



## **Colonized State of Mind: Dismantling of the Korean Identity During the Japanese Occupation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Korea went through a period of colonialism for 35 years, stretching from 1910 to 1945. The Japanese government tried to forcefully assimilate the Korean people in order to exploit and control them more effectively. This paper focuses on how education, language, changing of names, thought conversion, and religion was used to dismantle the Korean identity in order to attain complete cultural assimilation, thereby making Korean people into loyal subjects of the Japanese Emperor. This has been examined from a psychosocial perspective by reviewing and synthesizing existing literature.*

**Key Words:** Assimilation, Education, Identity, Language, Religion

### **Introduction**

“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of

being alive without a sense of identity.”

-Erik Erikson (1994)

In 1894-95, Japan declared itself to be the new military power of east Asia after it defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War. But the geopolitics took a massive turn when Japan came out victorious against Russia in 1905 after which it started to see itself as a threatening force and on an equal footing with the West. Japan - bolstered by its recent victories - aimed to expand its empire further. The Korean peninsula was Japan’s next conquest. Korea was one of the principal reasons why the Russo-Japanese War took place. In 1910, Korea was annexed by the Japanese government (see Figure 1), making it a colony of the Japanese Empire (Britannica, 2022).



**Figure 1. Japan Times article dated August 29, 1910, declaring Japanese rule over Korea (Chosen) (KI-ÖK, 2022)**

Korea was found to be inadequate in sustaining itself as a sovereign state as stated by Tanaka Tōsaku, a member of Japan's Overseas Educational Academy, Tokyo (Bang, 1972). 35 years of colonial rule ensued which involved economic exploitation, discrimination, and forced assimilation. On 15th August 1945, Korea became free from Japanese rule when Japan conceded in the Pacific War against the U.S. (KOCIS, 2022).

This paper will focus on the methods and policies used by the Japanese government to dismantle the Korean identity to make them into obedient servants of the Japanese empire, namely, education, language, and religion. This has been examined from a psychosocial perspective by reviewing and synthesizing existing literature. The scope of this paper does not include the nationalist counter-movements or resistance to the aforementioned policies by the Korean people. An important fact to note is that in this paper, "Korea" or "Chosen" refers to the entire Korean peninsula and not just the present-day Republic of Korea (South Korea) as the partition of the peninsula took place after the Korean War (1950-53).

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## Key concepts

**Identity.** To quote the American Psychological Association (2015), Identity is - "an individual's sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles. Identity involves a sense of continuity or the feeling that one is the same person today that one was yesterday or last year (despite physical or other changes). Such a sense is derived from one's body sensations; one's body image; and the feeling that one's memories, goals, values, expectations, and beliefs belong to the self. Also called personal identity". (p. 519)

**Assimilation.** It refers to when a person/group makes cognitive and behavioral changes in order to become members of a different group. Language is considered one of the most important aspects of assimilation (Taft, 1957).

**Forced assimilation.** In the context of colonialism, forced assimilation is an involuntary process wherein the colonized adopts the colonizers' language, culture, values, religion, etc as a result of coercion. Policies and mandates are put forth in order to force the people to conform and assimilate so that they become indistinguishable from those in power in terms of their culture, speech, and religious practices. This is done to eliminate the identity of the natives.

**Colonization of the mind** - Colonization of the mind is said to take place when colonial subjects' group autonomy and individual freedoms become restricted to a framework of highly structured, predefined choices and prescribed behaviors approved by their oppressors. This is done via formal educational institutions. Colonial education determines each individual's options and develops their decision-making capabilities in a way that supports the colonial agenda. Learners are given very little time to properly comprehend or criticize the material they are exposed to in school. As a result, a student's actual ability of self-determination is severely limited. These systems leave limited opportunities for a person's individual effort guided by their own background. Eventually, they start to embrace their identity as colonial subjects (Pak & Hwang, 2011).

## Methods Used By The Japanese Government To Assimilate The Korean People

Rather than lifting the colonized to equal status with the Japanese, assimilation was associated with fostering loyalty. Thus, the "Japanization" of Koreans intended on placing the native people in a state of servitude for the rest of their lives. The Japanese state continued to perpetuate discrimination and exploitation in disguise of assimilation. (Pak & Hwang, 2011).

The assimilation was intended to be complete and thorough, eliminating the cultural and ethnic identity of Korea. Attempts to assimilate the Korean people into Japan through Japan-Korea communal identity; anthropological research portraying Korean people as "natives"; and pressuring Koreans to use Japanese names are some of the ways in which Japan tried to establish hegemony (Lee et al., 2013).

