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Chapter 11
Japanese Colonial Rule and the Issue of Perceptions of History

Kan Kimura

Abstract This chapter takes up the question of whether, and in what ways, Japanese colonial rule was an exception to the colonial rule of other imperial powers. It seeks to define what a colony is and to tackle oversimplifications in historical interpretations. It closes with a discussion of some of the issues still affecting relations between Japan and the Korean Peninsula today.

Was Japanese Colonial Rule an Exception?

There has been an active and ongoing debate over Japan's rule of its colonies that has also seeped into its diplomatic relations with South Korea and Taiwan. This debate, unfortunately, fails to reflect the present views of historical research to a sufficient degree, frequently containing egregious errors. It is not possible to address all these shortcomings in a brief chapter, of course, but my goal is to address the major errors to provide an aid to the understanding of colonial rule.

So, let us start with one of the typical arguments concerning Japan's colonies, which might be summed up as: Japanese colonial rule was an exception. In other words, Japan's control and administration over the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and its other Asian colonies differed from that of other countries over their colonies.

We can divide this argument broadly into two categories. The first argues and emphasizes the differences between Japan's rule of Korea and Taiwan and the Western Great Powers' rule of their colonies from the affirmative standpoint. Occasionally this argument stresses that, unlike the colonial rule of the West, which was vicious, Japan's was something good, bringing great benefits to the local population. Furthermore, this argument is often linked to the claim that Japanese rule over the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan was, in fact, not colonial rule at all.

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In contrast, the second argues and emphasizes the differences between Japanese and Western colonial rule from the negative standpoint. It stresses that Japanese rule was vicious compared to that of the Western Great Powers, focusing particularly on the later period of Japanese colonial rule with the mobilization of labor and "comfort women" and the compulsion to adopt Japanese names and worship at Shintō shrines.

So, we can see that both arguments, affirmative and negative, contain a comparison with the colonial rule of the Western Great Powers. That being the case, do they have an accurate understanding of Western colonial rule?

The Errors in Both the Affirmative and Negative Schools of Thought

For instance, the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan under Japanese rule showed economic growth and colonial finances that were in deficit, facts that are highlighted and form the basis for the affirmative view of the difference between Japanese and Western colonial rule. The underlying premise seems to be based on an understanding that colonial rule by the Western Great Powers thoroughly exploited and impoverished local societies.

The actual condition of Western colonial rule, however, was quite different from such a stereotyped understanding. During the sixteenth century, the Age of Discovery, the Spanish and Portuguese rule in the American continents was cruel, and well-known is the significant decline in native populations, in part owing to the impact of communicable diseases from the Old World. But comparing the situation of Japanese rule of Korea and Taiwan between the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries to that of the Western colonial rule from an era over 300 years earlier is, to put it mildly, a bit unfair.

So, what about Western Great Power colonial rule contemporaneous with Japanese colonial rule in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries? The important fact to note is that Britain, France, and the Western Great Powers at this moment in time had already entered an age where their mother countries all had democratic political systems. So naturally, that means economic developments greatly influenced elections.

One concern for a colony was its economic situation; especially for someone making investments in the colony, the issue of the colony's economic situation was tied to one's own economic interests. Therefore, the governments of the Western Great Powers undertook enormous investments in order to maintain favorable conditions in the economies of their colonies. It was an age when railroads and ports were built and school education was started thanks to the mother country's investments.

Increased fiscal investment from the home country resulted in fiscal deficits for the home country in relation to its colony contemporaneously with the rapid development of the colony's economy. Rapid population growth was one sign of

such colonial economic development. In other words, growing fiscal deficits from the home country to its colonies in exchange for their economic development was a situation universally apparent for colonial rule of the time rather than something special seen only in Japan's rule of its colonies.

We can also discuss the many errors in the argument emphasizing the distinctiveness of Japanese colonial rule from the negative standpoint. For instance, it is well known that, especially at the start and in the early stages of Japanese colonial rule, there were many deaths and casualties that resulted from the suppression of people engaged in powerful movements protesting that rule. Notably, the number of Taiwanese victims was disturbingly large: it is estimated that the number of deaths greatly exceeded 10,000 in a few short years from the start of Japanese colonial rule there.

