

<Book Review>

The Japanese Colonial Legacy in Korea 1910-1945: A New Perspective
George Akita and Brandon Palmer

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Reviewed by Aldric Hama

“Who controls the past control the future: who controls present controls the past.”

--George Orwell

Historians George Akita, University of Hawaii-Manoa, and Brandon Palmer, Coastal Carolina University, describe the origin of Japanese colonial policy in Korea and compare Japanese Korea with contemporaneous European colonies. They conclude that Japanese policies were “embedded in realism, moderation, mutualism and proportionality in its application” to Korea, thereby forming the “foundation for South Korea’s postwar developmental miracle.” Their sources span a wide range of works, including the writings of Meiji-era leaders who developed Japanese colonial policy, and sources written by modern authors.

The current findings greatly contrast to the prevailing “nationalist” narrative of the colonial era (1910-1945), which portray the Koreans as victims of Japanese imperialism and ascribe numerous evils to the Japanese, including “cultural annihilation,” “exploitation” and “sexual slavery of women”. The nationalist narrative also “refuses to acknowledge” any benefit Korea may have received during the colonial era. Akita himself states that he accepted the nationalist narrative until recently—when he was presented with evidence contradicting it. Indeed, the authors point out that the nationalist narrative, a presentation of “facts” in a “black and white,” us-against-them manner, should sound alarms to any discerning reader of history. The authors say the nationalist narrative—the politically-correct historical view—lacks objectivity and is a clear example of ideology overriding the facts. The authors call for a “second look” at the historical evidence,” and offer a “scholarly rebuttal,” of the nationalist narrative’s claims.

One of the tenets of the Korean nationalist narrative is that the Japanese sought to culturally annihilate Koreans by outlawing their culture. In fact, Akita and Palmer point out, the Japanese Governor-General of Korea invested much time and effort preserving “major Korean historical sites and symbols” and went as far as introducing a law concerning the preservation of Korea’s cultural heritage, which has carried over to the present. The Governor-General’s reason for this, oddly enough, was to promote the “Korean identity.” Korean language and history was taught in public schools, again, as a way of promoting Korean identity. Akita and Palmer relate that traditional Korean dress (*hanbok*) was allowed and the Korean language, *Hangul*, was allowed in films up until

the early 1940s.¹ In 1941, the Governor-General encouraged the Japanese in Korea to learn the Korean language, as few Koreans at the time were able to speak conversational Japanese.²

While the nationalist narrative speaks of “the black period” of Japanese rule and says Korean suffering was “unlike that of any other people,” Akita and Palmer point out that compared to contemporary Western colonialism, Japan’s policy was quite “moderate.” The Western colonial powers generally lacked interest in the welfare of their subjects and, thus, there were limited efforts of modernizing largely rural populations.³ Western colonies, Akita and Palmer suggest, were meant to “serve the economic needs of the metropole, not to compete with it.” Subjects in Western colonies were forced to harvest crops and work on construction projects. In the Belgian Congo Free State, “individuals who did not meet their assign quotas were beaten, whipped and tortured.” In the Dutch East Indies, Indonesians were forced to devote sixty-six days out of the year “for the cultivation of cash crops for the government.” The Dutch and their native collaborators “confiscated as much as half of the harvest,” resulting in famines. The Philippines was treated by the U.S. as a plantation, as American authorities “promoted an intensely dependent, export economy based on cash crop agriculture and extractive industries like mining.” During the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), as a means of denying material support for Filipino guerrillas, civilians were forced out of their villages and put into concentration camps, wherein prisoners died of starvation or disease. About one million Filipinos were killed during the process of “pacification.” Similar concentration camps were used in European African colonies. By contrast, in Korea, the authors point out, there were no concentration camps.

Another example cited in the book of Japan’s moderate colonial policy is the Governor-General’s response to terrorism. In the Philippines, American forces tortured suspected subversives and executed captured guerillas. By contrast, in response to the attempted assassination of Japanese Governor-General Masatake Terauchi in 1910, “hundreds” of Korean nationalists were arrested the following year, but eventually only 105 were convicted. Furthermore, the book states that “most sentences were commuted or reduced on appeal.” To those familiar with modern South Korean history, it should be pointed out that, in its own struggle against North Korean communist subversion, South Korean security tortured and “disappeared” suspects, in keeping with American practice.

The book’s thesis is that closer examination of the Japanese colonial era shows that the period was neither “black” nor uniquely brutal. Despite Korean taxation, modernization of their own country was financed primarily by the Japanese people—the Governor-General was “constantly strapped for cash.” Developmental works, including

¹ The current reviewer saw newspapers from the 1930s, written in *Hangul*, on display at the Seoul Museum of History, Seoul, South Korea, in 2016.

² Committee Against Government Apologies to Korea (2010). *A New Look at the Annexation of Korea*. Tokyo: Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact.

