

Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945

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History has demonstrated assimilation under colonial occupation to be a near impossible result to attain due primarily to its basic premise: the colonizers' belief in their superiority over the colonized. Furthermore, the colonizers' ambition to replace the colonized people's 'inferior' culture with their 'superior' culture further complicated this process. Contemporary scholars interested in assessing the record of Japanese assimilation policy in Korea (1910–45) face the daunting task of sifting through the reams of policy reports, data collections, and essays left by government officials and residents to consider basic questions regarding the relationship between policy executers and the populations they targeted: What justification(s) did the former use in determining assimilation as their administration policy, and how did the targeted population respond to it? Todd Henry's focus on 'contact zones' – defined by Mary Louise Pratt as temporal and spatial zones that brought together 'subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures' (quoted on p. 11) – delivers an impressive contribution to the growing collection of research on Japanese imperial history in Korea, and the Japanese-Korean relationship in particular. His concentration is on the analysis of a selection of these zones that held the potential of strengthening Korean-Japanese communal bonds. Consistent with other research on cultural assimilation, Henry concludes that Japanese manipulation of these zones to better suit their own needs over those of the colonized Koreans, along with stubborn negative views that the colonizers held toward Koreans, contributed to the ultimate failure of Japan's assimilation efforts.

The core of *Assimilating Seoul* targets three types of assimilation – the spiritual, the material, and the civic. These chapters are bordered by two separate discussions, one that reconstructs Japan's creation of Seoul-based contact zones by examining colonial urban planning into the 1930s (chapter one), and a second that develops the process of Japan's acceleration of this policy during the war years, 1937–45 (chapter five). The monograph's epilogue traces South Korean efforts to resurrect the city's pre-colonial past by transforming former colonial public space into areas that reconstruct the pride of Korea's long history. A product of the author's dedicated research, *Assimilating Seoul* offers meticulously detailed descriptions of these zones, providing the most informed sketch of colonial-era Seoul in English historiography to date in terms of the city's urban planning, physical layout, and social network areas. Not limited to the rather approachable perceptions of Japanese officials, Henry's research also draws out the less transparent views of the Japanese settlers and even more obtuse views of the Korean colonized subject.

Assimilating Seoul focuses on contact zones planned by the Japanese colonial officials ostensibly to create space for Korean-Japanese interaction that potentially would assist the latter in developing an identity as Japanese. In other words, their creation of these zones reflected a practical application of Japan's idealistic rhetoric of assimilation. These acts of creation were often christened by acts of destruction. This was the task that Japanese urban planners faced in their efforts to reconstruct Seoul as their model colonial city from the 1910s, particularly when reconstruction intersected with previously developed areas of this ancient city. The symbolic center of the city, Kyŏngbok Palace, attracted Japanese attention even though it was situated in north Seoul, just outside the center of Japan town situated in south Seoul. Over the ashes of the now disassembled parts of the palace rose the majestic government-general building, completed in 1926, that cast a symbolic shadow over the remnants of the ancient palace granted immunity from destruction. Extending from the Capital building was Seoul's major thoroughfare, the broad Taihei Boulevard, the centerpiece of an ambitious project to construct 42 new roads – of which but 15 would reach completion (p. 36). The construction of these roads, much of which involved simply widening and extending existing passages, required still more destruction.

Henry's examination of the plans and the construction demonstrates these plans primarily targeting the transportation infrastructure of Japanese-centered neighborhoods, while leaving those areas where Koreans resided (85.5 per cent of the city) mostly untouched (pp. 36–7). The author cites the possibility of Korean noncompliance as a factor – many Koreans (but Japanese, as well) refused to relinquish their land even for compensation. However, there was also the added value to the Japanese in leaving untouched the 'narrow and uneven streets [that] overlapped like snakes': the roads provided a convenient contrast with the straight, wide boulevards of Japan town that could be used to compare Japanese advancement to Korean backwardness (p. 40). This contrast, also utilized in comparisons of the 'modern' Japanese-created school and the 'traditional' Korean traditional school, provided the colonizers with photo opportunities useful for convincing outsiders of the necessity of Japan's administration over the peninsula.

The government general's skewed concentration of urban development on Japanese residential areas did not go unnoticed by Koreans, as evident in even a casual perusal of the scholar Yun Ch'ihŏ's diary and the popular *Tonga Ilbo* (East Asian Daily). Yet, as Henry suggests, some Japanese apparently remained oblivious to this imbalance, which they attributed to Korean ineptness. He quotes a Tanaka Hanshirŏ of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce who reasoned that Koreans 'not only lack basic concepts about urban administration, but also do not possess strong convictions about the city ...'. Korean apparent lack of commitment provided the Japanese with an 'obstacle' toward extending the project to meet non-Japanese interests (pp. 45–6). What about public transportation? Whether these same conclusions were evident from the planning of Seoul's streetcar system is a question in need of similar consideration. Additionally, can we decipher in the planning behind this spatially restricted urban development a conscious effort to limit outsider contact with the general Korean population as well? Delaying development in the Korean section of town proved beneficial for the Japanese during a tour of American Congressional officials that passed through Seoul in August 1920, from whom the colonial administration tried to prevent contact with the Korean residents of the city.⁽¹⁾ The core of Seoul's transportation infrastructure being limited to the

primarily Japanese section of town curtailed the mobility of the tour members to the areas of Seoul that the Japanese wished for them to see (where also the core of the infrastructural improvements to the city mentioned in the tour report were located), and prevented them from venturing into the less-developed Korean sections of the city that the Japanese wished to hide from them.

