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JIHAD OR MCWORLD? AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE “COLONIAL PERIOD” IN KOREA

Peter Duus (Stanford University)

On a visit to Japan during the summer of the World Cup two years ago I was reminded what a schizophrenic world we live in. On the one hand, it is a world marked by the strident assertion of national and local identities, some as old as Moses, others as new as red-shirted Koreans and blue-shirted Japanese cheering their soccer teams with a fervor usually reserved for rock concerts. On other hand, it is also a world that continues to globalize at an accelerating pace — with people and products, capital and culture, drugs and diseases (and soccer players) moving across national borders as they never have before. Everyone seems to be in everyone else’s backyard — or soccer pitch. Some fear (and some are delighted) that this will erode the sovereign claims of the nation state and undermine its power to control what occurs within its boundaries.

Several years ago Benjamin Barber predicted two possible futures for this schizophrenic world: “McWorld” vs. “Jihad.” This flippant summary has a more poignant ring now than when he made it. By “Jihad” (not accidentally a term with an anti-Islamic overtones) he meant a future marked by the “retribalization of large swaths of mankind by war and bloodshed ... in which culture is pitted against culture, people against people, tribe against tribe.” By “McWorld” (not accidentally a term with anti-capitalist overtones) he meant a future marked by a surge of economic and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity in all cultures and that press all nations into “one commercially homogeneous global network.” In short, Barber predicted a world that was either coming together or falling apart, and he feared that

neither outcome (“Jihad” or “McWorld”) boded well for the survival of democracy.

As a historian I am uncomfortable with the radical oversimplifications beloved of political theorists like Barber; and I am not quite so pessimistic that either globalization or ethnic/national parochialism are incompatible with democratic institutions. Nor do I agree with Barber that the schizophrenic nature of our world emerged suddenly in the wake of the Cold War. In fact, it seems to me that the origin of “Jihad vs. McWorld” is not to be found in the 1990s or even in the 1890s but in the 1790s when the technological changes associated with industrialization began to spread across the globe. This not only accelerated the development of a “commercially homogeneous global network,” it also made possible the emergence of the integrated nation state as a new form of political organization. What makes our present world unique is simply the heightened pace and scale of globalization.

The general question I would like to address today is: how should the historian approach this schizophrenic world? How should he interpret it? Should he write history that focuses on (and perhaps celebrates) the struggle for nationhood, the development of national society, or the creation of national identity? In other words, should he throw his support behind other people’s jihads? Or should he try, in Prasenjit Duara’s arresting phrase, to “rescue history from the nation”? Should he write history that resists the “retribalization of mankind”? Should he look at human experience not from the vantage point of a national narrative but from

other perspectives, whether local, transnational or global?

These questions are particularly vexing for those of us, including myself, who study someone else's history. They are particularly relevant to my theme today: how we might think about new ways of narrating the relationships between Korea and Japan during the "colonial period." (I will put the phrase in quotation marks since other prefer to call it "the period of Japanese occupation.") In my view, the writing of the history of the "colonial period" can be seen as the historiographical manifestation of a local clash between "Jihad" and "McWorld" — between the forces of parochialization and globalization so pervasive today.

In the United States historians began writing about the "colonial period" by emphasizing the narrative of the "Jihad" — the story of the struggle for nationhood. When I began to read the English language secondary literature on modern Korean history many years ago, I was often struck (and frustrated) by two things. First, most narratives raced over the period from 1905 to 1945 almost as if anxious to avoid it. I recently did a quick check on eight general English-language histories of Korea, from a 1969 English language translation of Hatada Takashi's *A History of Korea* to Bruce Cumings' *Korea's Place in the Sun* published in 1997. In nearly every case, the narrative of the "colonial period" was brusque, covered in far fewer pages than the periods that preceded or followed. In a sense American historians at first treated the period as a "blank space" in the national narrative, a rupture or a distortion in the "natural development" of the Korean nation, when Korean history no longer belonged to the Koreans alone.

