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## Japanese Colonialism: Unraveling the Complex Historiography and Cultural Genocide in the Korean Peninsula

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**Japanese Colonialism:  
Unraveling the Complex Historiography and Cultural Genocide in the Korean Peninsula**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Upon the influence of western imperialism reaching East Asia, Japan began its own imperial conquests as it worked to establish itself as a world power alongside Russia and Western powers. After the first Sino-Japanese war between Qing China and Imperial Japan, China was forced to recognize independence to Korea, along with ceding the Taiwan, Pescadores and Liaodong territories to Japan as of 1895. While Japan initially claimed to promote Korea's independence and nationalism, they officially ended up annexing Korea as of 1910. From the perspective of the western powers and historians, they were initially optimistic about Japan's reform on Koreans. However, as more information was revealed to the world about Japanese rule, more and more individuals began to condemn the colonization. This paper aims to analyze the cultural impact of Japanese rule in the Korean Peninsula, specifically analyzing the revived cultural literature, the global perception of annexation throughout the 20th and into the 21st century, and primary accounts from the time period. I hope to suggest that colonial rule in Korea was nothing short of an atrocity against humanity that aimed to strip Koreans of cultural identity, but also that the success of Korea, notably South Korea, was made possible by the Korean citizens that rebuilt the country after colonization rather than the Japanese government. Ultimately this paper aims to contribute to the rich historiography regarding Japanese colonialism and provide a more raw perspective on the impact of cultural genocide in Korean society, as well as bring light to the impact of the colonial era in the present day.

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## INTRODUCTION

The late 19th century was a period of viciously competitive industrial imperialism that colonized the globe; East Asia was not spared in this conquest. The Qing dynasty in China was in decline due to revolutions and warfare, further exacerbated by imperialism. One of the most notable imperial attacks on China was from Britain through the Opium Wars. The first Opium War occurred between 1839 and 1842.. Britain valued Chinese goods such as tea, silk and porcelain, but China had no interest in trading with Britain and only accepted payments in *specie*, something that was limited in Britain. In order to force trade with China, the East India Company and other British merchants smuggled opium illegally into China, selling in exchange for silver that was then used to buy other goods. Over time, this resulted in a huge addiction problem in China, and China moved to stop the trade. The conflict developed into battle in 1839 and as a result the British had free reign to trade with whoever was in China, as stated in the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. This also contributed to the Taiping Rebellion in China from 1850-1864.<sup>1</sup> While China was preoccupied with squelching the Taiping Rebellion, the British used this opportunity to make advancements in their trading rights in China, sparking the short second Opium War, also known as the Arrow War after the British Warship, in 1860.<sup>2</sup> The Opium Wars opened the door for China's market to be accessible to the West, and for the Qing to

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<sup>1</sup> National Army Museum. "Opium War," n.d.

<https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/opium-war-1839-1842#:~:text=Between%201839%20and%201842%2C%20British,Chinese%20trade%20to%20British%20merchants.>

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Pletcher, "Opium Wars | Definition, Summary, Facts, & Causes," Encyclopedia Britannica, April 28, 2023. [https://www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars.](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars)

fall further into decline. Thus China, arguably the most impressive empire of the last few centuries that once dominated the East, succumbed to the cutthroat pressures of the western powers, leaving the surrounding smaller countries vulnerable to foreign invasion.

Japan, which isolated itself from the rest of the world between 1600-1868, rapidly reentered the world and quickly adapted to the new imperialism that had invaded East Asia. The Tokugawa period of isolation and relative peace was cut short due to the pressure of the US government. Commodore Mathew Perry entered Tokyo Harbor on behalf of the US in 1853, forcing Japan to enter into a trade deal with the US. Since Japan at the time lacked a comparable navy, they were unable to counter the small steam fleet should they use force. Thus, they acquiesced to the demands of Perry; shortly after this interaction, Russia, Britain, France and Holland all followed suit and forced Japan to sign their own unequal treaties that ensured trade. The 1854 and 1858 US treaties with Japan opened ports for trade, disrupting the Japanese economy and contributing to the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate. This contributed to “middle-ranking, reform minded samurai” overthrowing the government in 1868 and “set Japan peaceably on a course of radical modernization perhaps unparalleled in history.”<sup>3</sup> The new government took on the title Meiji Restoration. Invigorated by the influence and power of Western imperialism and, most notably, a witness to its negative effects on China, Japan aspired to become a world power themselves. Japan quickly pursued a large and modern military, educating themselves on Western imperialism. The current leaders, unsatisfied with their ranking in the social order around the globe, sought to increase their global presence, first through the acquisition of colonies, most notably Korea. The Korean peninsula, at the time, was under the influence of China, but Russia had also expressed interest in the small country. However, from

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<sup>3</sup> Asia for Educators, Columbia University. “Key Points | Asia for Educators | Columbia University,” n.d. [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main\\_pop/kpct/kp\\_1900-1950.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_1900-1950.htm).

1894-1895, Japan fought in the Sino-Japanese War against China and, to the surprise of many in the West, won, gaining Taiwan as Japan's first colony and influence in Korea.<sup>4</sup> Both Great Britain and the US saw a striking increase in potential and economic status from Japan, which ultimately led Great Britain to sign an alliance with Japan in 1902, further increasing their ranking in the social order; that same year, the US acknowledged Japanese influence in Korea.<sup>5</sup> Japan then targeted Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and was backed by Great Britain and the United States. By 1905, Japan succeeded in the war, and Korea was officially annexed in 1910.<sup>6</sup>

Korea, famously named the Hermit Kingdom due to its lack of interaction with countries outside of China, began opening their ports to foreign vessels in 1876. However, Japan's annexation marked the fall of the last dynasty in Korea, the Joseon dynasty. Throughout the 19th century, troops from Japan and Qing China vied for power on the peninsula, the majority of combat occurring on Korean soil. The combat and pressure from world powers weakened the dynasty, and when China ceded influence to Japan in 1895, the Japanese government slowly infiltrated the Joseon government until officially annexing the peninsula in 1910.<sup>7</sup>

From the start of Japanese rule in Korea, public opinion on Japan's rule has been mixed. Western leaders and scholars were initially optimistic about Japan's reform of Korea.<sup>8</sup> However, as more information became known to the world about Japanese rule, more and more individuals began to condemn the colonization. While there are still some Japanese and Western historians

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<sup>4</sup> Columbia University, "Asia for Educators."

<sup>5</sup> "Milestones: 1899–1913 - Office of the Historian," n.d.  
<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/japanese-relations>.

<sup>6</sup> Columbia University, "Asia for Educators."

<sup>7</sup> Kore Limited, "A History of Joseon: Korea's Last Dynasty." KORELIMITED, March 17, 2021.  
<https://korelimited.com/blogs/korelimited/a-history-of-joseon-korea-s-last-dynasty#:~:text=Japanese%20Occupation%20and%20End%20of,sign%20in%20the%20Emperor%27s%20stead>.