The motive behind this forced assimilation can be understood from a psychological perspective as well. By means of social comparison, a person who is seen as comparable to the self is designated the in-group, while those who are different from the self are branded the out-group (Stets & Burke, 2000). If Korean people started to see themselves as similar to the Japanese people, they were more likely to become obedient subjects of the Japanese Emperor and support the state in their efforts to colonize their country.

**I) Indoctrination through Education and Compulsory Japanese Language Learning.** Education not only transmits knowledge, science, and innovation, but it also molds people's thinking by assisting them in understanding their social relations, as well as their connection to their heritage, tradition, and self-identity. Similarly, oppressors have always understood the importance of educating the colonized to make them useful for the ruling state while destroying their national and ethnic identities, consequently ensuring their devotion to the colonizing power (Lee et al., 2013). Education was thus viewed as the key agent of assimilation. The meticulous organization of standards, values, beliefs, and norms of conduct aimed to "enlighten" colonized people and awaken an imperial consciousness within them (Pak & Hwang, 2011).

To make Korean children loyal and faithful subjects of the Japanese state, Japan hoped to denationalize them. The curriculum was modified to reflect Japanese nationalistic terms, and patriotism was indoctrinated into Korean school children as part of a massive propaganda campaign. Higher education for Koreans was not given any consideration as it was not "necessary" for them but rather a luxury. Normal schools (teacher training institutes) saw the use of harsh forms of thought policing and indoctrination to completely eradicate Korean culture, education, and identity (Bang, 1972).

All schools, including foreign missionary private schools, were forced to adopt textbooks authorized by the Bureau of Education to transmit Japanese ideas. Lectures and drills were used to teach in the classroom. Out of a total of 32 classroom hours each week, 14 hours were used to teach the Japanese language and morals. At all levels of study, special attention was paid to the teaching of Japanese geography and history. Korean geography and history were taught, albeit from a Japanese perspective; in other words, Korean history was portrayed as that of Japan's "younger brother". General Terauchi personally emphasized the need for the Korean people to recognize the importance of "bread over culture" (Bang, 1972).

During World War II (1937-1945), the Japanese administration issued three educational principles. These encompassed a thorough knowledge of the national mission; a commitment to fostering Korean and Japanese unity; and a strong determination to work to achieve national objectives. Thus,

denationalization, assimilation, and vocational training were the objectives of Japanese colonial education (Lee, 2002). The processes of colonial teaching strategies gradually displaced the autonomous and unique impulses of the people, resulting in both subconscious and conscious subordination to the colonial system (Pak & Hwang, 2011).

Okakura Yusaburo - who put forward the idea of "Chosen Kokumin Kyoiku Shin-an" or the New Plan for National Education in Korea in 1894 - claimed that Japan and Korea once shared an "intimate continuity" of traditions akin to one another. Furthermore, because the Japanese and "Korean languages were similar," the Japanese ought to teach the Koreans the Japanese language as a first and fundamental step toward Korea's modernization (Bang, 1972).

Phillipson (1992) opined that in a colonial framework, language planning is a unique sort of 'linguistic imperialism,' in which the oppressor's language is proclaimed and maintained through structural changes in social institutions. For example, in 1922, in a 6th-grade classroom, only 2 hours a week were devoted to the study of Korean while 9 hours were given to Japanese language teaching. Further, in 1941, the teaching of Korean was abolished at all school levels. (Rhee, 1992). In Figure 2, it can be seen how Japanese was taught in Korean classrooms.

The loss of their native language was not only a blow to the affective domain of the Korean people but also took away the basis on which the colonized were differentiated from the colonizer. This weakened the local social identity and solidified a collective identity as Japanese subjects (Pak & Hwang, 2011).



Figure 2. Japanese being taught in Korean schools (KI-ÖK, 2022)

**II. Thought Conversion and Changing of Names.** Not only did the regime force its language on the Korean people but also proclaimed in 1940 that all Korean traditional family names will be changed to Japanese nomenclature (Lee, 2002). According to the rules of kinship in Korea, a child would take their father's surname and the goal was to preserve the patrilineal lineage at all costs. A woman would never change her name, even after marriage as getting married did not change who her father was. But under Japanese rule, the surname was a house name. All members of a house were expected to have the same last name and no one could get a government job without a Japanese-style name.

Subsequently, Koreans had to change their names to mimic the Japanese style in order to earn a livelihood. For many, it meant giving up their souls as well as the entire lineage of their founding ancestors. The imposition of the name change policy was an attempt at not just linguistic assimilation but also structural assimilation with the goal of obliterating Korean national identity (Lee et al., 2013).