Second, narratives of the "colonial period" were, in nearly all cases, written as "victims' history." They offered a history of the suffering, oppression and resistance of the Korean people. The emphasis was placed on the Japanese colonial regime's ruthless authoritarianism,

the economic exploitation of ordinary Koreans by Japanese capitalists and bureaucrats alike, the systematic attempts to erase Korean culture in the name of assimilation, and the consequent emergence of political resistance to Japanese rule. Indeed, resistance movements, from the struggles of the righteous armies (*uibyeong*) under the protectorate to the Communist guerilla movements of the 1930s and 1940s, usually got the lion's share of coverage. It was almost as though the only way to retrieve this moment of rupture in the history of the "Korean nation" was to focus on a heroic patriotic narrative that portrayed the Korean people in a constant struggle against alien rule. One would not know from reading these general histories that most Koreans went to work, farmed their fields, paid their taxes, obeyed the laws, and got on with their lives in other undramatic ways during the "colonial period."

Many of you are probably thinking, "Well, of course, that's how the history of the colonial period in Korea was written. That's how it should be written. After all, the country was under the oppressive control of outsiders." But to accept only this kind of narrative, it seems to me, is not only to resist the possibility of "rescuing history from the nation" but also to acknowledge the rhetoric of the Jihad as "common sense." It was natural for the first historians who wrote about the "colonial period" to do so since many were either Korean expatriates or Korean Americans. But the nationalist narrative ignores the reality that, like it or not, imperialist expansion has been one of the principal ways in which globalization manifested itself in the 19th and early 20th centuries and that understanding colonial history requires more than just writing a story of suffering and resistance.

Whether it was the enterprise of a particular nation — Great Britain, Belgium or Japan or whether it took the form of "unequal treaties," spheres of influence, or formal colonial regimes, imperialism was a vehicle for the spread of the cultural, economic and ecological changes

that we associate with globalization. It was the vehicle for the transfer of new ideas and values, new technologies and institutions to societies under imperialist or colonial control. In short, imperialism was a force that made mankind more homogeneous than ever before, especially in terms of material culture. It is difficult to imagine that “McWorld” would have arrived as soon as it without the imperialist interlude. To ignore this side of the colonial experience is to accept a diminished understanding of how and why our schizophrenic world has emerged today.

It is easy to criticize old historical paradigms; it is difficult to suggest new ones. If we are to write history in a transnational or even supranational mode, if we adopt the rhetoric of McWorld, if we try to understand what happens across the globe as well as what happen in just one corner of it, what should we do? How do we write a narrative of the 1905-1945 period in Korea that escapes the rhetoric of the Jihad — a Jihad not even our own? How do we write a history that is neither a simple celebration of anti-Japanese resistance nor a reproduction of colonial discourse nor an apologia for Japanese abuses of power? How do we write a history of the period that treats it not as “abnormal” or “aberration” or “rupture” or “blank” but as a period integral to the development of Korean society today, both in the North and South? And finally how do we write a history that fits the colonial experience (both of Japanese and Koreans) into global as well as local or regional history?

Since the nation state has traditionally been the unit of study for most professional historians, these are challenging questions, but American historians studying imperialism and colonialism are trying to address them. This is no less true in the fields of modern Korean and Japanese history, where new historical paradigms are taking shape, and where new narratives of the “colonial period” are emerging. Since the early 1990s a younger cohort of American scholars writing on Korea has begun

to produce a narrative that does not deny the harshness of the colonial regime but explores the complex interactions between “colonizer” and “colonized” in the context of an imperialism that was as much a catalyst for change as a mechanism for oppression.

During the rest of talk I would like to discuss several new ways of looking the history of the “colonial period.”

1. We need to recognize that much change during the colonial period resulted from the autonomous logic of technological modernization rather from Japanese initiative or Korean initiative per se.