Yet, it is not so simple to conclude that the number of victims arising from Japanese colonial rule was especially greater than that in other colonies. For instance, in the Philippines, where the United States began its colonial rule slightly after Japan in Taiwan, it is widely known that the suppression of independence movements resulted in many victims.

Also, the mobilization of labor and troops from colonies during World War II was a phenomenon evident not only in Japan's colonies. In order to support total war twice, in World War I and World War II, Britain and France mobilized vast human resources from their colonies, also a well-known fact. This is also true for policies of assimilation. For instance, France had carried out measures similar to Japan's change of name policy at a considerably earlier stage.

To a certain extent, it is quite obvious and natural that it would be so. Japan after the Meiji Restoration pursued modernization modeled after the Western Great Powers, so it would be natural for political leaders of the time to reference Western colonial policies when faced with the matter of colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan. To rephrase the idea, it would be impossible to even consider that the Japanese government before World War II would choose policies that were completely different from those of the Western Great Powers, especially only in the realm of colonial rule.

What Is a Colony?

A thorough investigation of the problems with the arguments surrounding Japan's colonial rule reveals these errors are caused by a lack of sufficient consideration of their premises. Thus, these arguments are swept up in the popularly held image of Japan's colonial rule. And it is there, in their points based on this ill-defined image, that we can see rather clearly the deficiency of thought given to the main premise underlying all these arguments: what is a colony?

For instance, some proponents of the exceptionalism of Japanese colonial rule school insist that Japan's administration of Korea and Taiwan was not colonial rule. Needless to say, to correctly make this argument, one must clarify the matter of what

colonial rule is before getting into the substance of Japanese colonial rule itself. And almost no one making this argument does so after explaining what colonial rule is first.

Once again, the reason is simple. Proponents of the argument believe that colonial rule is–in their vague conception of the matter—the sort of governance that the Western Great Powers carried out in Asia and Africa. Most likely, they have an image of an oppressive system where white men suppressed the colored races, discriminated against them, and exploited them.

The shapes that colonies took, however, were more varied. For instance, British rule of Canada and Australia are examples of colonial rule. Obviously, the majorities in these colonies were not the indigenous peoples who lived there long before colonization, but the people who moved there from all parts of Europe and other regions under Western rule. In short, what existed there was not an oppressive system where whites from the home country suppressed, discriminated against, and exploited the native inhabitants of color but a system of people sharing similar culture and skin color, where some were on the ruling side as home country nationals and others were on the ruled side as colonials. And we call this an example of a colony, much like Canada or Australia.

To delve a bit deeper, there was not just one type of system for colonial rule in Asia and Africa where home country nationals, who were white, ruled the native populace, who were colored. There were regions, such as parts of Algeria which were ruled almost as extensions of the French mainland; regions directly managed by the sovereign country and regions indirectly administered through native or princely states or protectorates; and even regions where administration was carried out by colonial corporations, epitomized by the "East India Companies" that Britain and the Netherlands created. In summary, it is not possible, in fact, to give a response to the question of what the typical form of colonial rule was.

Yet, this does not mean there was no commonality among the diverse range of colonial rule types. To give the reader a hint: a colony is a place, not a people or a society. To put it another way, when we call some region a colony, it means that some sort of condition must exist at that place, in common with other colonies, and that is different from the home country.

There is only one such trait. It is that the laws applied in that region are different from the laws applied in the sovereign country. By being such a place, it means that the region experiences a condition in which the relationship of rights and duties of the local inhabitants is inferior to that relationship enjoyed by citizens in the mother country, particularly arising from the differences in the laws. Incidentally, a region where local inhabitants have a relationship of rights and duties more favorable than that in the mother country should be called a type of special zone, rather than a colony.