<sup>8</sup> William G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism, 1894-1945*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

that claim Japanese colonialism caused South Korea's current success as a world economic power, and therefore overruled any negative effects of colonization, more modern-day historians are quick to refute anything that is not "anti-colonial."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there is alarming evidence that proves Japanese colonialism was not only adamant on destroying the culture and well-being of Korea and Koreans as a whole, but also had complex causal effects on the country's modernity.<sup>10</sup>

The reality of Japan's imperial rule was that it was not only tyrannical, but arguably accounts for one of the worst cases of human rights violations in history. Koreans were not only stripped of their identity, they were also stripped of their language and culture. Most notably, Korean women were taken as "comfort women" for the Japanese soldiers and forced into sex slavery.<sup>11</sup> The majority of rice and natural resources were sent to Japan, leading to mass famine. Additionally, despite Japanese settlers making up only 2% of the population, they made 8x more per capita than Koreans.<sup>12</sup> The brutal treatment sparked mass protests not only within Korea, but around the world, gaining the attention of other world powers. Though Japan actively denied the allegations, in the 1920s they were forced to release a new order that was more hospitable to their Korean colony, though Japanese and Korean records contradict whether this actually improved quality of life.<sup>13</sup> Korean nationalists regardless continued to fight against the Japanese regime, calling out for support from other powers to step in on their behalf. Korean nationalism

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<sup>9</sup>Keith Pratt, *Everlasting Flower: A History of Korea*. Reaktion Books, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Gi-Wook Shin, and Michael Edson Robinson, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*. Harvard University Asia Center, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth W. Son, *Embodied Reckonings : "Comfort Women," Performance, and Transpacific Redress*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Mitsuhiro Kimura, "Standards of Living in Colonial Korea: Did the Masses Become Worse Off Or Better Off Under Japanese Rule?" *The Journal of Economic History* 53, no. 3 (1993): 629-652. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2122408>.

<sup>13</sup> George Akita, and Brandon Palmer. *The Japanese Colonial Legacy in Korea, 1910-1945*. Merwinasia, 2014.



took flight despite the graphic suppression of Korean culture. Koreans were able to not only maintain their customs and language, but their fighting spirit as well.<sup>14</sup> The strains of World War I, the following global depression, and then World War II eventually forced Japan to release its hold on the peninsula. In 1945, Japan was forced to surrender Korea to the US and the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, the warring in Korea did not end there, as the 38th parallel border was erected with allied troops occupying the North and South. Tensions soon resulted in the Korean War in 1950. Since the 38th parallel was established in 1945, the Korean peninsula still has yet to be reunified.<sup>15</sup>

To this day, Japan has still not acknowledged the harm they have done to Korea, which marks increased tensions between the two (or rather now 3) countries.<sup>16</sup> With the current booming success of South Korea's economy and pop culture circulating the world, some historians claim Japanese influence made this miracle boom possible. Despite Japan's harsh treatment of Korea, some historians argue that Japan left behind economic resources and infrastructure when they left, which allowed for Koreans to pick up where Japan left off and create a boom effect.<sup>17</sup> However, Japan notably took every resource possible from Korea and left nothing in its wake, especially when moving out of the peninsula. Additionally, with the Korean War, it would have been impossible for meaningful leftover remnants to survive even if Japan

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<sup>14</sup> "Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). Independence Movement : Korea.Net : The Official Website of the Republic of Korea. Copyright(C) 1999-2016 KOCIS. All Rights Reserved," n.d. <https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Independence-Movement>.

<sup>15</sup> Columbia University, "Asia for Educators".

<sup>16</sup> "Different Wartime Memories Keep Japan and South Korea Apart. United States Institute of Peace," n.d. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/different-wartime-memories-keep-japan-and-south-korea-apart>.

<sup>17</sup> Shin, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*..

had left anything for its discarded colony.<sup>18</sup> Despite the injustices that occurred in Korea, there is still scholarly rhetoric that not only invalidates the Korean experience, but even encourages the idea that Japan's influence was beneficial and contributed to the modern-day success of Korea, more specifically South Korea. While Japan worked collaboratively with Korea after the colonial period due to US influence between the two countries, relations before the Treaty in 1965<sup>19</sup> were practically nonexistent<sup>20</sup>; additionally, Japan's economic success during the colonial period did not translate to the majority of Korean people. It is unreasonable to claim Japan's colonial rule itself economically benefited South Korea to the extent that Japan directly caused their success; the suggestion that it does among scholars is a perpetuation of colonial paternalism; furthermore, citing economic partnership as a method to invalidate or downplay the cultural genocide in Korea is inaccurate, but also incomparable. Though Japanese colonialism itself was very complex, both economically and politically, the complex historiography cannot be fully grasped without understanding the severity of the cultural genocide that occurred in Korea, which was an intentional, methodical and brutal act by the Japanese government, whose actions can not be canceled out via economic influence.

## **HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Though the Japanese Colonial Period in Korea only lasted from 1910-1945, the complex historiography extends far greater than the actual colonial period. Though the Japanese did not

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<sup>18</sup>Gi-Wook Shin, *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia : The Korean Experience*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>19</sup>“Treaty on Basic Relations 1965.” *Treaties.Un.Org*. United Nations, 1965. Accessed April 24, 2023.

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8471-English.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Heo, Uk, and Terence Roehrig. *South Korea's Rise: Economic Development, Power, and Foreign Relations*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

officially annex Korea until 1910, the Japanese began their conquest as early as the previous century, citing resources from as early as the 300s. On the other side, current relations between Japan and Korea have both expanded and increased the complexity of the Japanese Colonial historiography, allowing for historians to present new theories and narratives as well as to reflect and utilize older ones. The Japanese Colonial historiography as it pertains to Korea can be divided into 3 sections: the Pre-Colonial Period, the Colonial Period, and the Post-Colonial Period. The Pre-Colonial Period begins as early as the 1880s with Japanese imperial propaganda and ends at the annexation of Korea in 1910. During the Pre-Colonial Period, the main narrative is primarily pro-Japan, as most sources are taken from Japanese Propaganda; while there is rhetoric from this period that is strongly against Japanese occupation (primarily from Korean Nationalists), it is not the main narrative on an international scale. The Colonial Period Begins in 1910 and ends at the removal of Japanese troops from the peninsula in 1945. During this period, two narratives emerge on an international scale: Korean Nationalist and Japanese Nationalist. The Korean Nationalist narrative is strikingly against Japanese occupation and consists primarily of Koreans; the Japanese Nationalist narrative, on the other hand, is supportive of the Japanese regime in Korea and is composed mostly of Japanese and western scholars. At this point in time, Historical literature is strongly rooted in nationalism and politics; for Western historians in particular, “they have often found themselves taking sides, making moral judgments, or writing between these narratives, only vaguely aware of the dominating logic that constricts their own narratives.”<sup>21</sup> Due to the political intensity of Japanese occupation, most historians chose a narrative to align with, leaving two extreme narratives and little middle ground. The Post Colonial Period covers 1946 to the time of this paper, 2023. After the colonial period, a significant amount of new information regarding Japanese occupation in Korea came to light,

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<sup>21</sup> Shin, *Colonial Modernity*, 4.

most notably the confessions of comfort women in the 1990s.<sup>22</sup> The Post Colonial Period historiography became significantly more complex, and rather than historians “choosing sides” or operating from the standpoint of the two extremes, scholars develop a third narrative and instead analyze the potential influence Japan had on modern day Korea, notably the success of South Korea. Though there are three distinct periods in which historiography functions, literature from all three periods have a tendency to overlap each other and can be used in conjunction with each other.