As many in the new cohort of historians have pointed out, the commitment of the Japanese colonial regime in Korea to economic and technological development set it apart from many European colonial regimes. It laid down railway lines, built new roads, improved port and harbor facilities, created stable money and credit systems, strung telegraph and telephone lines, established a radio network, and so forth. Comparatively speaking, the Japanese invested much more in their colonial territories than the European appear to have, and by the late 1930s the industrialization of Korea (as well as Taiwan and Manchukuo) had reached levels that find no parallel in French Indo-China, the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya or the American Philippines.

An earlier cohort of American historians debated whether Japanese colonial developmental policies were devised for the benefit of the Japanese or the Koreans and/or whether colonial economic development really enhanced the living standards or well being of the Koreans. This debate, of course, was sparked by the arguments of postwar Japanese bureaucrats and former colonial officials who claimed that the peninsula prospered under their rule. It was a debate in which one side focused on how the rewards of economic development were

distributed, which is very difficult to estimate, and the other side focused on how much the economy's productive power increased, which was measurable and palpable. As a result the debaters talked past one another, and the debate yielded more heat than light.

More important, the debate sidestepped the impact of new industrial technologies and organizational structures on Korean society. For example, one of the most important socio-economic events during the “colonial period” was the building of a railroad network. We know that the Japanese built railroads with strategic and economic goals in mind, but railroads have certain consequences wherever they are built and for whatever reasons. A railroad network reorganizes the national marketplace; it generates new kinds of economic unevenness, bringing prosperity to some regions, relative decline to others; it creates new patterns of urban migration of settlement, reshaping some towns into cities; and it creates a demand for new skills and occupations as well as a new structure of employment opportunities. Equally important, the introduction of the railroad as primary mode of transportation has important cultural consequences, creating a new consciousness of time and distance, overturning the received concepts of cognitive geography. Perhaps most ironically of all, even when built by a colonial regime, a railroad network contributes to the creation of a new sense of national identity, helping to create a homogeneous sense of space — a unified national space — that is so central of the construction of an “imagined community.” In any case, we need to recognize that some socio-economic change occurred during the “colonial period” not because of the Japanese presence, or in spite of it, but because economic development, especially industrialization, including the building of railroads, dictates certain kinds of change.

In a recent volume of essays on “colonial modernity” edited by Michael Robinson and Gi-wook Shin, several authors have begun to probe this issue. Robinson, for

example, argues that even though the Japanese colonial authorities intended to use radio as an instrument of assimilation broadcasting played an important role in preserving (and even popularizing) certain forms of traditional musical forms, in a sense reinforcing a Korean sense of identity. Even more to the point, in an essay on the colonial working class, Soon-Won Park characterizes industrial growth during the “colonial period” as a “powerful historical earthquake” that shook peasant villagers loose from their communities by offering new form of urban employment. Although she recognizes that Korean workers were subject to unequal wages, responsibilities and treatment, she also emphasizes that expansion of a Korean industrial labor force was accompanied by a widening market for consumer goods, new patterns of internal migration, rising levels of occupational skills, as well as opportunities for upward socio-economic mobility.

Such observations may seem obvious but they were filtered out of a nationalist narrative that embraced the “victims’ history” approach. Without denying that many Koreans suffered under Japan colonial rule, there is no reason why we should not explore more fully how their society was changed fundamentally by the logic of industrialization and economic modernization even as they were suffering.

2. We need to recognize that individual Koreans experienced the colonial period in different ways depending on their occupation, class, location or gender.

The new cohort of American historians has been particularly attentive to the fact not all Koreans experienced the “colonial period” in the same way. Much has been written about “colonial subjectivity” but these historians recognize that subjectivity is heavily influenced by the individual subject’s position in society. Just because outsiders take over the administration of a

society does not mean that the pre-existing social structure collapses or that old social divisions disappear.