Two events – shrine visits and colonial expositions – serve as the focus of chapters two and three that consider, respectively, spiritual and material assimilation. Koreans adopting Shintoism, as one editorial placed in the *Keijō shinpō* (Seoul Daily) just after annexation predicted, would prove to be the ultimate challenge that Japanese assimilation would face.⁽²⁾ Henry demonstrates as problematic not only the Koreans accepting Shintoism but also the Japanese recognizing as sincere their participation in the religion's spiritual activities. The Japanese built Seoul Shrine in 1898 to serve primarily its growing settler needs. In 1925 the government general completed a second place of worship, Korea Shrine, as Seoul's primary Shinto facility. Did this contact zone bring Koreans closer to Japanese? Henry quotes Yun Ch'ihō's rather pessimistic impression that characterized his belief – at least during the 1920s – in the difficulty that Japanese assimilation policy confronted in attracting his fellow Koreans. The Christian scholar bluntly confirmed that Koreans, or for that matter any non-Japanese, faced an impossible task in coming to understand Japanese Shintoism (p. 72). Henry's analysis on how the Japanese observed Korean participation at Korea Shrine suggests, as elsewhere, that Japanese prejudices were Japanese assimilation's worst enemy. Rather than compliment the Koreans for visiting the Shrine, Japanese criticized them over the way they participated: Koreans, Japanese claimed, were merely 'onlooking' rather than 'worshipping' (p. 84). Both Japanese and Koreans suggested the reason behind the apparently less sincere attitude of the Koreans was due to the lack of Korean deity representation at Korea Shrine (p. 82). The physical location of the Shrine being situated on a mountain overlooking Japan town may also have prevented many Koreans of more limited means from getting to the shrine, much less making proper donations to the Shrine as was expected from its worshipers (p. 78). But it was the Koreans' approach to the Shrine, and particularly their physical mannerisms that disturbed the Japanese observers who apparently concluded that any behavior which did not correspond to the Japanese way of doing things as being also improper and thus subject to criticism.

Henry centres his discussion of material assimilation on the three international exhibitions that Seoul hosted in 1907, 1915, and 1929. Exhibitions at this time were means of introducing people to the innovative as well as the exotic, of separating the civilized from the barbarian, as explained in Timothy Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt*.⁽³⁾ While previous research typically focused on the use of displays to draw these distinctions, Henry (just as with his discussion on Korean behavior at Japan's main Shinto shrine in Seoul), concentrates on Japanese pessimistic impressions of the colonized people's inability to properly behave, or properly appreciate the displays, as evidence of distinction between colonizer and colonized. He records the tabs that the Japanese kept on Korean misbehavior, which included their smoking in the pavilions, touching the displays, urinating in public, and straying into prohibited areas (p. 105). Thus possible efforts by the exhibition's planners in setting a rather high 20 yen entrance fee to limit Korean participation to the more sophisticated appears to have failed, unless, of course, it was also the sophisticated Korean who, realizing the Japanese true intentions behind staging the exhibition, literally pissed all over it. This intention did not escape the pen of Yun Ch'ihō who entered the following into his extensive diary: 'the whole show is a show of the Japanese, by the Japanese, and for the Japanese. Its objective is to advertise Korea' at the expense of Koreans (quoted on p. 123).

Henry's discussion on civic assimilation differs from that of the above two chapters on spiritual and material assimilation in that by focusing on hygiene it lacks the specifically defined spatial walls found in his discussions on Korea Shrine and the exhibition sites. Though Japan's focus was primarily on cleaning up the Korean sections of the city, they realized success in this effort contributed to ensuring a healthier Japan town as well. The Japanese administration followed fellow colonial powers in making hygienic improvement an important part of its colonial mission, which for the colonizer was a win-win scenario. Describing the colonial city as 'diseased', as Henry cites the Japanese view of Seoul, offered the colonizer an easily understood reason to criticize the colonized people's culture – it made them sick. Expending time and capital to redefine the city as 'healthy' provided the colonizer with the altruistic purpose it needed to justify its

presence in the colony, and the administrative approach it used to govern its people. Indeed, Japanese continue to milk these efforts to this day to demonstrate its tenure on the Korean peninsula as benevolent. Koreans, too, joined in this campaign to clean up Seoul, but toward a different end. As Henry puts it, the two sides occupied the 'same bed, [with] different dreams' (p. 131). The Japanese, of course had one critical self-serving reason to succeed in cleaning up northern Seoul: as disease does not recognize artificial borders, controlling disease here also improved the health of Japanese residents concentrated in southern Seoul. Yet again Japanese officials more often concentrated on improving areas for Japanese purposes, even though it levied a health tax on both Japanese and Koreans – albeit with the Japanese paying four times that of the Koreans (p. 114). Less fortunate Koreans not only found it difficult to contribute the monthly 2 *sen* tax and purchase basic sanitary equipment, but may also have deemed it unnecessary given that many of the improvements failed to improve their livelihoods even when their neighborhoods were targeted for improvement. The 1.25 million yen project to deliver running water to Korean residential areas only benefited those who could bring the water directly into their homes, an added cost beyond the means of many (p. 150). Koreans may also have thought twice about the necessity of these health-related improvements had they known that Japanese residents, despite living in the cleaner and more developed part of the city, contacted contagious diseases such as typhoid fever, dysentery, and typhus at a higher rate than did Koreans (p. 148).