The psychological impact of a forced name change must also be analyzed. Dion (1983) has found that a person's name is inextricably linked to his or her personal identity and sense of identity. Guardo and Bohan (1971) conducted a study on a group of middle-class, white, American children aged 6 to 9 years old. They were asked a series of questions about the notion of self-identity. The children were also asked if they would still be the same individual if their names got erased. The results were staggering. 80% of them reported that names, physical qualities, and behavior were named as the foundation points of their self-identity. This can give us an indication of what the Korean people must have gone through when they had to change their name, thereby discarding their identity as they knew it. The infringement and control of personal identity did not end here.

Personal identity and cognitions were further derailed by the means of "thought conversion". From the 1930s to the end of World War II, Japan pioneered idea conversion, which was eventually extended to colonial Korea. People's actions - not their thoughts or beliefs - are the subject of modern laws. Thought conversion, on the other hand, was intended to penalize both prohibited behavior and the thought that motivated it. The Japanese government intended to leave its impression on individual minds. People engaged in open confession and official condemnation of their own thoughts or beliefs that drove a prohibited behavior. Uncooperative Koreans, be it patriots or Christians, had "impure" thoughts squeezed from their minds through strict

interrogation methods until they were ready to admit their "sins" in writing. These "sins" were usually political in nature. They were later forced to join groups for all who had "reformed" their thinking. These people were now purified and "reborn into completely new Japanese".

Only a small fraction of the populace was subjected to the conversion policy; most ordinary people were spared since they could readily accept the required pro-Japanese ideology as a result of their primary education, or rather, indoctrination. Conversely, academics and college students were the targets of the program as they had been affected by Western thought chiefly through universities that were patterned after European institutions (Lee et al., 2013).

The process of thought conversion was succeeded by a feeling of frustration, anger, embarrassment, or feeble-mindedness. The procedure implied violating one's devotion to one's own group by discarding and rejecting one's fundamental views or ideology. In this perspective, thought conversion was regarded as unwanted by the people and converts were subject to admonishments by the unconverted members of the population (Lee et al., 2013).

**III. Shintoism and Shunning of Shamanism.** The Japanese infiltrated not only the tangible domain but also the spiritual realm (Lee et al., 2013) and the introduction of Shintoism in Korea greatly affected the everyday life of the people. Shinto was seen as an effective method to gain control over people and attain cultural assimilation.

Shinto was a primitive natural religion that combined animism, shamanism, agricultural rites, nature worship, ancestor devotion, and purifying rituals. Shinto was later fused with Buddhism and Confucianism to form Ryobu (Dual) Shinto, which included high-level theological and ethical components. Eventually, Shinto and Buddhism were separated to give rise to State Shinto or Shrine Shinto (Lee, 2002).

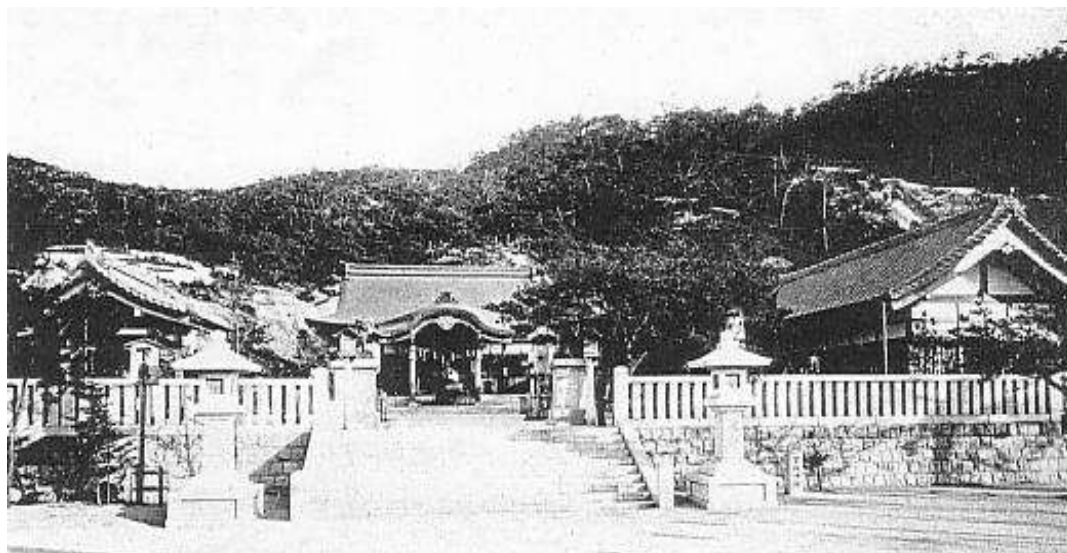
The beginnings of Shinto are highly contentious in the historical evolution of Japanese religion and national thought. The ideology of Shintoism combined the need for virtue and honor with a higher duty and loyalty to the state, especially the leader or head of state. This gained the interest of cultural nationalists in Japan (Lee, 2002). To the Japanese, having authority was more essential than having power. To covert Koreans into loyal subjects, the Japanese state relentlessly pushed for integration by encouraging people to worship the emperor and pay respect to Shinto shrines (Kim, 1997). On 24<sup>th</sup> March 1915, Instruction No. 16 was issued by General Terauchi that announced that Shintoism was a cult of patriotism and a system of the state, and not a religion (Bang, 1972).