To elaborate a bit more, it is also important to note that the situation where the relationship of rights and duties changed according to the type or class of "people" also varied with the colonial rule even in the same region. For instance, there were situations where racial and/or gender discrimination existed. But such situations were present even in home countries that were not colonies, as was distinctively

evident in the United States or South Africa until a certain period. So, we must decouple the fact that a region has discrimination problems from the discussion of whether or not it is a colony.

The archetype of the relationship of rights and duties being inferior in the colony versus the mother country is enfranchisement (as a right), especially whether one has the right to vote in national elections, and conscription (as a duty). In fact, inhabitants in almost all colonies were not given the right to vote in national politics; even in those cases where they were, the scope was different from that of the sovereign country. The same was true for conscription: even where the sovereign country had a system of military conscription, many times conscription was not implemented in the colony.

So, in keeping with this matter of "what is a colony," what is clear when looking at the Japanese rule on the Korean Peninsula and in Taiwan is the fact that the laws implemented in both regions were very different than those applied in the Japanese mainland. For instance, in Korea and Taiwan, they never held an election for the House of Representatives by war's end (one had been scheduled for 1946), but they implemented military conscription finally in 1944. It is not widely known that a system of voluntary military service was not implemented until 1938 in Korea and 1942 in Taiwan, so it was extremely difficult for people in Taiwan and Korea to enter the military so long as they continued to live in the colonies, leaving aside a small group of exceptions such as a handful of people granted permission to go to the Imperial Japanese Army Academy, members of a privileged class such as the Korean royal family (the former imperial family of the Korean Empire (1897–1910) who received special treatment equivalent to the Japanese imperial family), and people who were already in the Korean military at the time of Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910.

Not even the Constitution of the Empire of Japan was implemented in Korea or Taiwan at first, nor were the laws enacted by the Imperial Diet immediately applied locally. In other words, the laws implemented in these regions differed from those in the mother country, and the relationship of rights and duties of those inhabitants were inferior to the residents of the sovereign country. Thus, we can say that, by definition, Korean and Taiwan were clearly colonies.

The Simplification of Regional Differences and Era Differences

These are not the only problems with the arguments related to colonial rule by Japan, of course. One more is the excessively simplified understanding of it, notwithstanding the diversity of conditions that existed within Japanese colonial rule. There are two broad types of oversimplification.

The first ignores the regional differences among the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, Southern Karafuto (Sakhalin), the Guandong Leased Territory, and the South Sea

Islands.[1] Guandong was territory leased from China that came about in the Treaty of Portsmouth (1905) and the South Sea Islands were "Class C Mandate territories," which the League of Nations entrusted Japan with administering after World War I. So, by a strict definition, neither were territory under the Japanese Constitution. Given that the majority of residents in Southern Karafuto comprised migrants from the Japanese mainland, some villages and towns were self-governed, and conscription was introduced after 1924, and so the relationship of rights and duties of residents was quite close to that of the mainland. In Korea and Taiwan, a governor-general who was the emperor's representative reigned, administering legislative, judicial, and executive authorities, and whose rule essentially fell outside the control of the cabinet or the Imperial Diet. That meant each colony had its own set of laws that its governor-general enacted, executed, and adjudicated on that basis.

The second oversimplification is to overlook the changes that occurred over time. Colonial rule began in Taiwan in 1895; the Annexation of Korea was in 1910. So each rule lasted a long time of 50 and 35 years, respectively. As we can immediately discern by reflecting on the times that we ourselves have lived through, it cannot be the case that policy measures toward the colonies remained unchanged over the course of events during this long period of time. Furthermore, there were large political changes occurring within Japan during this period. In short, the period in which Japan ruled its colonies corresponds to a period in which the *genro* (elder statesmen) politicians who had wielded absolute power in the Meiji period lost their authority, to be replaced by political party cabinets, and later those same party cabinets lost power, changing to the system of imperial rule assistance. Economically, this period was marked by startling changes from the "Great War Boom" of the World War I known for its *nouveaux riches*, to a postwar recession when the war ended, transitioning through favorable economic conditions of the short-lived interwar period, then experiencing the Great Depression, and finally moving to a system of total mobilization.