This was no less true in the case of Korea than in other colonial societies. As Gi-wook Shin and Michael Robinson observe, “Colonial modernity meant loss of vested interest for some groups, but it provided social mobility for others.” The colonial regime in Korea had a very different impact on the landlord and the tenant, on the villager in the north and the rice merchant in the south, on the owner of the cotton mill and the factory worker tending its spindles, or the male nationalist and the female activist.

Those who study social conflict in colonial Korea have rediscovered class and gender differences as important analytical categories. They have concluded that tensions within Korean colonial society are often difficult to link solely, or perhaps even partially, to the Japanese presence. As Kenneth Wells has recently pointed out, “It is important to remember to realize that the Koreans in the 1920s and 1930s did not relate everything to nationalist projects, as if there were no other reference points in their lives than the fact of Japanese rule.” His own study of the Korean women’s movement, for example, depicts the deep tensions between early feminists who tried to put “women’s rights” on the political agenda and conservative male nationalists who thought the issue trivial or marginal. These differences were embedded in the traditional gender system, and it can be plausibly argued that they would have arisen whether the Japanese were in control of the country or not.

Growing tension between landlords and tenants was probably the most dramatic instance of social conflict during the “colonial period” but one can raise the question of whether it was the creation of the Japanese or the product of pre-existing conditions. Although the colonial authorities regulated and institutionalized the landlord system through land surveys and legal changes, they did not invent it. As many historians have pointed out, they

sought the landlords as allies in establishing order and control in the countryside, just as the Meiji leadership had at home, and conversely, in strengthening the ownership rights of the landlords, the colonial regime provided no mechanisms for the tenants to adjudicate their grievances. The result of this disjuncture was landlord-tenant strife. While the colonial regime might be accused of exacerbating this tension, the basic social division between landlord and tenant was already established before Korea became a Japanese colony — and similar tensions probably would have surfaced even under an indigenous modernizing regime. Not all the ills of Korean colonial society can be attributed to the Japanese.

It is interesting to note that American historians have also begun to examine how the colonial authorities and private groups responded to social tensions generated by economic development and technological change. Gi-wook Shin and Do-hyun Han, for example, have shown that the Rural Revitalization Campaign of the 1930s reflected a concern at the highest levels of the colonial administration that rural unrest was undermining social harmony in the colony. Deploying a range of policies from the diffusion of more rational farming techniques to the enlargement of the owner-cultivator class, the colonial authorities pursued the same sorts of social policies in the colony that were being used to deal with similar problems at home. As Shin and Han point out, they also found allies in Korean agrarian reformers who helped organize the campaign at the village level. Whatever their motives, the colonial authorities were attentive to the problems that arose from existing fractures in Korea society.

3. We need to reject the stark dichotomy between “collaboration” and “resistance” in characterizing the reaction of the colonized Koreans to Japanese colonial rule.

Historians of Western colonialism have long recognized that most imperialist regimes, colonial or not, rest on a structure of cooperation between imperialist and imperializer, between colonized and colonizer. That understanding has now emerged in recent studies that suggest that in colonial Korea “collaboration” and “resistance” were not either/or choices but two ends of a spectrum — or perhaps the two ends of a bell-shaped curve — with various shades of cooperation and subversion in between. Most Koreans were neither police spies nor armed guerillas. By the 1920s, particularly after the collapse of the March 1 movement and the loosening of the Government General’s controls, many Koreans accepted the fact that Japanese were there to stay for the foreseeable future — and that they would have to adjust their lives accordingly.

“Collaboration,” as you know, continues to be a sensitive political issue in Korea. The re-mergence of the issue stirred high emotions in the press and public as recently as this fall, when President Roh proposed an official investigation to identify Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese colonial authorities in hopes of dishing conservative opposition leaders like Park Geun Hye. Unfortunately he discovered that the father of the chairman of his political party had been a military policeman — and that other members of his party were similarly tainted. Ironically what the episode suggests is that “collaboration” was not an aberration among a relentlessly patriotic Korean populace but a fairly common strategy for social survival and/or social advancement.

