



# JAPANESE

ASSIMILATION POLICIES IN  
COLONIAL KOREA

1910–1945



MARK E. CAPRIO

KOREAN STUDIES OF THE HENRY M. JACKSON  
SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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by Mark E. Caprio

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**MARK E. CAPRIO**

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**JAPANESE ASSIMILATION  
POLICIES IN COLONIAL KOREA,  
1910–1945**



## INTRODUCTION

### COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION DECISIONS

A PROUD KOREAN FATHER BEGAN HIS BRIEF THREE-PAGE CONTRIBUTION to the March 1940 issue of *Chōsen* (Korea), a monthly journal published by the government-general, with the words “My eldest son has become a volunteer soldier.”<sup>1</sup> His pride stemmed from more than just his son’s enlistment. For he saw embedded within his son’s success the success of his fellow Koreans, their imperial status having risen two years earlier when the Japanese government initiated legislation that allowed Korean boys the privilege of serving the empire as volunteer soldiers. To some Koreans, this reform demonstrated that the Japanese were finally taking a pivotal step toward matching their colonial policy rhetoric to assimilate Koreans with an appropriate action.<sup>2</sup>

Cho Pyōngsang, who headed the Chongno civil defense bureau (*keibō-dan*) in Keijō (Kor. Kyōngsōng or Seoul) and sat on the government general’s central advisory committee (*chūsūin sangi*), repeatedly emphasized two points in his essay. First he emphasized that he had offered (*susumeta*) his eldest son to the Japanese military. By his sacrifice Cho demonstrated his liberation from Korea’s traditional lineage-centered society. It was unnecessary to explain the significance of this act in detail: the Confucian heritage that his Japanese and Korean readers shared allowed both peoples to grasp the magnitude of this sacrifice simply by his repeating the words “eldest son.” From the time of annexation, Japanese had used this shared heritage to argue the ease with which they could assimilate Koreans.

Cho also believed that by publicizing his son’s accomplishment, Japanese readers would understand this sacrifice as part of a wider trend among the Korean people: their acceptance of the modern (national/imperial) over the

traditional (familial/lineage). Rather than as the exception, he hoped that the Japanese would recognize his sacrifice as increasingly the rule among Koreans. Changes in this direction, Cho explained, began at the time of annexation. Although not recognized by all Koreans at the time, Japan's incorporation of the Korean Peninsula in 1910 rescued the country from the "lonely" (*sabishii*) direction in which it was heading. Annexation had also divided the Korean people into three groups: pro-Japanese (*shin-Nichiha*) Koreans, who trusted the Japanese pledge to make them "real Japanese" (*hontō no Nihonjin*); anti-Japanese (*hai-Nichiha*) Koreans, who believed that Korea's salvation could be realized only by seeking independence through ethnic self-determination (*minzoku jiketsu*); and Koreans who waffled in a gray zone (*haiiro sonzai*) between these extreme views.<sup>3</sup> Since the September 1931 Manchurian Incident, Cho claimed, public sentiment had shifted in Japan's favor. Many anti-Japanese Koreans had joined the middle, neutral, group; and members of this neutral contingent had shifted their sentiment toward the pro-Japanese group. The July 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident further accelerated this trend. Clearly evident in these developments, Cho emphasized, was a greater willingness by the Korean people to marry their national sentiments with Japan's imperial mission.

This conclusion led to Cho's second point—the need for Japanese to acknowledge Korean support for this mission. The Korean people's "real aspiration" (*shin no yōkyū*), he revealed, was to become true Japanese. That is, they anticipated that eventually the peninsular people (*hantōmin*) and the heartland people (*Naichijin*) would form equal subsets of a greater Japanese people (*Nihonjin*). Again, Cho believed that his aspiration was more than simply that of an individual Korean, but rather was one that reflected the "voice of the entire Korean people" (*hantōmin zenbu no koe*). The Japanese government, by permitting Korea's youth to protect the empire, had taken one important step toward the "embodiment of *Naisen ittai*" (literally, Japan-Korea, one body). Cho's challenge to the Japanese was subtle but clear: the Korean people were doing their part, but were the Japanese ready to recognize Koreans as their equal? This conclusion also suggested Cho's support for Korean assimilation to be contingent on the policy's application over a broader context than simply Japanese absorbing Koreans. Rather, he envisioned the assimilation of both peoples into a larger Korea-Japan union. Japan's Korea administration, he reminded his readers, aimed to realize coexistence and co-prosperity for both peoples, to "fulfill the potential for Japan and Korea becoming one body."<sup>4</sup>

Other Korean supporters of Japan's assimilation policy explored a similar concern. Like Cho, they welcomed the Japanese decision to accept Koreans into their military as a positive sign. Yun Ch'ihō, a leader in Korea's late nineteenth-century reform movements, actively worked to engage Koreans in Japan's wartime policies. He recruited Korean boys for the Japanese military; he participated in their send-off ceremonies; and he welcomed home those who survived the battlefield.<sup>5</sup> Sō Ch'un, who had helped organize the February 1919 Korean independence demonstration in Tokyo before joining the staff of the Japan-owned newspaper *Maeil sinbo* (Daily Times), was also encouraged by Japan's decision to enlist Koreans into its military. In 1942, he wrote of the "emotional inspiration" (*kangeki*) that Koreans felt upon hearing of Japan's plans to finally include Korea's youth in the empire's universal military conscription.<sup>6</sup>