From the 1880s, the Japanese Meiji Restoration faced criticism from its people regarding the legitimacy of the new regime. The hostile takeover and the less transparent change in power was suspicious to the Japanese people. Furthermore, the addition of new imperial conquests lacked a significant motive aside from economic and global recognition; there was no story or sense of nationalism for the Meiji Restoration, as many Japanese citizens still held nationalist ties to their previous regime. These were some motivators for Japan to create an accurate ‘national history’ of the restoration, so the Imperial Universities in Kyoto and Tokyo worked to develop a new national history that included Korea and Taiwan long before the colonial period. Historians Shiratori Kurakichi and Naitō Konan developed the study of Oriental History, and in 1884 Konan discovered an inscription on the stele commemorating King Kwanggaet’o of Koguryō, which was “taken as evidence of Japan’s past domination of Korea”.<sup>23</sup> However, the reality is that King Kwanggaet’o, otherwise known as Gwanggaeto the Great, was a king of one of the three kingdoms in Korea during the Three Kingdoms Period in 391 and 413 CE. He is

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<sup>22</sup> Son, *Embodied Reckonings*.

<sup>23</sup> “Colonial Historiography in Taiwan and Korea under Japanese Rule. 1890s–1940s (Part I),” Politika, n.d.  
<https://www.politika.io/en/notice/colonial-historiography-in-taiwan-and-korea-under-japanese-rule-1890s1940s-part-i>.

famously known for taking control over the peninsula and placing Korea under one ruler;<sup>24</sup> his stele only discusses an invasion in which Wa, identified as the Yamato government of Japan, lost to the Koguryo army in 400 and was defeated after another attempted invasion by King Kwanggaet'o in 404.<sup>25</sup> While it is true that Japan played an active role in Korean history from that time, they did not rule over Korea during that time period. This misinterpretation would continue to be used as propaganda during the colonial period in Korea, and the validity of both the stele and Japan's account is still controversial today.

However, Japanese Historians were responsible for the creation of the first linear history of Korea in 1892. Before then, Korean history had only been recorded in a disjointed manner based on its dynasties; in an effort to reshape Korean history, Hayashi Taisuke, sinologist and professor at Tokyo Normal School, published *The History of Korea*, the final version republished again in 1912 and then continuously being republished and used until 1944; this book not only constructed the first linear account of Korean history, but allowed the Japanese to “[shape] its biases”.<sup>13</sup>

During the colonial period, the research group on Korea studied ancient Chinese and classical texts at (Taipei) Imperial University. Their publication *Kankoku kenkyūkai danwaroku* reflected similar sentiments that Japan had been expressing since the Sino-Japanese War, notably that “Korea lacked an independent identity and was entirely dependent on its neighbors.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, The text reiterates that Korea is “nothing but a long and boring tale of an unchanging country, a history not even worth reading” without the foreign powers.<sup>26</sup> Given these

<sup>24</sup> Mark Cartwright, “Gwanggaeto the Great. World History Encyclopedia,” 2022, [https://www.worldhistory.org/Gwanggaeto\\_the\\_Great/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Gwanggaeto_the_Great/).

<sup>25</sup> Takashi Hatada and V. Dixon Morris, “An Interpretation of the King Kwanggaet'o Inscription.” *Korean Studies* 3 (1979): 1–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23717824>.

<sup>26</sup> Shiokawa 鹽川, “Wagakuni to gaikoku to no kankei” 我國と外國との關係 (Relations Between our Country and its Neighbours), *Kankoku kenkyūkai danwaroku* 韓國研究會談話錄, 1902, 1, p. 1–8, in particular p. 1.

accounts, it sparked propaganda that was not only pro-Japanese, but also supportive of the colonization of the Korean peninsula. By 1911, the Committee for the Compilation of the History of the Meiji Restoration was founded, and the committee added revision of both Taiwanese and Korean colonial history in Japan's national history.<sup>27</sup>

Some of the earliest analyses of Japanese Imperialism in the West come from historian Ralston Hayden in his 1924 article, "Japan's New Policy in Korea and Formosa." In his analysis of Japanese annexation, he referred to Japan's work in Korea as "truly remarkable accomplishments" and the Korean people as stubborn and proud for being unwilling to accept Japan's aid.<sup>28</sup> Many of these sentiments matched the Japanese narrative that Korea was dependent on others and needed to be colonized in order to prosper. However, he was not alone in this ideology. The United States, along with many Western powers, were keen to see how the Japanese were so successful in the drastic increase in industrialization and revenue in Korea, an astronomical increase from pre-annexed Korea. Like the rest of the world, Hayden was swayed by the remarkable economic development and reform of the country. Alleyne Ireland noted in her book, *The New Korea*, in 1926 that the Korean colony was "infinitely better governed than it ever was under its own native rulers, that it is better governed than most self-governing countries, that it is as well governed as any of the British, American, French, Dutch and Portuguese dependencies which [she has] visited".<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that many of these western writers, like Japan, had many racial biases towards the Koreans such as Cornelius Osgood, who referred to Koreans as "medieval in character but were also functionally

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<sup>27</sup> Politika, "Colonial Historiography in Korea."

<sup>28</sup> Hayden, Ralston. "Japan's New Policy in Korea and Formosa." *Foreign Affairs*, March 1924. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/1924-03-15/japans-new-policy-korea-and-formosa>.

<sup>29</sup> Alleyne Ireland, *The New Korea*. New York, NY: Dutton, 1926.

degenerate.”<sup>30</sup> Due to the vast success Japan was gaining from the land in Korea economically, Korean people were seen as ungrateful and unsophisticated in the eyes of the world.

However, that did not deter Koreans from protesting the unfair regime. A collection of some of the most famous activists from the time period are regarded by Koreans as “Korea’s Freedom Fighters.”<sup>31</sup> One of the most famous activists from this lineup, as well as the youngest, was Yu Gwansun. She was a young high school student who is famously known for taking to the streets with her friends shouting, “Long live Korea!” She not only motivated millions of other Koreans to take to the streets, but organized the famous March 1<sup>st</sup> movement in 1919 that had over 2 million followers protesting at around 2000 different locations. She died at the age of 17 in September of 1920, a year after the famous March 1<sup>st</sup> movement, after being malnourished and brutally tortured and beaten in prison for her acts, but even while in prison, she continued to oppose the Japanese government through rallies.<sup>32</sup> Another famous activist responsible for the assassination of Itō Hirobumi was An Jung-geun; Hirobumi was a high-ranking officer that was instrumental in cementing Japan’s power in Korea in 1906. An was heavily influenced not only by his Catholic faith but also by the French missionaries who had converted him. An was adamant about protecting his country, through battle if necessary. In the early 1900s, the Japanese government, under Ito, had tightened their hold on Koreans, leading to the deaths of many Korean citizens, the disbandment of the Korean military and the overthrowing of the Korean emperor, An sought to remove the common denominator, Ito. In 1909, An assassinated Ito in hopes of preventing the deaths of more Koreans and convincing the Japanese regime to

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<sup>30</sup>Cornelius Osgood, *The Koreans and their Culture*. New York: Ronald, 1951.