In his book on the Koch’ang Kims Carter Eckert has drawn attention to the fact that many members of Korea’s colonial business elite — the new “bourgeoisie,” as he calls them -- found it not only convenient but also

profitable to cooperate with Japanese colonial officials and Japanese capitalists. As he points out, they acted out of a sense of self-interest, allowing their “class interests” to trump their nationalist activities, particularly their support for the cultural nationalism of the 1920s. As a result the Kims acquired a vested interest in the perpetuation of the colonial situation and laid themselves open to accusations of being “imperialist lackeys” or “comprador capitalists.”

But Eckert suggests that there was an underlying rationality to their behavior. It was an adaptation to a changed political and social environment. How was one to succeed as an entrepreneur in colonial Korea without Japanese partners? As Eckert points out, “[Even before annexation] such partnerships were simply good business; there were few Koreans willing to invest in the nonagricultural sector ..., the Yi state was in financial disarray, and Japanese businessmen represented not only a country that was rich and developed ... but also one that was geographically close and culturally similar.”

While the business elite may have cooperated with the Japanese out of self-interest, the situation of the ordinary Korean was more complicated. Perhaps the most interesting question to ask is not why so many Koreans cooperated with the colonial regime but why, if the Japanese regime was so brutal and oppressive, so few of them chose to resist it? Was it because the Japanese regime, as Japanese officials argued, less brutal and more civilized than the Yi dynastic regime? Or was it so brutal, as Korean nationalists argued, that an atmosphere of fear discouraged all but the bravest from resistance? Both explanations were put forward by an earlier cohort of American historians but it is time to rethink this issue too.

For guidance we might turn to the work of Timothy Mitchell, a historian influenced by Michel Foucault, who has argued that the Egyptians remained docile under the British control (a favorite parallel of the Japanese

colonial authorities) because the British introduced a disciplinary regime that produced obedience through internal self-surveillance rather than external coercion. Everyday institutions like school classrooms, museums, or tours of the metropole, he suggests, made British dominion seem natural. These institutions legitimized colonial rule among the colonized as effectively as they legitimized the nation state in the colonizers' homeland. It would be fruitful to explore whether a similar process was at work in colonial Korea.

4. Finally we need to consider whether it is time for a re-periodization of the colonial experience.

To many American historians it is becoming clear that 1905 or 1910 or 1945 no longer constitute as significant temporal boundaries or turning points as they did in the nationalist narrative. It is clear that modernization — or at least precedents for the modernization of the 1920s and 1930s — emerged before 1905 or 1910 and that there were striking socio-economic continuities between the “colonial period” and the postwar period. After liberation it was easy to tear down Shinto shrines but difficult to dislodge practices, attitudes and patterns of behavior that had become embedded in society during the previous four decades. Many historians have begun to suggest that residues of the colonial period remained visible in the physical, material and social infrastructure in both the North and the South, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

In an interesting essay on the legacy of Japanese colonialism Bruce Cumings observed in 1982, “Koreans greeted liberation in 1945 with a profound rejection of Japanese colonialism, yet have never been able to rid themselves of its Janus-faced influence.” The new Korean military and bureaucracy was recruited from those who served under the Japanese, and so were national leaders such as Park Chung-hee, a graduate of a

Japanese military academy. Cumings, however, tended to emphasize the negative aspects of the colonial legacy — the absence of liberal democratic political values, the heavy reliance of repressive state mechanisms, persistent class divisions in the countryside, and so forth. But younger scholars like Gi-wook Shin and his collaborators argue that a similar re-periodization of modern Korean history is “essential for the new and better understanding of the roots nourishing Korean modernity of the 1960s and beyond.”