Both men echoed Cho's concern over whether the Japanese shared this enthusiasm. Did the colonizers recognize the sacrifices and gains that the Korean people had made since annexation? Yun Ch'ihō addressed this concern at the plush Chōsen Hotel, where in July 1939 he participated in a roundtable discussion on the topic of *Naisen ittai*. His July 3, 1939, diary entry summarized his advice to the colonizers: Japan must end its discrimination policy but Koreans must work to earn the privilege of Japanese respect. His advice hinted that the Japanese might prove incapable of rewarding deserving Koreans with positions of responsibility: Though Koreans as a whole do not have a "high sense of responsibility and of public morality . . . when [an individual] Korean is found who comes up to the standard of efficiency of the Japanese no discrimination should be shown in his treatment."<sup>7</sup> Sō Ch'un, who believed that all Koreans—to varying degrees—were "soldiers of the emperor," urged Koreans to prove themselves to be elite troops (*seihei*) indistinguishable from their Japanese counterparts in their "divine work" (*seigyō*), the formation of the Great East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere.<sup>8</sup>

This challenge to the Japanese—to back their lofty promises to assimilate Koreans with appropriate policy—represented a minority, but for this study a critical, response to Japanese rule. The majority of Koreans did not share Cho's "voice," nor did they consider themselves to be imperial soldiers in any shape or form. While the Manchurian Incident clearly had a positive impact on the Japanese-Korean relationship, many continued to answer Japan's calls to assimilate with passive or active resistance to its policies and its presence. As objects of the policy, the Korean voice—both the critical and

the supportive—provides an important dimension to our understanding and evaluation of Japanese assimilation policy in Korea.

This study examines assimilation in a broad historical context to ascertain the position that Japanese envisioned Koreans assuming in their empire. It first examines Western colonial examples to understand the global political situation of these times, and to determine the extent that these examples influenced Japan's colonial decisions. In this latter context it considers the following: how Japanese thinking toward assimilation evolved over its three decades of rule in Korea; what measures the Japanese took to instruct the people of the merits of accepting Japanese language, culture, and society; how the Japanese measured success; and finally, how the objects of this policy, the Korean people, reacted to Japanese assimilation overtures. Cho, Yun, and Sō all pointed to Korean military participation as a sign of Japan's willingness to match its assimilation rhetoric with appropriate practice. Did the Japanese administration offer any other hope or reason—besides dispatching Korean boys to fight in a reckless war—to encourage their confidence?

## INTERNAL, PERIPHERAL, AND EXTERNAL COLONIAL EXPANSION

One of the most important choices that Japan had to make upon annexing new territory was the administration under which it would govern its new subjects. At this time colonial scholars and officials generally summarized a colonial power's choice as one between French-style direct rule (assimilation) and British-style indirect rule (association). This distinction suggests the decision as a national preference. More accurately, it was based on the colonizer-colonized relationship. Colonizers, including the French and British, based their administrative decisions on their geographical and racial proximity to the people they colonized.

In question here is our image of "colonized." Specifically, what constitutes "colonized" territory? Which people were "colonized"? A scan of colonial historiography suggests answers to these questions are very much determined by contemporary geopolitics: liberated states were colonized; incorporated regions were not. Territories that remain a part of another state are generally excluded from this discussion. In the context of British historiography, liberated India and Burma were colonized; Wales and Scotland were not.<sup>9</sup> In Japan's case, Korea and Taiwan were colonized; Okinawa and Hokkaido were not. Another factor concerns our traditional images of "col-

onized” as peoples of different races and cultures from their subjugators. Bruce Cumings, for example, noted Japan’s colonization of Korea as unique in its subjugation of a racially and culturally similar people.<sup>10</sup> The Japanese repeatedly listed their similarities with Koreans as the primary reason why they could integrate (rather than colonize) Koreans.

The rhetoric employed by assimilation practitioners suggests a need for a more nuanced definition of “colonized.” In theory, assimilation advanced the idea that the colonizer and the colonized would, in time, stand shoulder-to-shoulder as members of equal standing in an extended nation-state. The French were exceptional in imagining black representatives of its African empire joining white representatives from French provinces in its national assembly. Their practices drew criticism from social Darwinists who argued that “inferior” races could not be uplifted to civilization. Most other practitioners limited their employment of assimilation to territories of racially similar peoples adjacent to the colonial center. Their rhetoric informed the colonized of their potential to assume a status equal to that of the colonizer should they adopt his customs, language, and polity. In this sense the purpose driving assimilation policy resembled that of nation building: the dissemination of common cultural and political systems among the state’s constituents. We shall argue the distinction between these two as one of degree and practice, rather than of kind.

A number of studies have identified colonialism at multiple levels to distinguish expansion across contiguous, or near contiguous, lands. This breaks from the more traditional impression of colonialism as overseas land grabbing, and offers an expanded concept of “colonized.” Hannah Arendt introduced “continental imperialism”—a “cohesive expansion [that] does not allow for any geographic distance between the methods and institutions of colony and of nation”—to distinguish “pan-movements” from the more traditional “overseas imperialism.”<sup>11</sup> Michael Hechter, examining Celtic assimilation into the United Kingdom, similarly uses “internal” and “external” colonialism to question why the internally colonized Welsh, Scots, and Irish retained a separate identity from the Anglican English.<sup>12</sup> Harold Wolpe’s “internal” (versus “normal”) colonialism considers cases “internal to a particular society,” including those of Arab-Israelis, black Americans, and black South Africans.<sup>13</sup>

Wolpe’s “internal” colonization further extends our definition by considering as colonized culturally subjugated minorities residing within state borders. Foreign residence thus is not prerequisite for a people to be con-

sidered “colonized.” Others have advanced this definition to consider nation building itself as colonial. Partha Chatterjee suggested this similarity when he questioned whether it served “any useful analytical purpose to make a distinction between the colonial state and the forms of the modern state.”<sup>14</sup> Ernest Geller’s definition of nationalism as the subjugation of “low” cultures by the hegemonic “high” culture suggests colonial activity.

Nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, whose previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases of the totality, of the population. It means that generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind, in place of a previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves. That is what *really* happens.<sup>15</sup>

“Nationalism” quickly became “colonialism” when this “imposition” was forced upon a foreign people. There is a distinction to be made between the two concepts, but it is not one of kind. The process of, in Benedict Anderson’s words, “inventing nations” involved determining the ethnic groups that would be admitted to the “image of [the nation’s] communion.”<sup>16</sup> New imperial acquisitions thus required renewed considerations as to how this territory fit into the empire. The most basic decision involved whether the territory would be governed under indirect association or direct assimilation. Peoples residing at the nation-state’s peripheries—those either physically separated or socially marginalized—were prevented from immediately entering the internal community; they were conditionally offered membership contingent upon their advancement in civilization. This distinction points to a major consideration of this study—the factors that determined a people’s place in the empire. Through assimilation, could a foreign people become nationalized citizens? If so, what factors influenced their status change? To what extent could the object of this policy, the colonized, influence their imperial status?<sup>17</sup>

The decision to colonize, as well as the administration to administer the colonized, was based primarily on the needs and interests of the colonizer

subject; those of the colonized object received minimal consideration. Colonizers generally chose among three broad levels of administration that ranged from the rather relaxed external colonization to the exhaustive internal colonization; peripheral colonialism occupied a middle position. Colonizers introduced external colonization, which corresponded with Arendt's overseas imperialism and Hechter's external colonialism, in distant territories where their indirect policy exerted minimal effort to forge political, social, or cultural bonds with the peoples under their jurisdiction.<sup>18</sup> Employed to administer a population geographically and racially different from the homeland, the colonizers claimed few (if any) cultural affiliations with these peoples. Rather than change them, the colonizers "grew to love their absurd . . . ways."<sup>19</sup> Their "mission" to civilize these peoples fortified their myths of superiority that justified their colonial subjugation over the people. The colonizers exploited the land for its resources and the people for their labor with minimal human or capital investment. External colonialism's primary ambition was economic; security concerns arose when the colony's location contributed to the security of the colonial power's other territorial possessions.<sup>20</sup>

External colonization's antithesis—internal colonization: the intense assimilation of the people as nationals, in other words nation building—provided colonizers with a second option.<sup>21</sup> With a primary goal of securing a people's political allegiance, the core colonial agent assumed control over the mechanisms required to disseminate a hegemonic culture among its constituents. It determined the dialect that would function as the nation's national language; it guided nation-building institutions such as education, the media, and the military to instruct the people of their membership, and to guide their participation, in the nation; and it established national events and icons (holidays, flags, currency, and songs) to remind its constituents of their new allegiance. Successful internal colonization was contingent on the newly formed state's ability to dismantle local political, social, and cultural barriers that political bodies had traditionally maintained. Administrative caretakers who failed to assimilate its people as national subjects faced charges of incompetence and accusations of "inept government," a shortcoming that colonial powers exploited to justify their intervention in the territory.

The high level of integration that internal colonization required, and the strong geographical and historical ties it assumed among its constituents, rendered the approach inappropriate for peoples residing at the periphery of the internal colony. Yet, the close proximity of these peoples required that

bonds be established to secure their allegiance and loyalty. The images established to justify the people's colonization—cultural difference rather than geographical or historical affinity—assumed a vertical relationship that precluded their incorporation as internal subjects. Peripheral colonization—Arendt's continental imperialism and Hechter's internal colonialism—thus served as an intermediate stage that dangled before the colonized the promise of their assimilation as internal citizens, but invariably introduced policy that compromised this vision.<sup>22</sup> Assimilation thus served as a rhetorical goal rather than a political assumption. The heavy intrusion into the people's lives reflected the peripheral territory's most important responsibility: as a strategic buffer to protect the colonial center from regional rivals.

A number of factors influenced the expansionists' choice of administration policy. Their perceptions of the colonized people(s) played an important role in their decision. These perceptions determined the degree to which the colonized peoples would be integrated as full members in the state's nation-building institutions. The geographic proximity of the territory to the homeland was an important, but inconclusive, factor. Many of the examples cited as "internal" in the colonial literature are considered as "peripheral" or even "external" in this framework. Black and Native American residents in the United States, for example, were institutionally excluded from institutions that welcomed white U.S. citizens unconditionally. In contrast, colonizing agents in external colonies generally co-opted a selection of indigenous elite by offering them an education equal to (and often exceeding) that of the colonizers' children, ostensibly to train them to act as intermediaries between colonized and colonizers.

One important distinction between the internal and the peripheral colonizer was the syntactical position in which its rhetoric placed its colonized object. Internal colonial administrations persuaded their constituents to accept their roles as national subjects by socializing them in the behavioral and ideological tenets of the hegemonic polity and culture: as national subjects they were expected to act in determined ways. Peripheral colonial administrations, on the other hand, defined the colonized as the object to be changed: as inferior peoples they had to be prepared for their acceptance as national subjects. Assimilation was the civilizing process in both cases, but it was more strongly articulated in the peripheral case than in the internal case. Assimilation assumed an inferior people being integrated into a more civilized cultural body, rather than, as in the case of the internal subject, into a body to which they theoretically already belonged. The articulated goal to

assimilate Koreans as Japanese made rhetorical sense; one aiming to assimilate Japanese as Japanese was nonsensical.

This distinction manifested in practice, particularly in the different education policies that colonizing powers advanced to internal, peripheral, and external subjects. Education policy is an appropriate example for two reasons. The conditions under which the colonizers accepted the colonized into their schools reveal the images they held of the people at the time, as well as the vision they held of the people's future. Limiting a people to an inferior education (or no formal education at all) dramatically increased the probability that they would occupy an inferior social position in the future. Internal colonizing powers defined their education goal as universal and compulsory: all citizens would be admitted to schools just as soon as the state constructed the schoolhouses to educate children and extended the infrastructure needed to transport them there. Colonizers at the peripheral level encouraged education participation but generally did not make school attendance compulsory. They generally offered the colonized people—who were deemed unfit to join the internal subject in the classroom—a noncompulsory education inferior in duration and resources and available to fewer people. The operative word here is *intention*. Both situations initially lacked the required resources to extend to the entire population a modern education. Yet, internal colonizers declared their intention to extend compulsory education to the entire population. Peripheral colonizers may have vowed to increase education facilities but stopped short of declaring their intention to make attendance mandatory.