State Shinto was the foundational underpinning of the Japanese imperial educational system (Lee, 2002). In July 1919, the Chōsen Jinja, a Shinto shrine was built dedicated to the supreme Shinto goddess - Amaterasu Ōmikami, and the head of the Japanese state - the Meiji Emperor (Lee et al., 2013). By 1923 there were 40 shrines dedicated to State Shinto in Korea, one of the biggest being the Keijo Shine (see figure 3) in Seoul (at the time called "Keijo" in Japanese). School students along with the teachers were obligated to visit these shrines and pray for the betterment of the state on every Japanese national holiday (Bang, 1972). These visits were not seen as a religious ritual but rather an act of patriotism and nationalism. In addition, small shrines were built in the eastern corner of elementary school playgrounds (Lee et al., 2013). Students were expected to bow facing the shrine every morning and pray for the betterment of the state and the good health of the Japanese Emperor before classes began at school (Kim, 1997).

At the same time, in the guise of science and rationality, the colonial authorities stigmatized all Korean traditional folk religions which created "unhealthy" thoughts and unnecessary superstitions. They put forth the idea that Korean customs were uncivilized and backward. The native culture could, therefore, be destroyed and replaced with "modern" Japanese culture and traditions (Lee et al., 2013).

Though Confucianism and Christianity were suppressed, the main target became Shamanism as it inspired people to resist and subvert established authority through symbolic acts of aggression against them. Since women were the primary practitioners of shamanism, the government placed more importance on their education in order to "enlighten" them. Furthermore, shamanic rituals allowed Koreans to communicate their own colonial experiences by the use of ceremonial words which emphasized their frustrations and mocked the Japanese authority under the pretense of religious practice. This was unacceptable to the Japanese state.

There was the use of newly adopted academic words that demeaned and disparaged native culture which led Koreans to see their own culture as substandard and infantile, and thus Korean culture studies were disregarded. As a result, the Japanese categorized local Korean belief systems and practices as pseudo or fake religion, or even just folk customary religion. Further, Koreans now followed the Shinto religious calendar (Lee et al., 2013). Thus, with Shinto at the top of the ladder, and all the Korean folk religions placed under it, the religious and spiritual domain in Korea came under the control of the state.



**Figure 3. The Keijo Shrine (Government-General of Chosen, 1935)**

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## Conclusion

In hopes of denationalizing and controlling the Korean people, the Japanese state attacked the grassroots by taking over all the aspects of human identity.

They glorified their culture and promoted the Japanese language while suppressing – and later abolishing – the teaching of Korean. People’s personal identity was systematically taken apart by the name change policy, i.e. giving up their Korean surnames and adopting Japanese-style names instead. “Thought conversion” was employed wherein Koreans who did not hold ideas acceptable by the state by forced to “confess their sins” and change their thinking and ideology under the supervision of the state.

The spiritual sphere was also tainted by colonialism. Folk religions, especially Shamanism were targeted and efforts were made to eradicate all such superstitious and “backward” religions and customs. In its place, State Shinto was introduced that revolved around the worship of some Shinto gods, and the spirit of Japan itself, making it a “patriotic cult” in many ways.

Whether they proved to be successful or not falls out of the purview of this paper but it is safe to say that such attempts stemmed from the wish to exploit and subdue the Korean people rather than make them equal and respectable citizens of the Japanese empire.

Korea was under Japanese rule from 1910 to 1935. Within that span, many policies and mandates were issued by the state in order to forcefully assimilate the Korean people, effectively erasing their identities thereby making them loyal subjects of the Japanese Emperor.

To echo the words of Emily Dickinson (2017), “I am out with lanterns, looking for myself”. After independence, it was Korea’s turn to find itself once again and reclaim its lost identity.

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## Adherence To Ethical Guidelines

This is to declare that this paper has been written while keeping in mind the general ethical guidelines of psychology. As the paper does not involve primary or secondary quantitative data or primary qualitative data, the ethics board need not review it to give approval.

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