Such changes in Japanese domestic conditions naturally had an impact on the shape of Japan's colonial administration. For instance, the Japanese government restricted the immigration of labor from Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula in the 1920s, strictly enforcing this restriction. Party politicians of the era were loath to let an influx of colonial residents drive a rise in unemployment on the main islands and thereby result in increased voter dissatisfaction. Contemporary conditions in the colonies were the polar opposite of the commonly held image of "the Japanese rulers mobilizing labor from the colonies."

The situation completely changed, however, after the onset of the Second Sino-Japanese War when Japan began mobilizing a large number of soldiers and laborers. As human resources on the mainland became inadequate under the total war system, Japan started to systematically mobilize the labor force from the colonies. The shortage of mainland human resources eventually spread to the military, leading to the mobilization of soldiers and civilians working for the military from its colonies,

[1] Today part of Palau, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and the Northern Mariana Islands.

too. The Japanese government, forced to rely on human resources from its colonies, began to compel "Japanification" of the colonial populace at the same time. Maintaining wartime institutions would become very difficult unless colonial inhabitants had the same way of living, customs, and sense of values as mainland Japanese. Therefore, education in the local language was abolished, worshipping at Shintō shrines was made compulsory, and individuals were forced to change their names to make them Japanese.

It means that most of the problems raised as emblematic of Japanese colonial rule actually appeared bunched up in the last five or so years of the long period of colonial rule that lasted 50 or 35 years. As a matter of course, it would be a mistake to make an argument about Japanese colonial rule based only on the understanding of conditions during this short period of time. This error of taking up just one part of the variety types of colonial rule in a diversity of regions is common among all of these arguments.

The Issues Left Over from Colonial Rule

Well, let us now consider the issues left over after Japanese colonial rule. As I just laid out, the majority of phenomena often discussed as constituting the image of Japanese colonial rule occurred in the period under a total war system, and thus they are the developments of only a short interval within Japan's long period of colonial rule. And yet, there are two reasons why the developments from this short period had a decisive influence shaping the image of Japan's colonial rule. First and foremost, colonial rule ended right after this period of total war; the second is that Japan's large-scale interference in its colonies' societies during this total war period continued to have significant impacts on these regions long after it ended. In summary, Japan made significant interventions in the way it ruled its colonies to prosecute the war, doing so in a concentrated fashion toward the end of its rule, so that when colonial rule ended suddenly under these conditions, the result was to leave this as the popular image of the "Japanese model of colonial rule."

Therefore, the impression of Japan's colonial rule was very negative immediately after Japan's defeat, not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in Taiwan (it was later that a reappraisal of Japanese colonial rule happened in Taiwan). And yet, this fact does not mean the disputes over colonial rule between Japan and its neighbors that we see today began in this period.

Let us look at the example of the relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) on this point. The important point is, as formal state-to-state relations did not exist between the two countries from 1945 to 1965, it was not actually possible for people on the Korean Peninsula to raise problems directly with the Japanese government or Japanese corporations (setting aside the matter of the *zainichi* ethnic Koreans who stayed in Japan). And so, the Japanese and ROK governments, as representatives of their own citizens, engaged in talks that finally resulted in the Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea

(1965) and the series of ancillary agreements. In the treaty, as you know, the ROK government received economic cooperation assistance of total value equivalent to $500 million: $300 million in grants (non-repayable basis) and $200 million in soft loans. In exchange, Japan and the ROK both confirmed that the "problem concerning property, rights and interests of the two Contracting Parties and their nationals . . . is settled completely and finally" (Agreement 3 1965).

The troublesome thing, however, is that when the ROK government accepted the economic assistance under the treaty, it did not adequately compensate its citizens who had been mobilized as soldiers or civilians employed by the military or laborers and "comfort women" during the period of Japanese colonial rule. Consequently, the people's lingering discontent eventually emerged as protest movements.