In addition to segregated educational systems, the colonizers devised other ways to maintain distinctions between internal and peripheral subjects. The status of the territory in relation to the homeland determined the legal codes under which it was to be governed. It also determined the form and extent to which the subjects could participate in political institutions. Peripheral and external colonial cities mirrored the colonial relationship, as internal subjects occupied their particular section of the city to protect themselves from the disturbing textures and smells of native districts. Both colonizers and colonized who passed through each other's zones described these excursions as foreign adventures, as if they were crossing a national border or entering a living museum. Descriptions left by colonizers of the filth and smell contributed to the mosaic of images arranged to advertise the colonized peoples as incapable of managing their immediate surroundings, much less their sovereignty.

The images that the colonizers drew of their colonized peoples contained stereotypes that displayed remarkable resilience across space and time. These images, as Edward Said notes, formed a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction”<sup>23</sup> to separate colonizer from colonized. The subjugating agent painted the colonized as victims of inept government that failed to disseminate to them the customs and mannerisms required of a civilized people. Their antiquated living environment reflected their inferior “habitus,” in Pierre Bourdieu’s thinking “a set of schemas or dispositions, acquired through the process of socialization.”<sup>24</sup> In the minds of colonizers, the inferior habitus of the colonized was reflected in the inferiority of their clothing, their cuisine, their social and work ethics, and even their language. The first task of the colonizing agents was to determine how to deal with these differences: internal colonial policy dismantled cultural barriers to create a unified culture across a diverse array of peoples; external administrations sustained colonizer-colonized distinctions by encouraging the colonized to maintain their traditional institutions; and peripheral colonial agents strengthened walls of division while preaching colonizer-colonized integration.

To this point we have focused attention on decisions made by the colonizers, and devoted little attention to the colonized. This unfortunately reflects the reality of the colonial situation: colonizers made decisions regarding colonial administrations with little, if any, direct input from the colonized people, whose most important contribution came in their responses to these decisions. Responses by the colonized were complex and are worthy of independent inquiry. Many accepted their assimilation as inevitable and, in the words of Franz Fanon, “married white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.”<sup>25</sup> Others challenged the subjugation of their homeland with nationalist rhetoric and physical rebellion. Both reactions gripped the population simultaneously, prompting the people to reconsider their identity in larger national terms. Colonizers exploited the diversity of responses to their rule that divided and weakened the colonized people’s social fabric and thus their ability to formulate a unified challenge to colonial rule. The potential sway that these factions held over the noncommitted both encouraged and discouraged policy decisions that colonial administrators made.

## JAPANESE EXPANSION AND ASSIMILATION

Japanese historiography generally dates Japan’s baptism into colonial expansion with its 1895 acquisition of Taiwan, as part of Japan’s peace settlement

to conclude the Sino-Japanese War. Defining Japan as a latecomer to colonial expansion strengthens images of Tokugawa-era “isolation” (*sakoku*) and the Meiji rise to power in 1868 as a “restoration” (*ishin*). The Tokugawa era (1603–1868) is most often depicted as a regime that enforced a strict isolation policy to protect the islands from a global community embarking on colonial expansion. It would follow that Japan at this time would have little interest in expanding its borders. Thus, Japanese expansion is generally seen as a late Meiji initiative, one that the government embarked upon after it had advanced its domestic nationalizing agenda. This interpretation also draws from the narrow vision of “colonized” discussed above.

Arano Yasunori and Ronald Toby independently have challenged the image of an isolated Tokugawa Japan. They argue, first, that the Tokugawa *bakufu* never initiated an “isolation policy” (*sakoku seisaku*), but actively participated in a rather extensive network of foreign trade and diplomacy.<sup>26</sup> On a number of occasions the Tokugawa, or individual domains, reached beyond its internal control to exert its influence on peripheral territories, namely northern Ryukyu and Ezo.<sup>27</sup> The Tokugawa never incorporated these territories as formal colonies; they better served its interests as sovereign territories, even if but as a fiction. In this sense the Tokugawa administration is more accurately rendered as a cautious and xenophobic polity that often demonstrated knowledge of colonial expansion, and occasionally interest in foreign intervention, to protect its local interests. Meiji Japan continued this process by officially incorporating these peripheral territories into Japan proper.

That Meiji Japan (1868–1912) may have continued Tokugawa practices challenges the idea of the 1868 “coup” as a “restoration” of ancient practices. Some have argued this process as a revolutionary advancement.<sup>28</sup> At the domestic level it adopted institutions built upon a new social, political, and economic foundation to forge within its internal subjects a sense of membership in a new (Japanese) ethos.<sup>29</sup> At the diplomatic level it immediately sought to expand Japan’s borders to strengthen its security. The imperial institution served as the Meiji Restoration’s symbolic center; colonial expansion—both internal and peripheral—propelled this process. By the end of this period Japan had completed the initial phase of this process, and was prepared to embark on further expansion.<sup>30</sup> The majority of its children had been enrolled in schools; its military had defeated two formidable enemies; and it had surrounded the archipelago with peripheral acquisitions now firmly under its control—Okinawa and Taiwan to the south and Korea,

Hokkaido and southern Karafuto (Sakhalin). Its greatest threats lay beyond these annexed territories, threats that trained a vigilant eye upon Japan lest it encroach upon their Asian interests. Japanese leaders confirmed assimilation as their colonial administrative policy soon after Japan annexed Taiwan in 1895. However, Japan had been practicing various forms of assimilation since the Tokugawa *bakufu* briefly took control of Ezo in the late eighteenth century. It practiced a more intrusive form of internal assimilation from the start of the Meiji period by spreading a unified Japanese dialect and culture to the corners of the Japanese archipelago. Meiji officials adapted these practices to integrate the peoples of the Ryukyu Islands and Ezo, but with less intensity.