If the narrative is shifted away from the political (and hence nationalist) emphasis, a whole new set of interesting issues and problems emerges. Just as American historians of modern Japan have focused on a “transwar” period from 1930 to 1960 as prelude the “era of rapid economic growth,” the new cohort of scholars have begun to speculate about the degree to which the “colonial period”, particularly the development of the 1930s, left an imprint on post-1945 developments. Instead of thinking about the “colonial period” as a self-contained chronological unit, historians, emphasizing linkages to the recent past, have begun to argue that it be placed in a longer historical context.

Many of the institutions associated with the period of high economic growth under Park Chung-hee, for example, appear to be based on Japanese models, albeit altered by local circumstances in Korea. Gi-wook Shin and Do-hyn Han argue that the “corporatist” state-society relationship that developed under colonial rule persisted in both the North and the South in the post-1945 period. The Saemaul Campaign launched by President Park in the 1970s, for example, drew heavily on the example of the Rural Revitalization Campaign by emphasizing both the economic and “spiritual” sides of rural improvement and organizing model villages to provide an example for the rest of the rural population. Others have pointed out parallels such as the similarity between the *chaebol* nurtured under the park regime and the *zaibatsu* in pre-1945

Japan.

In some ways, backward historical linkages are as intriguing as forward ones. In a provocative new book Andre Schmid, a Canadian historian trained in an American university, has demonstrated how closely the ideas of the Korean “enlightenment” movement resembled those of the Meiji “enlightenment movement.” Both shared the same critique of the late Yi politics and society: they attacked orthodox Confucian conservatism, rigid social hierarchy and political corruption as the sources of Korea’s weaknesses. Many Korean “enlightenment” reformers realized that their country faced problems confronted earlier by Japan and they looked to Meiji Japan as a model. Such a meeting of minds made possible the cooperation behind the Kabo reforms of 1894-1895. It was only when Japanese leaders decided not to trust the ability of the Koreans to reform themselves, Schmid suggests, that the shared transnational “discourse of civilization and enlightenment” was tragically ruptured.

To sum up, the liberation of American historians from a nationalist narrative, and their broadening of the historical issues to be explored in the “colonial period,” seems to me a positive development. To be sure, American historians do not have the same political or psychological stake in the history of the “colonial period” as Japanese and Korean historians do but in that sense they can perhaps be more dispassionate, if not more objective, than their Japanese and Korean colleagues. At the same time my sense is that today the nationalist narrative is being subjected to criticism in both Japan and Korea, and that the negative interpretation of the “colonial period” is being questioned. Whether this trend has had any impact on the general public, or on the writers of school textbooks, I do not know, but it raises my hope that historians in both Korea and Japan are trying to overcome the rhetoric of the Jihad.

As politicians know quite well, patriotic narratives couched in the rhetoric of the Jihad will never lose their appeal. We are, after all, higher mammals, with “tribalism” and “territoriality” built into our genes, and in a small ways we all carry on our jihads on a daily basis — in the subway and in the supermarket. But “survival” and “altruism” are also in our genes too. Perhaps our schizophrenic world would become a bit safer if we as historians were to call all patriotic narratives into doubt — even if the narratives are not our own; and maybe it also would become a bit safer if we were occasionally to suggest that in the long run common interests of the human race may be more important to our survival than the differences. If historians think seriously about rescuing history from the nation, they should also think about saving it for the human race. After all, whatever our identity politics, we are all members of that race.

And so we might remember, as Andre Schmidt reminds us, that there was a time when Korea and Japanese intellectuals and scholars shared similar visions of Korea’s history and future, and when both understood the opportunities as well as the dangers posed by the impact of imperialism on their societies. In his conclusion, Schmid urged American historians to “transcend the bounds of nation-bound history” by taking into account “the transnational forces both unleashed by and enabling colonialism.” That message is relevant for all historians of modern East Asia, wherever they live. We must realize that whatever the benefits of national solidarity, at a time when the forces of McWorld bring us closer and closer together, the rhetoric of the Jihad is more likely to put us in harm’s way than to help us adjust to the compelling realities of globalization.