<sup>31</sup>Steven L. Shields, “[RAS Korea] Remembering Korea's Freedom Fighters.” *Koreatimes*, February 28, 2023. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/02/113\\_341879.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/02/113_341879.html).

<sup>32</sup>The Albany Academies. “Yu Gwansun,” March 2, 2021. <https://www.albanyacademies.org/news-detail?pk=1403377>.

change their policies. However, it did not work, and An was executed in March of 1910, just before Korea was officially annexed.<sup>33</sup> Among the other freedom fighters was Yun Bong-gil (1908-1932), Ahn Chang-ho (1878-1938), and Kim Gu (1876-1949).<sup>34</sup>

Though there were many Korean activists and scholars that spoke out against treatment in Korea, the first historian to openly condemn Japanese colonialism was, under no surprise, a Korean. Ki-Baik Yi (1924-2004) first wrote *A New History of Korea* in 1968, then revised from 1976, and finally translated by Edward W. Wagner in 1984. Yi was born in what is now North Korea before graduating in 1947 from Seoul National University and gaining a reputation as a leading South Korean Historian. In his account of Korean history, he referred to Korea's annexation as a "scheme" plotted by the Japanese that had been in the workings for a long time. Though Japan claimed to promote well-being and peace, Yi argued that "Japan had annexed Korea to enhance the prosperity of the Japanese people at the expense of the people in Korea."<sup>35</sup> In his text, he is unfiltered as he accounts the brutality that was bestowed upon the Korean people, including public beatings, arrests, the suppression of the Korean language and culture, and mass censorship.

Andrew C. Nahm was a professor that shared similar views to Yi. In 1988, Andrew C. Nahm was an American Professor who also actively condemned Japan in his work, *Korea: Tradition and Transformation*, claiming "Korea was forcibly deprived of its sovereign rights"<sup>36</sup>. In his work, he outlined documents from Japanese colonialism to reveal the hidden history of

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<sup>33</sup> Association for Asian Studies. "The Story of An Chunggŭn - Association for Asian Studies," May 27, 2020.

<https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/the-story-of-an-chunggun/>.

<sup>34</sup> "Who Are Korea's Freedom Fighters?" KORELIMITED, November 11, 2021.

<https://korelimited.com/blogs/korelimited/who-are-korea-s-freedom-fighters>.

<sup>35</sup> Ki-Baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, Translated by Edward W. Wagner and Edward J. Shultz. Harvard University Press, 1984.

<sup>36</sup> Nahm, "Korea: Tradition & Transformation," 223.



suppression of the Korean people which until Yi had been mostly buried. Despite these appalling accounts of mistreatment, historians such as W.G. Beasley were still primarily pro-Japanese, especially in the West. From the US perspective, Japanese annexation was justified. Beasley accounted that “When the Korean emperor appealed to the Hague in 1907 the New York Tribune had commented that Japan’s right to act as it did in Korea was ‘at least as good as Russia, France, England or any other power to deal as they have with subject nations.’”<sup>37</sup> Like many western powers, Beasley argued that Social Darwinism was at play here; if Japan was strong enough to imperialize, then they had a right to do so.

However, Japanese support took a sharp turn in the 1990s, when comfort women began to speak out against the atrocities they were forced to endure by the Japanese government. In 1995, the first accounts from comfort women in Korea was published in English by Howard Keith.<sup>38</sup> This was followed by the resurfacing of many hidden pieces of literature by Koreans from the colonial era, many of which explicitly described life as a Korean under Japanese rule.<sup>39</sup> In 2000, Korea also began to lift its bans on Japanese culture and goods in Korea.<sup>40</sup> This only served as a catalyst for further information to be uncovered from the colonial period.

Additionally, many historians began criticizing the West for their support of Japan. In 2006, East Asian Studies Professor Keith Pratt, begs the question, “Where was the condemnation of the annexation in 1910, and who...showed solidarity with Koreans in their suffering under the oppressive colonial rule that followed?”<sup>41</sup> As more and more Koreans fall under the global gaze demanding reparations and a public apology from the Japanese government, more and more

<sup>37</sup> Beasley *Japanese Imperialism*, 89

<sup>38</sup> Keith Howard, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women : Testimonies*. London: Cassell, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Chong-un Kim, *A Ready-made Life : Early Masters of Modern Korean Fiction*, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> Kathryn Tolbert, "Seoul Warms to another Old Enemy; Bans on Japanese Culture being Lifted as Memories of Harsh Oppression Fade: [FINAL Edition]." *The Washington Post*, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Pratt. *Everlasting Flower*, 207

historians push to unveil the tragedies from the era and unearth the stories of individuals, most notably comfort women.<sup>42</sup> However, it is notable to acknowledge that despite overwhelming evidence of injustice and mass genocide in Korea towards the Korean people, there are still many scholars who argue that colonialism had beneficial effects for Korea in the long term, most notably foreign and Japanese scholars.<sup>43</sup> There is still a significant prevalence of Japanese Nationalism in government, most notably Nationalist Toru Hashimoto, who in 2013 denied that comfort women were forced into sex slavery, and most notably commented that “For soldiers who risked their lives in circumstances where bullets are flying around like rain and wind, if you want them to get some rest a comfort women system was necessary. That's clear to anyone.”<sup>44</sup> These nationalist remarks denying the atrocities during the wartime period have contributed to increased tensions between the United States, South Korea, and even China. Furthermore, Many scholars argued that Korea’s, specifically South Korea’s, success was catalyzed by and directly contributed to Japanese imperialism. Due to the sudden boom in the Japanese economy while utilizing Korean production, along with the “weakness” of the Joseon Dynasty preceding Japanese annexation, many argue that Korea would not be nearly as successful today if it weren’t for Japanese intervention.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hiroko Manabe. *Apologies to Korea: Reconciling Japanese Imperialism in the Rhetorical of PM Koizumi*. Proquest, Umi Dissertation Publishing, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II*, 2011;

- Taylor E. Atkins, *Primitive Selves : Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910-1945*, 2010.

-Aldric Hama, "The Japanese Colonial Legacy in Korea 1910-1945: A New Perspective." *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 43, no. 1/2 (2011)

<sup>44</sup> Reporter, Guardian Staff. “Japanese Mayor Says Second World War ‘comfort Women’ Were Necessary.” *The Guardian*, December 1, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/14/japanese-mayor-comfort-women>.

<sup>45</sup> Hwang Kyung Moon. *Rationalizing Korea : The Rise of the Modern State, 1894-1945*. 2016.