Korean scholars, who have long argued Japanese expansion as a major platform of Japan's Meiji Restoration, will welcome this interpretation.<sup>31</sup> The Meiji government began showing an aggressive posture toward Korea soon after its inception. In 1875–76, Japan mimicked the United States' "gunboat diplomacy" to force the Korean government to sign the Kanghwa Treaty, the first of a series of treaties that over the next few decades increasingly compromised Korea's sovereignty. Koreans who participated in the 1881 "gentry-officials touring group" (*sinsa yuramdan*) recognized Japan's efforts in Okinawa and Hokkaido as colonial expansion and raised the concern that Japanese expansionists might eventually turn to Korea.<sup>32</sup> Japanese continued to press an important ambition of the Kanghwa Treaty—freeing Korea from Chinese influence by "protecting" Korean independence. Fukuzawa Yukichi, who dubbed Japan Korea's "teacher of civilization" (*bunmei no kyōshi*), explained that as Korea's doctor, Japan must inquire over every aspect of the patient's life and prescribe the proper medicine to strengthen Korea's independence.<sup>33</sup> Ōi Kentarō, of Japan's Liberal Party (*jiyūtō*), on trial for trying to raise funds and enlist men to aid Kim Okkyun's failed 1884 Kapsin coup ("Osaka incident" [*Osaka jiken*]), summarized Japan's responsibility to maintain Korean independence through pan-Asianism that the Liberal Party pushed: it must preserve Korea's "national independence" at the expense of its "state independence," which was a concern "to the whole Orient."<sup>34</sup>

Reform efforts initiated by different parties in Korea from the 1880s showed promise until squelched by either the Korean government or foreign elements. From the early 1880s the Korean government negotiated treaties with several Western governments, sponsored overseas study tours, and dispatched Koreans abroad for overseas studies. These efforts were interrupted by a Chinese initiative to reestablish its traditional ties with Korea

under a modern guise. Kim and Kim write that the Chinese Resident, Yüan Shih-k'ai, arrived in 1885 to assume a role that more accurately resembled a "Chinese viceroy." His presence stifled efforts to, in Young Ick Lew's words, "put the 'hermit kingdom' on the road to full-fledged membership in the family of nations while enriching and strengthening the country sufficiently to maintain her independence."<sup>35</sup> More recently, Kirk W. Larsen, considering the Chinese role in connecting Korea to modern institutions, has argued their efforts in Korea at this time to have been "more ambiguous and complex" than previously acknowledged.<sup>36</sup>

China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War encouraged a second series of modernizing efforts by reform groups and the central government. Foreign observers gave Korea mixed appraisals for its advances. The journalist Angus Hamilton, noting Seoul's infrastructural improvements, wrote in 1904 "the old order is given way to the new. So quickly has the population learned to appreciate the results of foreign intercourse that, in a few more years, it will be difficult to find in Seoul any remaining link with the capital of yore."<sup>37</sup> That same year, however, U.S. representative Horace Allen wrote to William Rockhill, President Theodore Roosevelt's "unofficial East Asian advisor," as follows: "These people . . . cannot govern themselves. They must have an over-lord as they have had for all time. When it was not China, it was Russia or Japan, and as soon as they [come] out from one they make such an awful mess of things as to oblige someone else to take charge of them. . . . Let Japan have Korea outright."<sup>38</sup> The more important question thus became not whether Korea could reform, but whether the international community would recognize its efforts to do so. Comments from foreign observers do not, of course, tell us the complete story of Korea's pre-annexation conditions. However, their impressions cannot be ignored given the considerable influence that global powers exercised over Japan at this time. When Japan, citing "Korea [as] the source of all dangers in the Extreme East,"<sup>39</sup> moved to annex the peninsula it encountered few foreign voices of dissent.

Scholars of late Chosŏn Korea history remain equally undecided in their evaluation of this period. A number of studies focus on the weaknesses in Korea's reform efforts. James B. Palais, whose research focuses on the contribution of the Taewŏngun (1866–73), maintains that Korea's "traditional system was incapable of allowing a major shift . . . toward strong central and monarchical leadership."<sup>40</sup> Martina Deuchler, examining reform efforts following the 1876 Kanghwa Treaty that Japan forced upon Korea, criticizes the reformers' reluctance to break from the traditional Confucian system.<sup>41</sup>

Shin Yong-ha and Vipin Chandra, examining the Independence Club reform movement (1896–98), both argue that the club's success required revolutionary action. Chandra suggests that the movement's leaders were ill equipped to succeed at such an effort.<sup>42</sup> Yi T'aejin, however, focuses on the regime's strengths in portraying Kojong as a capable monarch whose efforts to reform Korean institutions were blocked by foreign intervention, first by the Chinese and later by the Japanese. Yi claims that Korea's capacity to modernize, rather than its stagnation, motivated Japan's efforts to annex the peninsula.<sup>43</sup>

This study stops short of arguing that Meiji Japan followed a blueprint to absorb the Korean Peninsula. Yet, Japanese were well aware of the important role that colonial expansion occupied in their quest to develop a "rich country strong military" (*fukukoku kyōhei*).<sup>44</sup> Korea's location was to Japan both strategically critical and tantalizingly convenient. This in and of itself does not justify Japan's annexation of the peninsula. However, the foreign threats felt by both Korea and Japan, the support that Japan received from other foreign powers for its actions in Korea (mainly to protect their own Asian interests), and the strategically critical location of the Korean Peninsula completed an equation that made Japan's annexation of Korea the most predictable scenario.

