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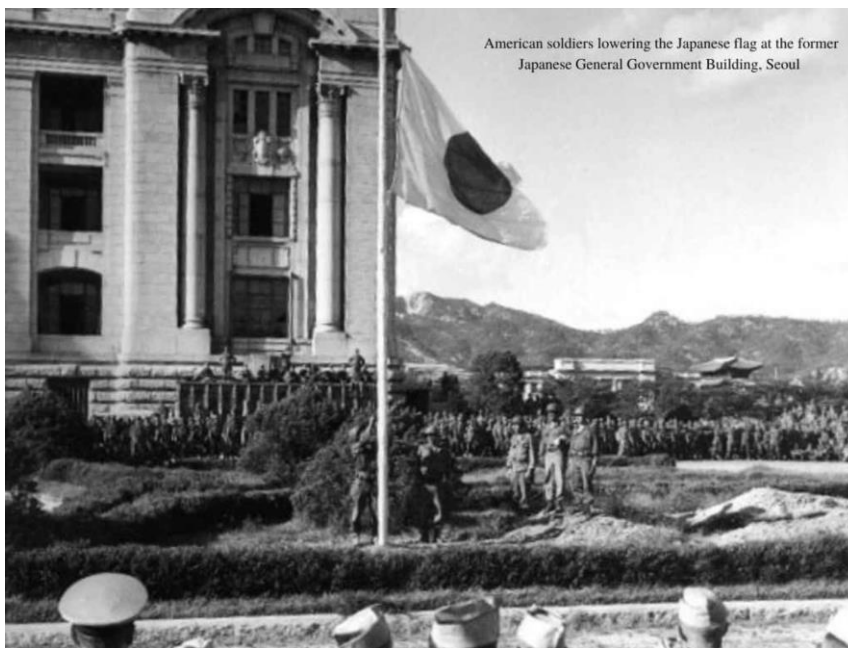
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Website title:

BEYOND ASSIMILATION: JAPANESE COLONIAL RULE IN KOREA, 1910 – 1945

Home page:

Introduction – The Myth of Assimilation



Hook:

The early 20th century marked one of the darkest periods in Korean history: the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 and the following 35 years of colonial rule. This period has been characterised by aggressive assimilation policies, economic exploitation and cultural erasure. This digital exhibition explores the question: *Was the main goal of the colonial government the assimilation of Koreans as Japanese?*

Thesis Statement

Although the Japanese colonial government implemented extensive assimilation policies that aimed to transfer Koreans into loyal Japanese subjects, these policies were primarily tools for consolidating imperial dominance and exploiting Korea's

resources. The rhetoric of 'shared origin' and 'unity' was less about genuine equality and more about legitimising Japan's supremacy.

This topic holds profound significance in understanding how colonialism operated beyond mere conquest. By examining Japan's assimilation strategies in Korea, this project highlights the tension between ideological justification and material exploitation. It also resonates with broader global patterns of imperialism discussed by theorists like Edward Said (1978), whose concept of *Orientalism* reveals how colonisers construct the 'Other' to dominate and control them both intellectually and politically. Japan's portrayal of Koreans as both 'brothers' and 'backward subjects' mirror this duality which was an attempt to justify control through the language of kinship.

Context:

After Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Korea was declared a protectorate and formally annexed in 1910 under the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty. The Japanese government claimed that annexation would modernise Korea and bring progress through the 'benevolent guidance' of Japan. Initially, the colonial administration emphasises paternalism and racial hierarchy where Koreans were described as 'childlike' and in need of Japanese discipline (Caprio, 2009).

However, by the 1930s, the focus shifted toward cultural and ideological assimilation as Japan expanded its imperial ambitions across Asia. Their initiatives were justified through a racial narrative that posited Koreans and Japanese as sharing common ancestry, both descending from the sun goddess *Amaterasu*. This was used to naturalise Japan's domination (Eckert, 1991). The tension between Japan's concept of unity and its practices of exclusion exposes the contradictions of the colonial ideology. Japan's modernisation of Korea 'did not erase the colonial hierarchy but deepened it' (Schmid, 2002). This digital exhibition therefore explores whether assimilation was the true goal or just a facade for control.