Yet, such movements were unable to achieve much under a succession of authoritarian regimes from Park Chung-hee to Chun Doo-hwan. There is a backstory to this: between the late 1960s and the 1980s, South Korea was a poor, divided country situated on the frontline of the Cold War between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and whose economy was largely dependent on Japan. Raising a dispute over colonial rule of the past in the midst of this situation would create obstacles in bilateral economic relations with Japan and have tremendous implications for the ROK economy, so Seoul's political and economic elite worked hard to avoid aggravating the issue.

This situation changed significantly in the 1990s for two reasons. First, pro-democracy movements brought about the collapse of the authoritarian regime, which reinvigorated South Korean civil society. In this new environment, the Korean people began an active push for compensation for the period of colonial rule.

A more important reason was the shift in economic relations between Japan and South Korea. This change resulted from three phenomena that made progress during this period: the collapse of the Cold War system, growth of the ROK economy, and the advance of globalization. The change created a new situation in which the ROK economy's degree of dependence on Japan dropped rapidly. As Fig. 11.1 clearly demonstrates, Japan's share of South Korea's total trade (exports and imports), which had topped 40% in the early 1970s, had fallen below 10% in the 2010s. In terms of the movement of goods, at least, the importance of the Japanese economy to South Korea's economy had shrunk to less than one-fifth of what it had once been.

In this new situation, the former mechanism fell into dysfunction: when issues linked to colonial rule were stirred up, the elite no longer calmed the situation out of consideration for the importance of economic relations. The situation in South Korea had changed; as President Lee Myung-bak flatly stated in 2012, "Japan's influence is not like it once was."

This situation naturally showed itself in both the frequency and the prolongation of the issues over colonial rule cropping up in bilateral relations. The latter is particularly important. Japan and South Korea held different perceptions of history concerning colonial rule right from the beginning, as became readily apparent in the two governments' differing interpretations of the sentence ". . . all treaties or agreements . . . [including that concerning colonial rule] . . . are already null and void" in Article 2 of the 1965 Basic Treaty. (Treaty on Basic Relations 1965).