Japanese discussion on assimilation, often incorrectly associated with Japan's wartime imperialization (*kōminka*) policies, preceded Korean annexation. Japanese debated the policy's merits and demerits in 1895 after Taiwan was absorbed into the empire; discussion in 1910 considered the pace and direction to which the colonial administration would push Korean assimilation. Japan's "uniqueness" as a colonial power was in its attempts to assimilate an ethnically similar people amid the unbridled land grabbing that characterized the period that Eric Hobsbawm famously dubbed the "Age of Empire" (1875–1914).<sup>45</sup> Yet, Japanese were inspired by British, Prussian, and French efforts in their peripheral territories, rather than these states' efforts in their external possessions. A survey of Meiji-era discourse on assimilation policy reveals Japan's views of "colonized" to consist of a rather broad set of examples, with the English formation of the United Kingdom, the French annexation of Algeria, and the Prussian incorporation of Alsace and Lorraine serving as the most popular examples. The Japanese recognized assimilation to be the governing policy in territories such as Scotland and Wales, territories generally not treated in the contemporary literature as "colonies." They revised pre-annexation images that saw Koreans as foreign

to argue that the similarities shared by the two peoples made assimilation more appropriate in Korea than in other European situations.<sup>46</sup> Such discussions were required to address the more difficult question of whether assimilation was indeed the most appropriate policy for the Korean situation. Japanese assumed that their culture was superior, but did this justify their security needs requiring Koreans to undergo such drastic cultural revision? Did viable alternatives exist to total assimilation?

The components of Japan's administration in Korea have received substantial consideration in colonial historiography.<sup>47</sup> Yet, little research has been conducted to analyze and evaluate Japanese assimilation as a policy in Korea. This study seeks to fill this gap in a number of ways. It first considers the question of assimilation's place in modern colonial history by examining European and American examples.<sup>48</sup> The Japanese used these examples as models, as well as to legitimize their own decision to adopt this policy. They also used these examples as benchmarks to measure their own success. Considering other assimilation examples provides criteria by which we can evaluate Japan's application of this policy. By defining Japanese colonialism in global terms we can see this history as a complex instance of multiple narratives, rather than the simple narrative of Japanese aggressors and Korean victims.<sup>49</sup>

This study also traces the process of Japan choosing assimilation as its colonial policy, and the lessons it learned from its earlier acquisitions.<sup>50</sup> The precarious position that Japan held in the global community through much of its prewar history greatly influenced its Korean policy. Japan expanded with one aggressive eye fixed on the desired territory, but another cautious eye focused on Western reactions.<sup>51</sup> But Japan was a rather experienced colonizer by the time it prepared to annex Korea. The lessons it learned from its previous colonial experiments in internal and peripheral settings potentially influenced its policy decisions in Korea and thus are worth reviewing.

A third dimension of this study traces policy evolution in Korea—how Japan's assimilation policy developed over its thirty-six-year occupation of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>52</sup> Japanese envisioned their policy as a gradual process. They argued that Koreans would require decades, and possibly as long as a century, of guidance before they could shed their traditional culture to absorb Japanese culture. This attitude continued into the 1930s, when the urgency of the wartime situation on the Asian continent forced the government-general to radically accelerate this process. Throughout the duration, the Japanese government used education and the media to instruct Koreans on their new status as Japanese subjects. Beyond this rhetoric,

Japan's most important task was to dismantle the walls that separated colonized from colonizer to encourage Japanese to accept Koreans as their fellow imperial subjects.

Success here required that both peoples shed the disparaging images they traditionally held toward each other. These images, evident during Japan's Tokugawa era, intensified in concert with Japan's intrusion upon Korean sovereignty.<sup>53</sup> Annexation forced Japanese to soften these images to accommodate their assimilation rhetoric. The images remained negative, but Japanese interjected the hope that with good (Japanese) administration, the people could be guided to a higher level of civilization. They saw Koreans as in need of help, but not helpless. Could the Japanese imagine the Korean people one day assuming a partnership role in Japan's imagined Asian community? Or did they believe the Koreans would always remain the inferior people? Many Korean supporters of Japanese policy assumed the former to be the goal of assimilation. Japanese rhetoric suggested as much. But its policy suggested the latter. Japan's success depended on whether it could square its rhetorical goals with its policy decisions.

The important critics of Japanese assimilation were the Korean people. Until recently, most research from the Korean perspective has trumpeted their heroic and determined resistance to Japan's harsh colonial administration. Korean patriotic resistance was noble; it is also a well-documented component of this history. It does not, however, add to our understanding of Korean views of assimilation beyond the predictable fact that many Koreans vehemently opposed this policy. Groups that believed Koreans unprepared to accept national sovereignty—Japan's Korean supporters and Koreans who favored gradual self-strengthening reforms—at this time provided more insightful critiques of Japanese ambitions in their discussions on Korea's future. Many of these Koreans believed that Japan's modernizing experiences could prove useful.<sup>54</sup> The question that separated them was Korean identity: would their learning from Japan assist in their self-strengthening as Koreans or their integration as assimilated Japanese? Both groups criticized Japanese arrogance toward Koreans. They agreed that no advancement could be made unless Japanese recognized Koreans as their equals. Japan's most ardent Korean supporters advised the Japanese to offer a policy that matched Japan's assimilation rhetoric. Statements by Koreans such as Cho Pyöngsang argued that Japan had made progress, and suggested their confidence that this progress would continue. Our inquiry examines Japanese assimilation policy in a search for evidence that justifies their confidence.