³ The lack of European effort in modernizing their African colonies could be one of the reasons why post-colonial African countries failed to thrive. However, the failure of African states to, for example, become major exporting nations like South Korea, generations after the expulsion of Europeans, suggests more profound reasons.

the building of transportation infrastructures, government buildings, hospitals, sewage systems, providing clean running water and electricity to Korean homes, were provided by and large funded by Japanese taxpayers. Seoul was transformed into a modern city with paved roads and multi-storied buildings. Literacy was enhanced by building schools and expanding primary and secondary education to all children, including females. Korean businesses were created, with Japanese subsidies, in mining, agriculture, manufacturing and construction, creating both jobs and capital, which in turn gave rise to a Korean middle class.⁴ Socially, the Governor-General worked at multiple levels, ending the heavy-handed influence of the *yangban*, the Korean hereditary elite, improving the social status of the *paekchong*, a Korean outcaste group, and alleviating the heretofore crushing taxes borne by average Korean. Indeed, the authors point out, from anti-Japanese Korean sources no less, that before the colonial era, almost all Koreans (“97%”) were politically powerless: “the common people were abused and forgotten” and reformers were suppressed. During the Yi dynasty (1392-1910), agents of the Korean emperor sold public office and land rights; the Korean emperor’s favor could be obtained at a price. Not surprisingly, the nationalist narrative entirely ignores the grim reality of pre-colonial era Korea. Perhaps those espousing the nationalist narrative are more comfortable with a feudal, elitist Korea and reject the present as it is based on a past built by a despised, alien race and their Korean “collaborators”.

While careful historians might dismiss the Korean nationalist narrative as nothing more than a mirroring of Korean ethnocentrism and xenophobia, the narrative thrives well beyond Korea’s borders and, in fact, shapes foreign attitudes and policies towards Japan. The current book does not address this peculiarity, but it may be worthwhile exploring. The nationalist narrative serves as the basis to blame the Japanese for current Korean “social distortions” and as the foundation of hard-line attitudes against Japan on issues such as the “comfort women” and Takeshima Islands. American adoption of the nationalist narrative leads to government pronouncements against Japan that are ideologically based and historically inaccurate—such as the House Resolution that condemned Japanese “forced military prostitution” during World War II. The nationalist narrative is espoused by many—but not all—Japanese intellectuals as well, as observed by their constant calls for appeasement in the face of aggressive Korean demands. Mistrust and resentment will continue so as long as the nationalist historical narrative is accepted by all sides as fact.

While the current book and others have seen the nationalist narrative for what it is, it nonetheless persists.⁵ The book suggests that the nationalist narrative reflects deep Korean “resentment,” of “humiliation of being subjugated” by an “alien ruler.” However, this does not entirely explain the persistence of the nationalist narrative beyond Korea’s borders. One possible explanation could be the attractiveness by many of the romantic notions of “victimization” and “oppression” that envelopes the nationalist narrative. The authors note that the nationalist narrative “dominated Western and Asian academic worlds from the early 1950s to the mid-1990s”. The 1950s and 1960s saw the ascent and

⁴ Not mentioned in the current book is that at war’s end, The Treaty of Peace with Japan (1951) forced Japan to forfeit all properties and assets in Korea and was not allowed to seek restitution.

⁵ Oh, S. (2015). *Getting Over It!* Tokyo, Japan: Tachibana Publishing.

strengthening of leftist dogma within the intellectual class and a rejection of all things Western. Central to leftist dogma is never-ending conflict between the bourgeoisie “oppressors” and the alienated “oppressed”. The Allied victory over the Axis was a victory over “fascist” and “imperialist” ideologies that allegedly pervaded pre-war Western, as well as Japanese, thinking. To guard against the re-emergence of “fascism” and “imperialism,” the general public are constantly reminded of what is really an invented past. Thus, in response to Japanese attempts to correct the historical record or visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese politicians, there are streams of warnings from Washington, D.C., as well as China and Korea, against the revival of “Japanese imperialism” and “historical denial”.

Akita and Palmer do note increasing revisionist coverage of the colonial era emerging within South Korea, apparently due to a growing need to fully explain the abrupt transformation of Korea from a feudal to a modern society in the early part of the 20th century. Perhaps better relations between Korea and Japan will follow with genuine recognition of Japan’s sacrifices in colonial Korea. However, the nationalist narrative currently overwhelms the cultural and political elite, both outside as well as within Korea, and recent events do not suggest that this will change in the near future. The culture of victimization is particularly rampant in the U.S. and it is within the U.S. that Korean nationalists, with American moral support, hope to propagate their historical narrative and quash any opposing views. Indeed, to this reviewer, Japanese efforts to counter the Korean nationalist narrative so far have been fruitless, akin to current efforts within America to preserve its own unique historical identity.

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