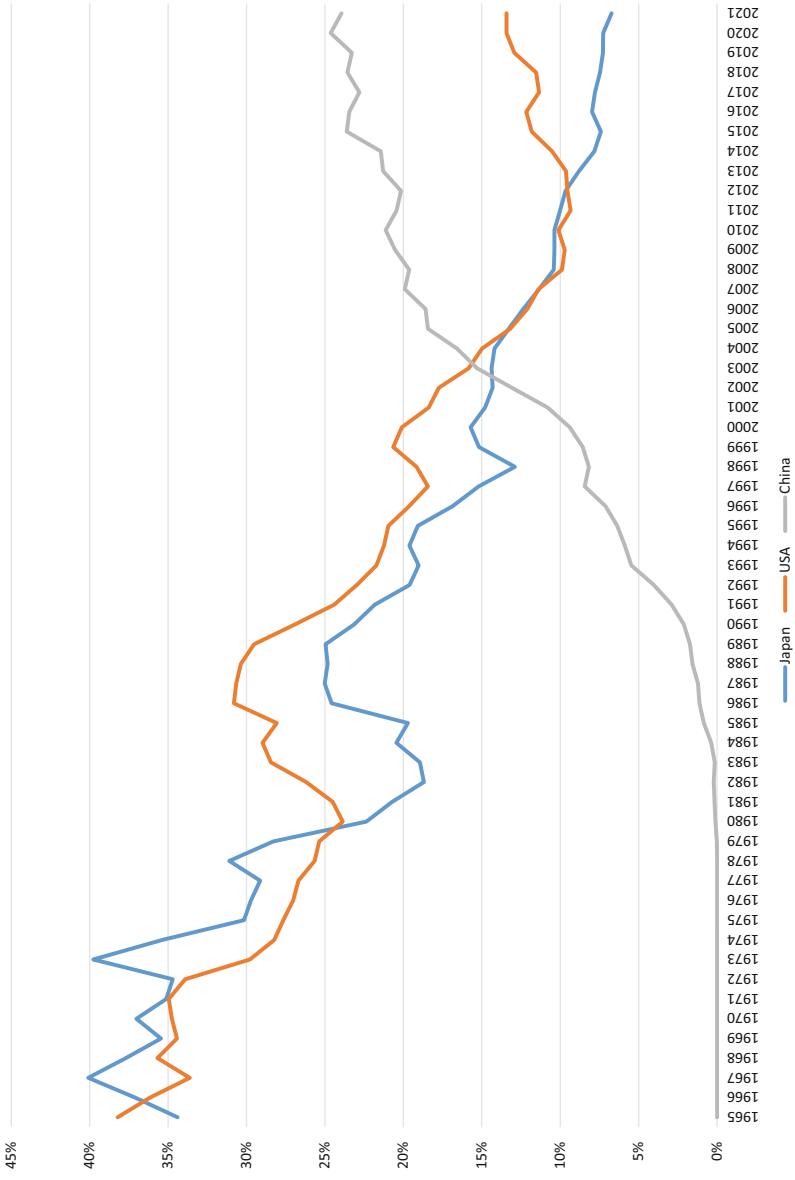

Fig. 11.1 Changes in key countries' share of South Korean exports and imports. (Source: STATISTICS-KOREA)

Regardless, the reason these differences had not been a major political problem before is because both governments, especially the ROK elite, made sure to nip it in the bud. For instance, ROK media lambasted Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro right after his official visit to Yasukuni Shrine in 1985. The ROK media situation was suppressed after a few days, however, and Japan-ROK relations soon returned to normal.

In the bilateral relationship of today, however, no one is brave enough to pull the chestnuts out of the fire by settling the perceptions of history issue. The reason is simple: the risk in doing so far outweighs the reward. The dispute gets more heated as the situation becomes prolonged.

In October 2018, the Supreme Court of Korea (the nation's highest court) handed down a decision seeking compensation from Japanese corporations for former civilian workers from the Korean Peninsula. The Japanese and ROK governments have been slow to react to settle the matter; public opinion in both countries has inflamed the dispute. It seems that the era has not yet arrived when the history of Japan's colonial rule of the past is, in the true sense of the word, in the past.

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Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea. 22 June 1965. As referenced at: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8471-English.pdf

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To understand the diversity of colonial rule types and the differences among countries, one must understand what sort of laws were initially applied in each region and how they changed over time. Though the contents are somewhat academic, it is a good book for tracing how the legal systems related to Japanese colonial rule changed up to the end of the war.

Kimura, Mitsuhiko. 2018. *Nihon tochika no Chōsen: Tōkei to jisshō kenkyū wa nani o kataruka* (Korea under Japanese Rule: What do Statistics and Empirical Research Tell Us?). Tokyo: Chūkō shinsho. [Published in English as: Kimura, Mitsuhiko. The Japan Institute of International Affairs (trans). 2021. *The Economics*

of Colonialism in Korea: Rethinking Japanese Rule and Aftermath. Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture.]

Regarding the economic conditions in the colonies, we are often presented with conflicting opinions from the affirmative and negative sides of Japanese colonial rule. However, as much reliable statistical data does exist on economic conditions of the colonial period, we can statistically recreate quite a large portion of it. This volume takes pains to show those related to the Korean Peninsula.

Peattie, Mark R. Asano, Toyomi (trans). 2012. *Shokuminchi—20-seiki nihon: teikoku 50nen no kōbō* (Twentieth Century Japan: Colonies—Fifty Years of the Empire's Rise and Fall). Tokyo: Jigakusha Shuppan. [Originally published as: Peattie, Mark R. 1983. *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.]

Though an older one (originally published by Yomiuri Shimbun in 1996), still the best book for getting an overview of Japanese colonial rule in one volume. The author is an American who writes with the perspective of the differences with European and US colonial rule in mind. A must-have work for considering colonial rule by Japan.

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