## WESTERN ASSIMILATION PRACTICES

THE FOUR DECADES LEADING UP TO WORLD WAR I REPRESENT A NEW FORM of colonial expansion that saw a small number of global powers partition and claim “most of the world outside Europe and the Americas.” Eric Hobsbawm calls this partition

the most spectacular expression of that growing division of the globe into the strong and the weak, the “advanced” and the “backward.” . . . It was also strikingly new. Between 1876 and 1915 about one-quarter of the globe’s land surface was distributed or redistributed as colonies among a half-dozen states. Britain increased its territories by some 4 million square miles, France by some 3.5 millions, Germany acquired more than 1 million, Belgium and Italy just under 1 million each. The USA acquired some 100,000. . . . Japan something like the same amount.<sup>1</sup>

Japanese participants on the Iwakura Mission that left Japan in late 1871 on a world tour were well aware of the extent of European expansion at the time. The tour’s official historian, Kume Kunitake, noted in his introduction to Great Britain that the British Empire, at 8.7 million square miles, was “seventy-five or six times bigger than Japan,” and that it subjugated 243 million people.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the French Empire at the time totaled only 350,000 square miles and 3.6 million people.<sup>3</sup> By the time Japan acquired Taiwan in 1895, the British Empire would assume control over 23 percent of the earth’s land surface, an empire that dwarfed its French rival, which claimed but 9.3 percent.<sup>4</sup>

This sudden increase in colonial expansion is directly related to the

increase in nation-building activity at the time. Hobsbawm calculates that over this period, the number of heads of state who considered themselves to be “emperors” peaked, as well.<sup>5</sup> This reflects the rather high degree of internal colonial expansion that encouraged the (primarily) external expansion of this period. It is rather difficult to imagine the emergence of an “Age of Empire” of this proportion without the emergence of new colonial powers. Rival states, primarily Germany but also the United States, Italy, Belgium, and Japan, encouraged the traditional expansion states (particularly England and France) to expand their empires. Territorial acquisition came to be seen, in Friedrich List’s words, as a “means of protecting . . . markets and sources of raw materials from possible retaliation by foreign competitors.”<sup>6</sup> Expansion also strengthened global status. French expansion, as Joseph Chailley-Bert explained at the 1908 North African Congress, was an “event or effort through which [France] should later seek to recover [its] position as a first-class power” following defeat to Prussia in 1871.<sup>7</sup>

Reactions by the Japanese and the Korean governments to these developments were very different: Japan joined the colonial expansion bandwagon while Korea attempted to preserve its sovereignty though diplomatic maneuvering. The Korean Peninsula, like Siam, was caught between competing states—Russia, China, and Japan—and attempted to remain sovereign by exploiting the competition. This no longer remained a viable option after Japan defeated China and Russia in war; soon after, Korea succumbed to Japanese expansion. Japan’s interest in expansion in general, and the Korean Peninsula in particular, was greatly encouraged by the expansion of this period. The nascent Meiji state quickly learned that its fundamental goal—to create a rich state and a strong military—depended on its demonstrating the capacity to extend its influence internally, but also peripherally and (eventually) externally.

## ASSIMILATION AS A COLONIAL POLICY

The Iwakura Mission represents one of the most important fact-finding endeavors undertaken by the Meiji government. This mission failed in its most urgent ambition—to convince the Western powers to rescind the unequal treaties imposed upon the previous Tokugawa regime (1603–1868). It succeeded, however, in completing an equally important pledge: to “busily, without rest, brave the cold and hot to investigate the near and far.”<sup>8</sup> The mission’s agenda did not specifically list Western expansion as a point to be

investigated. However, it would be inconceivable for the participants not to have entertained this issue given its paramount importance at the time. Indeed, the records kept by Kume Kunitake suggest this to be the case.

En route, the mission's participants were exposed to colonialism from a number of dimensions. They directly witnessed internal colonialism as they passed through Germany, France, and Italy, and peripheral expansion when they visited Wales and Scotland. Their discussions with government officials and tours of government institutions also reminded participants of the institution's importance and clearly influenced their thinking. The travelers would identify closely with the efforts being made to create nation-states in Europe, particularly in Germany. Indeed, through Kume's official tour history we learn that the majority of the participants' time abroad was spent examining the components of nation building. Their realization of the magnitude of the task that Japan faced internally convinced participants of the need to limit their peripheral colonial activities, at least until the more pressing internal (domain integration) and relatively safer peripheral (Ryukyu and Ezo) expansion realized success.

The Japanese mission encountered peripheral colonialism soon after it crossed the Pacific Ocean, in the United States. The country, having concluded a bloody civil war just six years earlier, was busily engaged in efforts to reconstruct the union. One part of this process included assimilating recently emancipated blacks and Native Americans into mainstream American society. The mission then crossed the Atlantic Ocean, where it was exposed to assimilation at different levels of advancement: from the more developed efforts by the English to amalgamate the Welsh, Scots, and Irish, to the embryonic German ambition to incorporate the peoples of its newly annexed territories—Alsace and Lorraine. Upon arriving in France the Japanese travelers witnessed the inauguration of the French government's intense campaign to integrate its southern provinces, and the revision of its Algerian administrative policies to secure direct bureaucratic (rather than military) control over this colony. Japanese officials writing on colonial policy when Japan acquired Taiwan and Korea exploited all of these examples in their discussions regarding the administrative policy their country should adopt in its expanding empire.

By the end of the nineteenth century, assimilation as a theoretical construct for colonial policy had come to be associated with French colonial policy. Direct rule rhetoric promised its recipients benefits reserved for those colonized as internal citizens, yet in practice the policy treated these peoples

as marginalized subjects. Indirect rule, favored by the English, advanced separate colonized-colonizer existences, and its practitioners generally governed their charges in this spirit. Contrary to this distinction, close examination of these colonial histories reveals that while the French philosophized on assimilation and invited a small, but diverse, number of colonized to their parliament, their assimilation practices hardly approached the ambitious inclusive goals trumpeted by Enlightenment thinkers. The English, on the other hand, practiced indirect rule in most of their colonies but also introduced assimilation practices in others. While the French trumpeted assimilation as a universal right to all peoples, the English quietly introduced the practice in a more practical way, as one applicable to a selection of its peripheral possessions. While the French demanded cultural rebirth as a prerequisite to assimilation, the English incorporated assimilated peoples as political subjects, without requiring (but occasionally prodding) them to adopt English culture.