However, Korean scholars such as Kyung Moon Hwang argued that the Joseon dynasty was already progressing towards industrialization before Japan got involved with Korea; Japan was simply a catalyst in an already progressing reaction. Many Korean nationalists reject the idea that Japan had any contribution to Korea's current success; some even argued Japan had set Korea back from successes that could have possibly occurred without their intervention.<sup>46</sup> It is even further proved that Korea had little benefits from Japanese rule, as the economic success, jobs and well-being was only awarded to Japanese people. Koreans rarely, if at all, saw any benefits from this industrialization, and Japan was thorough in taking all the resources from Korea with them when they ceded Korea. Nahm stated Korea's "natural resources and manpower had ruthlessly and indiscriminately been exploited, her energy was sapped, and her time and creativity were wasted for Japan's vanity and greed."<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the majority of Koreans were barred from an education, "socially unsophisticated," and left to fend for themselves without aid.

One of the scholars that challenged both Japanese and Korean nationalism was Shin Gi Wook, a Korean sociologist and Professor of Contemporary Korea. Shin Gi Wook's account was a famous talking point that introduced a "middle ground perspective" in which neither Japanese rhetoric nor Korean rhetoric is completely truthful. He claimed that postcolonial rhetoric "added more facts to the pile while further blurring causes and connections that might better illumine the full experience of humanity on the peninsula," and emphasized that Western historians, rather than using their objective view as an outsider, instead aligned themselves with a 'side' that best matched their moral views.<sup>48</sup> While acknowledging the inherent flaws in following an extreme narrative, he encourages readers to look past the laid out narratives provided and instead look at

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<sup>46</sup> Shin, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*.

<sup>47</sup> Nahm, *Korea - Tradition & Transformation*, 259.

<sup>48</sup> Shin, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, 4.

colonialism from the perspective of modernity. In his book, *Colonial Modernity*, he argued that while “Colonialism intervened in Korea’s path to modernity... this did not automatically make Koreans mere passive recipients of modernity. Koreans participated directly and indirectly in the construction of a unique colonial modernity —a modernity that produced cosmopolitanism (a sense of shared universals) without political emancipation.”<sup>49</sup> However, Shin Gi Wook also recognizes “it was the emergence of modern Japan and its intrusion into Korea that stimulated and provided a direct model for the effort to build a nation-state in the late nineteenth century.”<sup>50</sup> Shin argues that while it is difficult to see something as tragic as colonial rule to have contributed to modernity, as modernity is considered to be beneficial and signify positive growth, it is important to not see modernity as something that is good or necessary; he argues that modernity in Korea was strongly influenced by Japanese invasion and that because modernity in Korea is rooted in its atrocity, “its sheer complexity must be recognized.”<sup>51</sup>

Given the severe complexity of the colonial period, it is difficult to fully understand the causal links between South Korea’s success and Japanese invasion. However, what is often not mentioned is whether or not economic success outweighed the lives of Koreans that succumbed to famine, abuse and injustice during the colonial period. Nahm described early colonial policy in Korea as “the destruction of Korean nationalism and racial consciousness...all speeches and public assemblies were banned and all Korean newspapers and magazines were forced to cease publication, all textbooks written by Koreans were banned... the government adopted various programs to promote the Korean acceptance of Japanese policy.”<sup>52</sup> Hundreds of historic buildings were destroyed to “eradicate nostalgia for recent history in Korea”, thousands were killed in

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<sup>49</sup> Shin, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Shin, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Shin, *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Nahm, *Korea - Tradition & Transformation*, 229.

protests, and ‘Koreans were daily being shot and whole villages burned.’<sup>53</sup> This, unfortunately, was only a small list of the atrocities that occurred during that period, a period that is arguably one of the worst instances of imperialism in history.

Regardless of Japan’s economic success, it is irrefutable that the atrocities that occurred in Korea during the Colonial Period were nothing less than brutal and inhumane. However, despite the suppression of Korean culture, language, and identity, the Korean people were able to hold onto their roots and survive until the Liberation of 1945. While many foreign and Japanese historians often argue that the economic success Japan achieved in Korea was admirable and successful, there are many more historians that argue that success benefitted no one other than the Japanese, and more likely hindered Korea from reaching its full potential. Despite Japan’s best efforts to suppress and eradicate the Korean identity, even today, there is still literature and remnants of surviving culture from the colonial period resurfacing today.

## **CULTURAL GENOCIDE IN KOREA**

Though Korea was officially annexed in 1910, Japan had been pursuing the takeover of the peninsula as early as the previous century. After the Meiji Restoration, Japan actively pursued relations to open trading ports in Korea, but was rejected by Taewŏn-gun, also known as Yi Ha-ŭng, who was regent and son of the Korean King Kojong up until he stepped down in 1873.<sup>54</sup> However, after he stepped down, Japan immediately jumped into trade talks in Busan in 1875. Impatient as ever, Japan sent warships to Kanghwa Bay, where a battle ensued and Korea was forced under duress to sign the Treaty of Kanghwa, also known as the Japan-Korea treaty of 1876. This treaty defined Korea as an independent state and no longer a protectorate of China.

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<sup>53</sup> Pratt, *Everlasting Flower*, 217-218.

<sup>54</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Taewŏn-Gun | Korean Regent.” Encyclopaedia Britannica, July 20, 1998. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Taewon-gun>.

However, China insisted that Korea, though independent, still had the protection of China and as a result the Qing dynasty increased troops on the peninsula, which ultimately led to the Sino-Japanese War of 1904.<sup>55</sup>

When annexing Japan, the government promoted many of the same imperialist ideas that they had been promoting in previous decades and even in their newly written histories: Korea was “stunted” by an incompetent government, and they were only able to reach their full potential with the aid of Japan, who considered themselves “benevolent” rulers that were perfect for the position.<sup>56</sup> In their policy-making and radical justification of their atrocity, this would be the overarching gaslighting narrative that Japan would perpetuate.

Japan was adamant from the beginning about separating Japanese from Koreans; they made it very clear that Koreans were lesser, lower beneath that of a Japanese individual, both racially and politically. However, Japan still identified Korea as theirs, as well as its people. This prompted the need for Koreans to assimilate into Japanese culture. Japan was unique in this regard by classifying Koreans as internal Japanese subjects, which some argued could be dangerous; few argued that it would be safer for Koreans to remain external for fear of them undermining the government. However, Christian Evangelist and writer Ebina Danjo was one of those who supported the policy and pointed out its merits; he argued that Korea and Japan differed from other imperial relations in the west because Korea and Japan had been sharing the same culture and were of the same race, unlike other western imperial conflicts. Thus, the Korean assimilation would be much smoother and beneficial for both sides.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. “China | Culture, History, Maps, & People,” April 24, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/China/Japan-and-the-Ryukyu-Islands>.

<sup>56</sup> Mark E Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*. Jstor.org. University of Washington Press, 2009. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnv6v.7>.

<sup>57</sup> Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies*.