Scholarly Opinions

There are a few different interpretations of Japan's aims:

1. Assimilation was the official framework of Japanese colonialism, expressed through language policy, education and symbolic practices such as name changes. (Caprio, 2009).
2. Japan's priority was economic exploitation, using Korea as a colonial periphery for capitalist expansion. (Eckert, 1990)
3. Japanese efforts at assimilation sparked new forms of Korean identity, emphasising cultural nationalism and resistance. (Robinson, 1988).
4. Japan framed its rule as a continuation of Korea's 'natural' historical evolution, highlighting the ideological justification of the empire. (Schmid, 2002).

PAGE 2

Title: Assimilation as a Policy – Creating Loyal Japanese Subjects

The colonial government's assimilation policies demonstrated a deliberate attempt to reshape Koreans into loyal Japanese subjects.

Assimilation (*dōka*) was the cornerstone of Japan's imperial ideology in Korea. Caprio (2009) defines it as the 'attempt to make the colonised accept the culture, values and political system of the coloniser as their own'. Its function was less equality but more compliance, a way of transforming the colonised population into obedient subjects who are able to serve imperial needs without resistance.

The ideology of Japan and Korea as One Body (*naisen ittai*) epitomised the assimilation ideal. Colonial power often operates through 'the construction of sameness and difference' (Said, 1978). The coloniser asserts similarity to legitimise rule, yet simultaneously emphasises inferiority to maintain dominance.

Japan's assimilation project operated through the most intimate aspects of life: language, education, religion and identity.

Language and Education

Japanese replaced Korean by gradually removing it from schools and official use. Textbooks contained content glorifying the Emperor whilst Korean history was rewritten or erased (Robinson, 1988). Punishments were also imposed for speaking Korean in classrooms. The Governor-General's office also controlled the entire education system, promoting Japanese history and loyalty to the Emperor while also marginalising Korean culture (Schmid, 2002).



This September 1944 photo shows sixth-grade students at an elementary school in Incheon. (Museum of Japanese Colonial History in Korea).

Shinto Worship

Koreans were required to visit Shinto shrines under the claim as 'non-religious patriotic duty' when in reality, it served to enforce submission to the Emperor's divinity.

Soshi-kaimei (1939):

Koreans were also pressured to adopt Japanese-style names, symbolising a coerced abandonment of heritage (Caprio, 2009). These policies reveal Japan's strong intent to erase Korean distinctiveness and producing compliant 'Japanised' subjects.

Mobilisation During War:

Under the *Naisen Ittai* campaign of the 1930s, Koreans were conscripted as soldiers and labourers during World War II. This was evidence that 'unity' only served in militarism rather than equality.

Ideological Foundation – The Myth of Common Ancestry

Japanese ideologues argued that Japan and Korea shared a common origin under the sun goddess *Amaterasu*. This myth of 'shared blood' (*naisen dōsoron*) justified colonial assimilation as a return to a supposed familial unity (Schmid, 2002). By portraying colonisation as a reunion, Japan was able to mask coerce under the concept of 'destiny'.



내선일체 or Naisen Ittai

While it may seem Japan's policies pursued assimilation, their coercive nature enforced through suppression of the local language, history and religion, reveals a project of identity control rather than mutual integration. Assimilation was clearly a tool and not a goal.

PAGE 3

Title: Economic Exploitation – The Engine of the Empire

Japan's colonial rule in Korea was driven first by economic exploitation rather than assimilation

Ulterior Economic Motives

Japan's colonisation of Korea was inseparable from its capitalist ambitions (Eckert, 1990). The Japanese empire sought to transform Korea into a resource base and supplier of raw materials, agricultural goods and cheap labour for Japan's industrial core. Korea's fertile lands, natural resources and geographic proximity made it a strategic asset for Japan's industrial expansion.