Forms of assimilation could be found as early as the colonial policies of the Roman Empire, which encouraged the absorption of peoples throughout the empire as citizens. The policy gained philosophical support from Age of Reason thinkers such as Claude Adrien Helvétius, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, who preached the universality of human reason. Helvétius, for example, saw education as a “possible means of correcting discrepancies between classes and other social classes.” Supporters of the policy were encouraged by ideas such as Jean-le-Rond D’Alembert’s “universal enlightenment,” Jean Marie de Condorcet’s theory of the perfectibility of humankind, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s belief that people “who may be unequal in strength or intelligence, become every one equal by convention and legal right.”<sup>9</sup> This idea of universal affinity manifested in French views on citizenship—a right (rather than a privilege) that was open to all human beings provided they demonstrate their capacity to perform three basic requirements: an ability to speak the French language, a desire to faithfully follow a “civilized” religion, and a willingness to drop their barbarous customs and mannerisms.

The French government’s advancement of assimilation was hardly consistent. It embraced the idea in its 1791 French Constitution, which declared its colonies to be an “integral part of the Republic and subject to the same constitutional law.” However, subsequent constitutions rejected and re-embraced it over the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> At the turn of this century, the policy faced a severe challenge by promoters of social Darwinist thought. In Paris, Gustave Le Bon, a man described by Raymond Betts as “one of the

first and most ardent opponents of the Enlightenment idea of human equality,” attacked the idea with vigor. In his *Les Lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (The Laws of the Psychology and Evolution of Peoples), Le Bon advanced a scientific approach that classified members of the human race into four racial categories: primitive races, inferior races, intermediate races, and superior races. The “mental gap” that separated these groups, he argued, rendered cross-group integration impossible. Educating an inferior people in the hope of changing their national habits would bear feeble results. This assimilation was “one of the most harmful illusions that the theorists of pure reason have ever engendered.”<sup>11</sup> These racist ideas were supported by biological experimental frameworks that sought to scientifically prove racial division.<sup>12</sup>

Those out in the colonial field voiced similar criticisms. Joseph Gallieni, who served in both Tonkin and Madagascar, warned of the dangers wrought by exporting European ideas to colonial lands: “Nothing is more damaging . . . in colonial affairs than preconceived formulas, imported principles, which based most often on European ideas, do not apply to the environments, situations, or occasions for which one has wanted to adopt them.”<sup>13</sup>

The French declaration that all peoples regardless of race could become French no doubt invited these racist challenges and criticism. Yet, French success at assimilating colonized peoples was pitifully poor. First, the French limited the implementation of the policy to but a selection of the colony’s urban centers. In Senegal, for example, they designated St. Louis, Goree, Rufisque, and Dakar as *communes* whose residents were eligible for citizenship. Here the colonizers divided the Senegalan people into native “subjects” and native “citizens.” To advance to native citizenship the Senegalese had to serve in a French public or private office for a minimum of ten years, be literate in French, possess a means of existence, and be of good character (i.e., non-Muslim).<sup>14</sup> Even still, the French qualified their status as “native,” rather than “French,” citizen. In Vietnam, the French bestowed French citizenship on a small minority of the native population.<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, this honor did not protect the recipients from French harassment.

Even in Algeria, the territory often cited as the exemplar of French assimilation policy, stringent conditions for inclusion severely limited the number of indigenous people who actually gained French citizenship.<sup>16</sup> After World War I, the French government enacted legislation to increase the number of people assimilated, particularly to reward those who contributed to France’s war effort as either a soldier or a laborer. This provoked counter efforts to

block its implementation by French expatriates and European residents, who rejected efforts made by the colonized to meet French standards of civilization. Rather than the indigenous Algerian, it was the European immigrant from the former French territories of Alsace and Lorraine, and from Malta and Italy, that benefited from French assimilation policy. This affected an ethnic hierarchy that placed the French at the top; the Jews, Arabs, and Berbers at the bottom; and other European migrants in between.<sup>17</sup>

The most telling example of the discrepancy between French rhetoric and practice in Algeria was in the colonizer's dealings with the *Jeunes Algériens* (Young Algerians), a group that made efforts to move linguistically, culturally, and politically toward France. The government-general responded by charging the group with "anti-French and nationalist" behavior.<sup>18</sup> The list of reform demands that this group presented to the colonial government in June 1912, when faced with military conscription, demonstrates the extent of French discrimination toward Algerians: abolishment of the *code de l'indigénat*, equality in taxes and public expenditure, representation in Algerian local assemblies, representation of Muslims in the French government, and automatic French citizenship for each conscript who returned with a good record.

The Algerian who favored assimilation found the *code de l'indigénat* particularly disturbing, as it codified the indigenous people's inferior status in the colony. Instituted by the French Parliament in the early 1870s, soon after French bureaucratic rule replaced military rule, the code listed thirty-three infractions of humiliation that curtailed Algerian, but not French, activity: it prohibited them from traveling without a permit, speaking disrespectfully to a French official, begging outside their *commune*, or protesting *corvée* duty. Penalties for violations of this code were set at a maximum prison sentence of five days and a maximum fine of fifteen francs.<sup>19</sup>

Efforts by the French government to strengthen its assimilation policy, and by the expatriate to weaken it, were most evident when in February 1919 the parliament attempted to pass the Jonnart Laws designed to allow Algerians easier access to French citizenship. Named after Charles Jonnart, the governor general who initiated the effort, the legislation initially aimed to provide Algerians with greater representation and voting rights even if they retained their religious beliefs. Predictably, European residents believed the reforms to be excessive while the Muslim population argued their shortcomings. The French retaining the religious conversion requirement in the legislation's final draft limited the number of Algerians who benefited from