The Japanese assimilation of Koreans can be categorized into 3 different segments: knowledge production, brute force, and economic policies. These are methods that interact simultaneously, formulating a web of power over the Korean people. A significant aspect of Japan's "knowledge production" methodology involved the collection and development of Korean national history and the rewriting of Japanese Oriental history under the Meiji Restoration.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, by comparing key similarities between Japanese and Koreans in terms of linguistics, cultural and physical correlations, they were able to use that knowledge to properly justify the annexation of the peninsula, both to their own people and the rest of the world. Another example of how knowledge production was utilized was through sanitation. In the pre-colonial period, Japan utilized discourse that deemed Koreans as unsanitary or "filthy". By producing this knowledge, Japan was able to implement the Seoul Sanitation Association in 1907, which was responsible for "carry[ing] out sanitary reforms, aligning Korean sanitary conditions to those of Japan. In reality, the SSA utilized brute force to enforce Japanese hygienic standards to individual Korean households. The colonial police intruded into private spaces of Korean homes, surveying hygienic conditions and collecting sanitation fees."<sup>59</sup> This is an example of how knowledge production and brute force were utilized to force assimilation onto Koreans. Additionally, despite claims that the annexation of Korea was "peacefully accomplished by the mutual consent of the people,"<sup>60</sup> it was actually due to the intense military presence by Japan that allowed for the annexation. Because of this, the first decade of the colonial period was deemed the "military rule" period,<sup>61</sup> where dissenters of colonial rule were

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<sup>58</sup> Politika, "Colonial Historiography in Taiwan and Korea under Japanese Rule."

<sup>59</sup> Admin, "Japanese Colonial Ideology in Korea (1905-1945)." *The Yale Review of International Studies*, October 12, 2019. <http://yris.yira.org/essays/3523>.

<sup>60</sup> Saito Makoto, "A Message from the Imperial Japanese Government to the American People – A Home Rule in Korea?" *The Independent*, January 31, 1920.

<sup>61</sup> Admin, "Japanese Colonial Ideology in Korea."

“imprisoned, tortured and prosecuted.” These acts of brute force were almost always backed by economic policies, which often subjected Koreans to poverty, discrimination and abuse by officials. A notable instance of economic policy was the cadastral survey, which favored Korean landlords significantly over tenants.<sup>62</sup> This policy dramatically increased the disparity in class and further divided Koreans against each other. Poor tenants were also unable to advance in work due to significant losses in land, forcing them to subject themselves to Japanese capitalism and work in factories as cheap labor.<sup>63</sup> Each of these aspects of colonial ideology worked in tandem with each other and compounded Japanese power and influence over Koreans.

The colonial period can best be separated into three distinct periods: Military rule, cultural rule and assimilation or wartime rule. Each of these periods utilized knowledge production, brute force and economic policies in tandem with each other. Though annexation was official in 1910, it can be argued that conflict in Korea began as early as 1895, when Japanese officials assassinated Empress Myeongseong in the Korean palace. Resistance groups and anti-Japanese sentiment sparked immediately after this assassination, and as Japan increased their militia in the peninsula, activists and nationalists rose up, sparking the beginning of the Korean Resistance movement. This period from 1895-1905 is referred to as the penetration period, characterized by the initial invasion of Japanese in the peninsula. However, at this point, Japan was careful to not attack these movements directly. According to the Great Principle of Japan’s foreign policy that was established in the 1880s, “ the Japanese Foreign Office had declared that Japan was interested in neither the conquest of Korea nor the reform of Korea.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Dong-no Kim, “National Identity and Class Interest in the Peasant Movements of the Colonial Period,” in Lee, Ha, and Sorenson, eds., *Colonial Rule and Social Change in Korea, 1910-1945*, (Seattle: Center for Korea Studies Publications, 2013), 156.

<sup>63</sup> Admin, “Japanese Colonial Ideology in Korea.”

<sup>64</sup> Eun Kyong Shin, “THE MORPHOLOGY OF RESISTANCE: KOREAN RESISTANCE NETWORKS 1895-1945.” PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2015, 42



This meant that in order for Japan to adhere to their policy, the annexation of the peninsula needed to appear consensual between the two parties. However, the turning point began in 1905 with the Ulsa Treaty, which forced Koreans to “relinquish to Japan many of its rights and interests in the Korean peninsula. The prime minister of Japan, Hirobumi, threatened Emperor Gojong and forced him to sign the treaty, which deprived Korea of its diplomatic sovereignty and declared Korea a protectorate of Japan.”<sup>65</sup> This treaty allowed Japan to fasttrack the annexation process, and two years later, Hirobumi forced another full-fledged treaty on Korea that gave him full judicial and administrative sovereignty, though it was later nullified as illegitimate. In 1907, the Korean army was dismantled by the Japanese government, though the soldiers became key players in resistance movements across the peninsula as they returned to their hometowns. Increased presence and policy change by the Japanese inflated the actions of the Korean Resistance movement, and “According to Japanese statistics, a total of 2,819 offenses targeting the Japanese army were made by Koreans between 1907 and 1910. More than 17,600 people were estimated to have participated in these attacks by 1910.”<sup>66</sup>

Once Japan officially annexed Korea in fall of 1910, they immediately began filling high official positions with Japanese friendly Koreans; at this point, for the most part, elite and noble families were still fairly submissive towards Japanese rule, so they were not heavily impacted by these changes. However, Japan’s political shift came with significant social reform in areas including taxes, financial systems, the educational system, the medical system, and the development of modern transportation. The military rule, which took place from 1910-1919, received its name due to the harsh military police forces in Korea; any dissent towards Japan was criminalized, and Koreans engaged in any suspicious activity were punished. Furthermore,

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<sup>65</sup> Shin,. “THE MORPHOLOGY OF RESISTANCE,” 43.

<sup>66</sup> Shin,. “THE MORPHOLOGY OF RESISTANCE,” 44.

“Military policemen had the right to perform summary executions and exercised enormous repressive control against any type of resentment from the locals... In 1911, the Japanese imperial government arrested eight hundred nationalist leaders... [and] by 1918, Japanese imperial authority had arrested, imprisoned, and executed more than ninety thousand Koreans.”<sup>67</sup>

However, the military crackdown did not dampen the spirit or power of the resistance, and on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1919, a series of protests that demanded independence from Japan; these protests occurred throughout the country and even in parts of Japan, gaining international attention until the Japanese government suppressed it 12 months after. It is estimated that “approximately 2,000,000 Koreans had participated in the more than 1,500 demonstrations. About 7,000 people were killed by the Japanese police and soldiers, and 16,000 were wounded; 715 private houses, 47 churches, and 2 school buildings were destroyed by fire. Approximately 46,000 people were arrested, of whom some 10,000 were tried and convicted.”<sup>68</sup> Though the movement itself was unsuccessful in actually gaining independence, the Korean “Proclamation of Independence” was drawn up by 33 of the cultural and religious leaders from the movement, and it sparked Korean unity internationally, contributing to the development of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai, China.

One of the first major activists of the era, known as Kim Gu, or by his pen name Baekbeom (established 1910), began their activist life as early as 1892, where he joined the armed Donghak Movement at the age of sixteen to support the peasant goals of reform and an end to foreign influence in the peninsula.<sup>69</sup> In 1896, he assassinated Josuke Tsuchida, a Japanese

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<sup>67</sup> Shin, “THE MORPHOLOGY OF RESISTANCE,” 45.

<sup>68</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “March First Movement | Korean History.” Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998.  
<https://www.britannica.com/event/March-First-Movement>.

