

Commentary

The Imaginary Reconstruction of Keijō Imperial University: A Study Focusing on the Alumni Association Activities of Japanese after Repatriation, by Cha Eun-Jeong

“Jōdai”: Colonial Education and Shaping Post-1945 Memory

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If the name “Keijō Imperial University” (KIU) retains any associations in South Korean memory, the most frequent images are those of a specifically Japanese institution, a place reserved for colonial elites, with the majority of prospective students deriving from the Japanese settler population. Preceded by a training school in 1924, the university opened in 1926 with two faculties, Law and Medicine, training bureaucrats and physicians to meet future needs for the colony. If a few places were slotted for Koreans, these tended to be for those coming from families with elite status and holding some relationship of proximity to the colonial system. Other ambitious Korean students went abroad if they could, whether self-funded or on scholarship, typically to universities in Republican China or in Japan. In these terms,

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Keijō holds a limited history, producing graduates for a period of roughly two decades (1926–1945), before its resources were reconfigured in the aftermath of 1945, repurposed by the American military.

During the American occupation (1945–1948), Keijō took on additional controversy for two related reasons. First, the newly opened Seoul National University (August 1946), a Korean institution combining Keijō's facilities with existing resources in the capital, held its first classes in the fall of 1946, and an anti-Japanese spirit prevailed. Returning professors from overseas found themselves targeted if they could not provide evidence of their Korean *bona fides*, especially if they had spent a lengthy period in Japan (e.g., Lee Tae-gyu). Others, unsure of the American role, were uncomfortable in the new university for personal reasons, and some of these elites migrated to North Korea, particularly those in the physical sciences (e.g., Ri Seung-gi). At least in the short term, Keijō quickly looked to overcome its controversial past, one that its (Korean) alumni did not readily admit to, certainly not in the early years preceding the Korean War.

With the passage of time, these Korean graduates transformed themselves using the guise of proto-nationalists, particularly in a South Korea that needed government officials and trained physicians following the Korean War (1950–1953). Many of those who graduated during the late stages of Keijō proved capable of handling new opportunities, pursuing additional degrees and fellowships abroad in the 1950s and 1960s. In medicine, for example, Dr. Seo Byung-Seol became one of the nation's leading parasitologists, helping to run anti-parasite efforts for soldiers during the Vietnam War (1964–1973), while also heading a similar campaign targeting Korean schoolchildren with anthelmintics (1968–early 1990s). For public health, Dr. Kwon E. Hyock played a prominent role in national family planning (1964–early 1980s), later serving as a government minister and as president of Seoul National University. In these cases, Keijō graduates with international training (in the USA and Europe) seldom faced public scrutiny about their backgrounds, transforming themselves via higher education and extensive international travel.

The "lost Keijō": Jōdai and its Performative Power

Of course, there were a considerable number of Japanese graduates over the course of two decades, and this development is taken up by Cha Eun-Jeong. Again, the classes were dominated by colonial settlers through at least the mid-1930s, and Koreans only began to approach parity in the late

war years. This means that by 1945, a pool of several thousand graduates comprised an alumni base, and in a sense, they, too, had some say about the future of the institution. The South Korean narrative to present states that Keijō Imperial University (1926–1945) and Seoul National University (1946–present) remain distinct institutions, with SNU celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2016. The controversy over SNU's origins in a collaborative plan conceived by Koreans and the American military rarely generates much commentary today, elided by the Korean War and the subsequent recovery story. For Japanese graduates, the story is even more murky as the end of formal empire in 1945 was followed by the American occupation (1945–1952).

Cha's piece notes that Japanese graduates of Keijō have their own collective sense of the institution, one in which the university represents a "loss" of sorts, whether of a specific place or maybe even of a temporal experience. The initial temptation is to read this simply in terms of colonial nostalgia, and indeed, this kind of phenomenon is typical for many colonial encounters. Certainly for post-1945 Japan, imperial nostalgia, while officially disavowed with the "new" Japan emerging in 1952, was not entirely unknown and continued to influence popular culture as well as policy. Cabinets of the post-1952 governments had many members who previously held high positions in Manchuria, further reinforcing this point. Well into the late 1960s, imperial development models, drawing upon heavy industry (steel, coal production) models from Manchuria, and drawing upon Southeast Asia for raw materials (wood, petroleum), drove Japan's economic recovery, along with its subsequent growth into a major economy, one capable of posing concern for the United States.

If the university offers a sense of "loss," for whom is this the case, and in what sense does this affect test the limits of authenticity? Presumably, for Japanese alumni of Keijō, the loss refers to their specific ownership of the institution, as opposed to the larger colonial project. The absorption (or elision) of the university within the facilities of Seoul National University meant a Korean institution beginning in 1946. SNU had its own post-colonial anxieties, as mentioned, and it took until after the Korean War to acquire a stronger sense of self, a positioning as an elite Korean space, and one specifically for Koreans. In the Japanese case, presumably the Keijō affiliation lost some of its allure after 1945, whether in terms of jobs or, more simply, as an uncomfortable reminder of imperial excess. Still, these former elites have a right to their own affective experience, and indeed,

share part of it with a certain group of Koreans. In this second case, Korean graduates who transformed themselves continue to hold pride in their colonial status, simultaneously insisting upon their own sense of nationalism, even while holding onto their unique accomplishments, achieving higher education under colonialism and conditions of privation.

In this last case, there is an interesting correspondence between these two populations, the Korean and Japanese alumni of the university, even with very different lived realities under post-liberation Korea and post-occupation Japan. The Korean alumni had to publicly suppress their enthusiasm for the university for nearly two decades, especially with the strident anti-Japanese spirit of the Syngman Rhee period. Still, they left memoirs and often became prominent academics and public officials. As Cha notes, the passage of time also added a dynamism to this form of memory, with a degree of tolerance coming over time. Again, for the Koreans, it was possible to simultaneously take pride in the university while laying claim to a special brand of South Korean nationalism, one in which elite colonial status in no way threatened their Korean credentials.

Moreover, the restoration of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and Japan in 1965 added another nuance, as Korean and Japanese elites often began to reunite, unintentionally in many cases. Development money from Japan's Technical Cooperation Agency (TCA, 1962) began to include South Korea late in the decade, as indeed, it reached many of its former colonies and partners. In the Korean case, these funds targeted public health and anti-parasite activities, meaning that microscopes, cover slides, and even training for medical technicians became common in the late 1960s. On the human side, administrators from the Korean Association for Parasite Eradication (KAPE) met with their Japanese counterparts, with Japanese doctors and bio-scientists often surprised that their colleagues could speak Japanese quite capably. In a sense, the intervening two decades allowed for selective "forgetting," along with nostalgia, meaning that this "new" type of collaboration could take place without rancor, and with minimal tension. Perhaps rather than limiting the Jōdai narrative exclusively to colonial nostalgia, it is valuable to recognize it as part of a larger spectrum of responses rather than as a binary.