navy with his "Turtle Ships," are a unique and patriotic aspect of Korean History. (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989) page 316
- <sup>5</sup> (Vinacke 1950) page 645
- <sup>6</sup> The conclusion of the Sino--Japanese War with the treaty of Shimonoseki gave Japan Taiwan (Formosa) in 1896. The Russo-Japanese war ended with the Portsmouth Treaty in 1905, giving Japan "paramount political, military and economic interests in Korea." (Vinacke 1950) page 183
- <sup>7</sup> (Vinacke 1950) page 124
- <sup>8</sup> (Han 1970)
- <sup>9</sup> (Yamagata 1922) page 185
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Everyone that I would have the chance to speak with would fall into this category. It is too late for any more oral histories of adults during this time to be collected.
- <sup>12</sup> She told us we could call her "The neighborhood grandmother"
- <sup>13</sup> (역사문제연구社 1999) page 188
- <sup>14</sup> (Han 1970) page 430
- <sup>15</sup> Same as the Japanese game of Go.
- <sup>16</sup> (Chang 1997) page 52
- <sup>17</sup> (Yamagata 1922)
- <sup>18</sup> (Kim 1977)
- <sup>19</sup> (Current Opinion 1919)
- <sup>20</sup> Professor of Korean History at the University of British Columbia. From a personal telephone conversation November 13, 1999.

The Korean National Museum 1994.  
The building was formerly the  
Japanese Administration Building.



The Building  
preparing for  
demolition in  
1995.



In 1999 the building  
has been demolished.  
The Gwang Hwa Mun now  
domiates the street.



A new gate  
being erected  
in the place  
of the old  
Japanese  
Administration  
Building.



All Photos by  
Kevin Richins