<sup>69</sup> “Donghak Peasant Revolution - New World Encyclopedia,” n.d.  
[https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Donghak\\_Peasant\\_Revolution#:~:text=They%20d](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Donghak_Peasant_Revolution#:~:text=They%20d)

national who he suspected played a role in the death of the Korean empress Myeongseong. He was tortured and sentenced to death, though popular sentiment coerced emperor Gwangmu to delay his execution until eventually Gu escaped in 1898 and went into hiding. A non-violent organization that resisted Japanese occupation, known as the Shin Min Hoi, was established in 1905, and Gu eventually joined the organization in 1908. In 1910, he was arrested for the assassination of Hirobumi Ito due to his association with An Jung-geun, the assassin. He was imprisoned and tortured for 3 years, and even attempted suicide unsuccessfully while in prison. In 1919 he exiled himself to Shanghai, China, after witnessing the brutality of the Japanese on Koreans during the March 1<sup>st</sup> movement; however, he continued his activism by taking office as the president of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai in 1927, of which he was one of the founding members.<sup>70</sup>

After the March 1st Movement, Japan decided to take a shift from extreme brute force, as the results from the movement proved it ineffective. They realized that due to the modernization and globalization of technology, it was impossible to exert complete control over Koreans and instead began allowing limited freedoms; “for example, Koreans were now allowed to establish a newspaper, businesses, and schools. Approved associations were mostly cultural and educational and concerned with 46 subjects such as youth and children, savings, academics, health, and anti-drinking or -smoking efforts... Although a limited number of political and labor associations were allowed, their activities were strictly restricted to nonpolitical projects.” The Cultural Era lasted roughly from 1920-1931; this cultural reform, though still significantly restrictive and segregated, was a shift from militia force and rather focused on the less violent measures.

Additionally, the resistance movement also made a significant shift; though the March 1st

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emanded%20institutional%20government%20reform,believers%20in%20the%20peasant%20army.

<sup>70</sup> C. Peter Chen, “Kim Gu.” WW2DB, n.d. [https://ww2db.com/person\\_bio.php?person\\_id=832](https://ww2db.com/person_bio.php?person_id=832).

Movement was extremely successful in mobilizing and unifying Koreans, the ultimate goal of independence was not reached; groups began to splinter off, and the movement itself became less unified, resulting in the movement splintering into 3 main groups. Individuals that believed the issue was rooted in international policy chose to establish the provisional government of Korea (PKG), which focused on changing international and domestic policy. Other groups believed the lack of a Korean military was the issue, and focused on developing more armed forces; finally the third group was focused on the lack of education for Koreans, and instead initiated a cultural resistance movement against Japan.<sup>71</sup>

The Assimilation Period, also referred to as the Wartime Period, lasted from 1931 until the end of World War 2 in 1945. Japan's wartime efforts made the Korean peninsula increasingly more valuable, both for economic exploitation and the exploitation of the Korean people. This period, known for its brutal suppression of Korean culture, is more accurately described as a cultural genocide; this is because Japan's assimilation policies focused on eliminating the Korean identity and replacing it with Japanese; "In an attempt to eradicate Korean ethnicity, the Japanese prohibited the use of the Korean language, the practice of traditional religion, and all Korean historical education."<sup>72</sup> Colonized Koreans were pressured into changing their names to Japanese ones for citizenship and in 1937, Japan reinstated its ban on Korean organizations. Furthermore, the resistance movement became significantly more sporadic, leading to the pursuit of international activities outside of Korea.

Kim Gu is also an example of one of the major activists that engaged in international activities for the resistance movement. He founded the Korean Patriotic Corps in 1931, a radical group that was best known for setting off a bomb in Hongkou Park in Shanghai that ultimately

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<sup>71</sup> Shin, "THE MORPHOLOGY OF RESISTANCE." 48-49.

<sup>72</sup> Shin, "THE MORPHOLOGY OF RESISTANCE," 49.

killed General Yoshinori Shirakawa, a Japanese official. At the start of the second Sino-Japanese War, Gu aligned himself with the Chinese Nationalist Army and later established the Korean Liberation Army. Gu would also become a part of the interim government in Seoul after Japan leaves Korea in 1945, but would eventually be assassinated in his office in 1949. He would later be awarded the Medal of Order of Merit for the National Foundation of South Korea and the National Reunification Prize of North Korea.<sup>73</sup>

Despite international resistance movements, the situation in colonial Korea only worsened as World War II progressed. One of the most notable atrocities from the time period was the establishment of comfort women. From 1932-1945, it is estimated that around 200,000 Korean women were sexually trafficked by the Japanese military and forced to provide services in brothels throughout China and other Pacific Asian countries. Japanese troops established the first brothel station in Shanghai in 1932 to “prevent Japanese soldiers from raping local women.”<sup>74</sup> However, the sex slavery system was officially established after Japan enacted an all-out war with China and occupied Nanking in 1937-38. Shortly after, Japan began establishing brothels throughout all of their occupied territories, including Indonesia, Indochina, Thailand, the Philippines, Korea and Taiwan, as well as areas in Japan, such as Okinawa. Due to Japanese government officials burning key documents, the actual number of women that were comfort women is unknown, though it has been estimated the number could range from 200,000 to 400,000.<sup>75</sup> According to the comfort women Justice Coalition, the sex trafficking of comfort

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<sup>73</sup> Chen, “Kim Gu.”

<sup>74</sup> Pyong Gap Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class.” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (December 2003): 940.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3594678>.

<sup>75</sup> Comfort Women Justice Coalition. “‘Comfort Women’ The Unresolved History – Comfort Women Justice Coalition,” July 5, 2021.  
<https://remembercomfortwomen.org/history-background/comfort-women-the-unresolved-history/>

women is considered the single largest case of “institutionalized sexual exploitation by a government entity (Japan) in modern history.”<sup>76</sup> Pyong Gap Min, Korean historian and journalist, compiled 75 interviews from the Korean Council and Research Association, as well as her own 19 personal interviews with victims, who disclosed some of the atrocities they had to endure. In her account, she summarized that the women were “confined to filthy shanties... forced to have intercourse with Japanese soldiers, from 10 to 30 times per day. They were regularly subjected to torture, beating, burning, and sometimes stabbing. Some women died of venereal disease in military brothels, while other women committed suicide. Testimonies by both the victims and Japanese witnesses reveal that Japanese soldiers abandoned the comfort women, in some cases killing them, when Japan was defeated in World War II.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, survivors, “physically and mentally sick... could not live normal marital lives. Although most eventually got married, many were later divorced early because of their infertility or their husbands’ knowledge of their secret past... all victims suffered from a number of health problems and psychological traumas”. Additionally, survivors were ostracized and shamed significantly by society. It wasn’t until the 1980s that light was brought onto this atrocity due to the Korean feminist movement, and to this day, Japan has refused to formally apologize for their actions regarding comfort women or their occupation of the peninsula.<sup>78</sup>

By the time Japan left the peninsula at the end of World War II, they had left behind the remains of a devastating cultural genocide. If it weren't for the perseverance and diligence of Korean nationalists, it is unlikely that any Korean language, religion or culture would have

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<sup>76</sup> Comfort Women Justice Coalition. “‘Comfort Women’ The Unresolved History.”