Land and Labour Exploitation

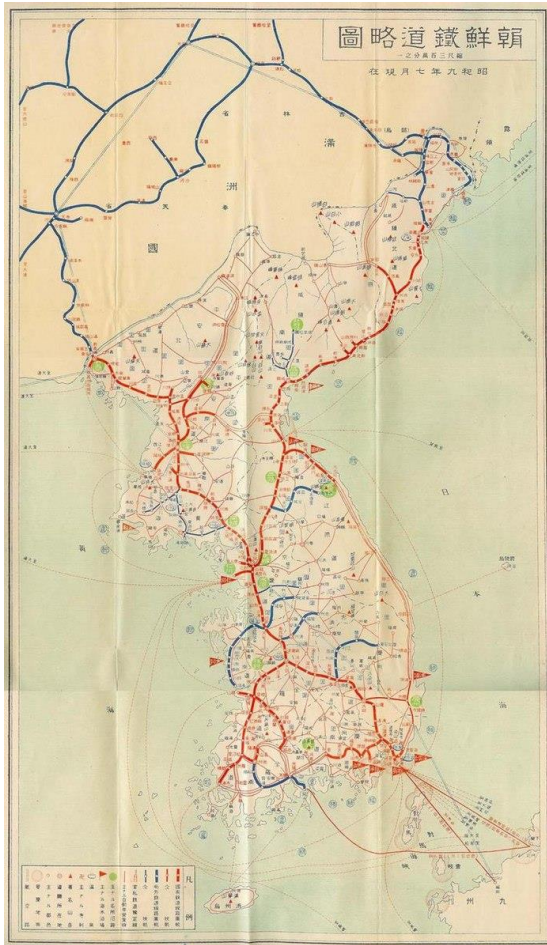
1. Land Surveys in the 1910s: The colonial government's land reforms had dispossessed Korean farmers under the pretext of modernisation. When in reality, vast tracts were transferred to Japanese settlers and companies
2. Industrial Development: Korean industry was dominated by Japanese firms by the 1930s. Koreans worked in Japanese zaibatsu-owned (large Japanese business conglomerates) factories and in exploitative conditions whilst simultaneously earning less than their Japanese counterparts. By 1938, over 50% of Korea's major industries were owned by Japanese investors (Caprio, 2009)
3. Agriculture: Although Korea's rice production boomed, it was mostly exported to Japan and caused local shortages and famine (Eckert, 1990).



Korean girls heading to do hard labour at the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Nagoya plant where they manufactured planes. The Kyunghyang Shinmun file photo.

Infrastructure

Roads, ports and railways were built to facilitate extraction rather than local development. These 'symbols of modernity' were not evidence of benevolent progress but 'arteries of empire', connecting Korea's resources to Japan, (Schmid, 2002).



Map of the Japanese-made railway between Seoul and Busan

Economic Integration & Subordination

By the 1930s, Korea had already economically integrated into Japan's empire as their subordinate periphery. Robinson (1988) argues that this economic dependence deepened social divisions, creating a colonial class structure in which Japanese settlers dominated commerce while Koreans were agricultural labourers and used as cheap labour industrial workers.

Economic control was the true heart of Japan's colonial project. The term 'assimilation' simply softened the reality of resource extraction and labour exploitation. Imperial discourse often masks material exploitation behind moral and cultural superiority, portraying domination as benevolence (Said, 1978).

PAGE 4

Title: Discrimination & Control – The Illusion of Equality

The discrimination against Koreans reveals the true intentions behind assimilation: to secure obedience and maintain control rather than promote equality.

Social Hierarchies and Segregation

Koreans were systematically excluded from rights and privileges that were commonly enjoyed by the Japanese, despite claiming unity. Korean schools received inferior funding compared to Japanese schools and discrimination in the job sector was also pervasive. Separate residential areas, public facilities and restaurants heavily enforced racial hierarchy.