The effect of the Second World War years on these contact zones is the topic of Henry's final chapter. As others have noted, Japan's engagement in total war forced the Japanese to dramatically alter their policies toward Koreans.⁽⁴⁾ Henry, too, concurs with this conclusion in his examination of the process that he calls Korean 'Shintoization'. Many studies on the war years focus on numbers: the increasing numbers of Koreans visiting the shrines; the percentage of Koreans that Japanized their names; the number of men who volunteered for military service; the amounts of the financial contributions that affluent Koreans made to Japan's war effort. Henry's discussion notes the increased participation of Koreans in Shrine visitations, but, as in previous chapters, also the increased suspicions that Japanese held toward the participants. Did Koreans who challenged the steep stairway leading up to the shrine to pray at Korea Shrine carry with them the correct attitude required of Japanese subjects (p. 191)? Did Koreans who purchased portable Shinto shrines (*butsudan*) for their households actually pray before these shrines in a way becoming of a Japanese (p. 194)? We must pause to consider what in particular led the Japanese to conclude insincerity: their shabby costume and irreverent postures. Was unacceptable dress and behavior sufficient evidence to conclude the identity of the irreverent participants as Korean? Likewise, on what basis could Japanese reach the conclusion that Koreans who had purchased home altars were not using them for their intended purpose?

The important contribution that *Assimilating Seoul* makes to colonial historiography and to Korean history is evident in the impressive depth that Henry brings to our understanding of the Japanese articulation of their colonial goals and the problems they envisioned for Koreans in reaching these goals. He further considers the more difficult question of the Korean perspective on Japanese intentions. Henry's primary finding, that the Japanese failed to maximize the potential utility of the three contact zones, is a conclusion that would certainly surface in more mundane contact zones, such as the classroom and places of employment. The 'why' question, however, remains a mystery: Why didn't the Japanese extend more positive efforts to exploit these contact zones to attain their stated administrative goal: making Koreans Japanese? One possible conclusion is temporal limitations. The three-plus decades of Japanese rule were too short to expect the emergence of more positive Japanese attitudes. A second possible explanation was a Japanese fear of Koreanization, that closer contact (more so in rural areas) would encourage the absorption of Korean culture by Japanese settlers. A third possible reason considers the approach itself: that, as argued by many from the late 19th century, a culture-based assimilation simply was not a viable policy under colonial conditions. Henry leaves his audience with the suggestion that Japan's refusal to recognize Korean space within these contact zones was encouraged by an attitude that prevented the colonizers from imagining any assimilation that compromised the vision of complete Korean capitulation to the 'superior' culture, much less recognized any behavior that suggested Korean attempts to cooperate. The Japanese who envisioned the role of Korea and Koreans in the colonial relationship as being as supporters of a grander Japanese purpose discouraged

Korean participation even among those more inclined to do so.

Assimilating Seoul also challenges national border and ethnic assumptions. It defies categorization as either a Japanese or Korean history to serve as a valuable artery of both during the time of Japan's colonial subjugation of the peninsula. It seeks views held by both peoples, as evinced by Henry's healthy consideration of both Korean and Japanese sources, though Japanese censorship frustrates contemporary attempts to access the unadulterated Korean voice. The book's epilogue teases the reviewer to contemplate a sequel to Korean colonial-era research – one dealing with South Korea's re-reconstruction of these contact zones: the return of Kyŏngbok Palace, the replacement of Korea Shrine with a massive commemorative hall dedicated to An Chung-gŏn (5), and the decoration of Seoul's main thoroughfare extending from the palace with statues and commemorations to Korea's pre-colonial political and military heroes.

Notes

1. Henry Z. Osborne's report on the tour is found in House of Representatives records, 66th Congress, 3rd sess., *Congressional Record* 60 (23 December 1920), 707–28.[Back to \(1\)](#)
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2. Chŏsen dŏka to Shinto' [Korean assimilation and Shinto], *Keijŏ shinpŏ* (23 October 1910).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley, CA, 1991).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. S. W. Park, *Colonial Industrialization and Labor in Korea: The Onoda Cement Factory* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); M. E. Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (Seattle, WA, 2009); T. Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans During World War II* (Berkeley, CA, 2011); B. Palmer. *Fighting for the Enemy: Koreans in Japan's War, 1937–1945* (Seattle, WA, 2013).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. An Chung-gŏn is remembered for gunning down Japan's most noted politician and Korea's first Resident General Itŏ Hirobumi in October 1909.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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