<sup>77</sup> Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’”

<sup>78</sup> Choonsik Yoo, “Japan’s PM Tells South Koreans His ‘heart Hurts’ over Pain Caused by Occupation.” *Reuters*, May 7, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-pm-kishida-visits-seoul-forge-closer-ties-amid-north-korea-threats-2023-05-06/>.

survived this wartime period. Additionally, the trauma and disparity implemented by the Japanese government directly contributed to the splintering of political nationalists, which had a direct correlation to the separation of political parties and eventually the Korean War. Furthermore, it is not only the cultural suppression of Koreans but the violation of Korean women that holds significant scarring and trauma for the peninsula today. The atrocities that occurred during this time period have systematically strained international relations between Japan and Korea and remains a significant point of tension between the two countries. When Japan and Korea began revisiting diplomatic relations, in part due to US intervention, in 1965, the two countries signed the Treaty on Basic Relations, which declared any treaties during the colonial period null and opened up talks between the two countries.<sup>79</sup> However, it was stated clearly by Japanese officials that any economic aid provided by Japan to Korea was not considered reparations.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, in 2015 the “Comfort Women” agreement was signed, which concluded negotiations regarding reparations for the atrocities committed. Despite controversy, the Comfort Women agreement concluded and “resolved irreversibly” the debate, despite Japan not explicitly stating its role in the atrocities or directly consulting with the actual victims.<sup>81</sup> Though statements of acknowledgment have been made regarding Japan’s colonial past, “the reconciliation efforts have been fundamentally flawed, whether by process, content or seeming insincerity. This history of ineffectual apologies and agreements has left many Koreans feeling Japan has not sufficiently atoned for its colonial actions. At the same time, some Japanese suffer “apology fatigue,” which stems from issuing numerous apologies without seeing

<sup>79</sup> “Treaty on Basic Relations 1965.” *Treaties.Un.Org*. United Nations, 1965. Accessed April 24, 2023.

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8471-English.pdf>.

<sup>80</sup> Heo, “South Korea’s Rise,” 91.

<sup>81</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. “Announcement by Foreign Ministers of Japan and the Republic of Korea at the Joint Press Occasion,” n.d.

[https://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/na/kr/page4e\\_000364.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/page4e_000364.html).

sustainable improvements in relations.”<sup>82</sup> Additionally, the insincerity of Japanese officials is exacerbated by their lack of empathy and seeming justification of the actions of the Japanese government during the time period. In 2013, Japan’s Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto claimed that in regard to sex slavery, “to maintain discipline in the military it must have been necessary at the time.”<sup>83</sup> The previous year, Hashimoto also claimed there was no evidence to prove that comfort women were coerced into sexual slavery, even taunting the Korean government for evidence.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, it is notable that new Japanese textbooks do not address the extent or severity of colonialism in Korea, and rarely touch on sexual slavery; this has been criticized both by Korea, Asia and the United States and deemed as Japan’s whitewashing of history.<sup>85</sup> Due to these factors, there is significant lingering animosity, not only between Korea and Japan, but other Asian countries.

Both the historiography and the cultural significance of Japanese occupation in Korea can be seen in modern day politics on a global scale. This is most notable when discussing current Japanese and Korean relations, specifically in regards to reparations and apologies. To this day, Japan has still not issued a formal apology to Korea nor has it extended any offer for reparations.<sup>86</sup> As both Japan and Korea work towards stronger economic and political relations,

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<sup>82</sup> United States Institute of Peace. “Japan, South Korea Must Address Mounting ‘Debt’ of Historical Atrocities,” n.d, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/japan-south-korea-must-address-mounting-debt-historical-atrocities>.

<sup>83</sup> CBS News. “Japan Mayor Says ‘Comfort Women’ -- WWII Forced Prostitutes -- Were Necessary to ‘Maintain Discipline.’” *CBS News*, May 14, 2013. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/japan-mayor-says-comfort-women-wwii-forced-prostitutes-were-necessary-to-maintain-discipline/>.

<sup>84</sup> Eric Johnston, “No Evidence Sex Slaves Were Taken by Military: Hashimoto.” *The Japan Times*, April 10, 2013. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/08/23/national/no-evidence-sex-slaves-were-taken-by-military-hashimoto/>.

<sup>85</sup> Heo, “South Korea’s Rise,” 103.

<sup>86</sup> “Japan’s PM Tells South Koreans His ‘heart Hurts’ over Pain Caused by Occupation.” *Reuters*, May 7, 2023.



the unresolved tension from the colonial era is still increasingly prevalent, and it is a hot topic that appears in the media frequently. Additionally, Korean Nationalism is strongly tied with its anti colonial stance, which contributes to the lack of compromise regarding the demand for reparations from Japan. Japanese Nationalism is also strongly against admitting fault or providing reparations, and some conservative Japanese officials such as Toru Hashimoto even deny the severity of Korean suffering, which only exacerbates the increasing tension between the two countries.<sup>87</sup> Without the historical context of the colonial era it is impossible to fully grasp the intense hostility between Japan and Korea.

Regardless of the personal takes from government officials, there is significant evidence that proves the cultural genocide in Korea during the colonial period was nothing less than a crime against humanity. The Japanese regime progressed in severity from the militant era in the early colonial period all the way to the assimilation period in which the Korean identity was targeted and the Japanese government attempted to eradicate it entirely through the destruction of cultural artifacts, suppression of language and the division of Koreans, particularly through attacks on nationalists and dissenters. The severity of this era is complex and not only influences the narratives within the historiography of the colonial period, but also directly impacts modern day relations between Korea and Japan as well as the rest of the Asian Pacific. Though there are claims by Japanese officials that attempt to invalidate or deny the severity of the colonial period, as well as claims that Japan's economic benefits outweigh the harm they did culturally, there is irrefutable proof of the severity and criminal acts that occurred.<sup>88</sup> Though the relations between

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-pm-kishida-visits-seoul-forge-closer-ties-amid-north-korea-threats-2023-05-06/>.

<sup>87</sup>CBS News. "Japan Mayor... Comfort Women."

<sup>88</sup>KYODO NEWS. "FOCUS: Japan Conservatives May Impede Ties with S. Korea despite PM's Visit." *Kyodo News+*, May 7, 2023.

<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/05/1626faed65f8-focus-japan-conservatives-may-impe-de-ties-with-s-korea-despite-pms-visit.html>.

Japan and Korea are complex and often mixed, there is no justification or retribution that could reduce the severity of the cultural genocide in Korea.<sup>89</sup> In order for modern relations to progress, there is no easy solution due to this complexity, but it is essential to be understood and for the remembrance of this era to be a priority, in its entirety despite the potentially triggering subject matter.

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<sup>89</sup> Sonya Kuki,. “THE BURDEN OF HISTORY: THE ISSUE OF ‘COMFORT WOMEN’ AND WHAT JAPAN MUST DO TO MOVE FORWARD.” *Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (2012): 245–56. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24461685>.

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