Japanese occupation in Seoul

Legal Inequality

Japanese settlers had different legal standards and lighter punishments than Korean locals. The right to vote and hold office for Koreans remained restricted until late in the colonial period, limiting their political participation.

While *Naisen Ittai* claimed to create one imperial family, the reality was more racialised inequality. The policy's 'assimilation without equality' reinforced Japan's superiority, positioning Koreans as eternally inferior and incapable of being truly Japanese, (Caprio, 2009).

The suppression of Korean culture eventually led to the rise of cultural nationalism where intellectuals sought to preserve their identity through language and history.



This is a promotional post for the 1929 Joseon Exposition which was held for 50 days. It was to display Joseon's cultural heritage and development however the true motive was to promote the country post-colonial development progress and legitimise colonial rule. The poster shows many performances such as acrobats, dancers and musicians. Obtained from [대한민국역사박물관](#)

Assimilation's promise of equality was nothing but hollow. Its true motivation was not unity but obedience. The continued discrimination potentially reveals the colonial government's fear of equality leading to loss of imperial control.

PAGE 5

Title: Periodisation – Changing Policies and Constant Control

Although Japan's colonial rule was from 1910 to 1945, its policies were able to be evolved over time. Coercion transformed to cultural reform to total mobilisation however the underlying motivation of domination was constant.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4fdhAz0VSw&t=10s>



1910 – 1919: Military Rule and Suppression

The first decade of the colonial rule can be described as military control, censorship and land confiscations. Japan justified brutality as necessary discipline, 'colonial modernity under the gun' (Schmid, 2002).

1919 – 1931: Cultural Rule (Bunka Seiji)

After the *March First Movement* in 1919 where there were nationwide protests demanding independence, Japan relaxed censorship and promoted some cultural policies. These changes were tactical with the intention of pacifying resistance while

also maintaining authority, (Caprio, 2009). This resurgence of identity also shows that forced assimilation cannot extinguish collective consciousness. Colonial modernity in Korea in the end, 'produced the very nationalism it sought to suppress' (Schmid, 2002).



March 1, 1919, where around 2 million people came to protest on the streets

1931 – 1945: Wartime Mobilisation and Total Assimilation

Assimilation intensified after Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931. *The Kominka Movement* was intended to transform Koreans into imperial subjects through mediums such as conscription. By 1945, the empire had demanded total devotion to the war effort.

Insert an interactive timeline slider showing key policy shifts

The changing periods of colonial policy (military, cultural and total mobilisation) all had the same goal of maintaining Japan's dominance. Assimilation only evolved as a strategy for each phase of control.

PAGE 6

Title: Legacy & Conclusion – The Meaning of Assimilation

Assimilation was significant however not Japan's ultimate goal. It was more of a political and ideological tool consistently used to justify domination, extract resources and suppress resistance.

A few scholarly perspectives:

1. Assimilation is a coercive instrument (Caprio, 2009)
2. Assimilation has economic motives (Eckert, 1990)
3. Assimilation is for cultural resistance (Robinson, 1988)
4. There are ideological methods that sustained the empire (Schmid, 2002)

Overall, all scholars can agree that assimilation served as a strategic justification for the empire but not the genuine objective.

Edward Said's (1978) theory of *Orientalism* offers another perspective that helps interpret Japan's colonial rhetoric. Japan intended to portray itself as the bringer of enlightenment to a supposedly 'backwards' Korea. This mirrors the same logic European powers used in Asian and Africa as well. This narrative of benevolent modernisation successfully hid systems of violence and control.

The legacy of assimilation continues to shape modern Koreans identity. The wounds of cultural suppression and unequal treatment persist in all of Korea today. This is why it matters for modern generations to remember the history of those in the past.

This project's central argument challenges the notion that assimilation was the main goal. Japan's colonial occupation in Korea was not an act of shared destiny which they promoted, but a calculated system of control. Assimilation functioned as the empire's mask, disguising coercion as civilisation and domination as unity.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYd7gjUavek>



Insert final closing interactive map that links historical events to post 1945 Korea

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