

Challenging Korean and Japanese Historical Memories of Their Colonial Narratives as Presented in YouTube Video

The rise of the Internet over the past decade or so has also advanced a most popular learning tool for younger generations. Interest groups recognize the value of this social education resource and employ it as a resource to dispatch their messages to surfers. Groups promoting Korea-Japan issues are no exception. A student seeking such information has little problem in finding commentary regarding the controversial issues that have complicated the two countries' history and relations, much of it centered on the 35 years of colonial rule to which the Japanese subjected the Korean people. When I initially began surfing the Internet for examples of how this history is presented I found far more hits arguing the Japanese side, but recently the Korean narrative has increased remarkably. Both sides naturally tell this history from their subjective view; there is little effort to inject objectivity into their narratives. After all, both sides accept as their purpose convincing audiences that their narrative is correct: either that the Japanese annexation of Korea was a totally benevolent action, or that the Korean people experienced the worst case of foreign occupation in history. The purpose of this lecture is not to take sides—both narratives are problematic—but to understand the subjective techniques employed by both sides to empower the viewer to analyze them objectively.

Japanese: Colonialism Improved Korea Narrative

The YouTube film clip, “The Korean File of Korea under Japanese Rule,” is a bilingual (Japanese and English) presentation choreographed by presumably Japanese authors (who are not mentioned) that has enjoyed mild popularity on the Internet, as judged by the number of viewer hits. It relies on text, rather than voice, commentary accompanied by background music from the X-Files films. This short (3:35.84 minute) clip employs visual evidence—photos, personal observations, and documentary and statistical evidence—rather than voice explanation, to essentially argue two points. First, though the aggressors, the act of Japanese intrusion onto the Korean peninsula is justifiable as, to modernize, the Korean people needed the outside assistance that the Japanese could provide. Korea benefited from Japan's colonial guidance. And second, that claims of Japan's alleged crimes, such as the “comfort women,” are exaggerated if not all together false.

We start by acknowledging the clip's strong points in its attempt to inject objectivity into an argument that is ultimately arranged for a parochial purpose. It does present authentic documentary evidence. That is, the narrative provides photos that appear authentic (i.e. not enhanced by Photo Shop-type software); it includes the observations of people (Isabella Bird) who witnessed Korea at this time; it supports its arguments with convincing statistics (on longevity and literacy rates); and it cites document evidence (by the U.S. army) from which it borrows critical evidence. We assume that, unless proven otherwise, the Japanese-language advertisement for *ianfu* (comfort women) that it introduces is also authentic, and that it was displayed somewhere for the purpose of recruiting women for this job. Thus, the Korean File relies on techniques that push its argument through means recognized as acceptable by academic standards. Its use of non-Japanese views and reports lead us to the conclusion that their presentation the narrative presents truth. Contemporary accusations of

Japanese invasion and cruel colonial rule over Koreans are pure fantasy. Weakness can be uncovered even in the soundest of academic scholarship; that found here, however, is much more serious as it suggests conspiracy to purposely misrepresent this history. We can start with the photographs. Why, we might ask, do the authors of this presentation not provide precise information regarding when and where the pictures were taken? There is a popular English expression: "A picture tells a thousand words," which suggests that a photo/painting is useful for conveying a wide variety of messages. It is not difficult to understand why the authors chose the photos they did for this presentation. But their selection choices still invite questions: What message did the photographer intend to convey by taking the pictures, but also why did he (or she) choose to make them public? We might assume that to the photographer the scenes s(he) captured represented something new or different; that is generally why people chose to take the pictures that take even today. But to serve this presentation's purpose it is also important to ascertain whether they were unique to Korea's situation: Might a similar picture of antiquity have also been taken in Japan at this time? The examples of Korean women exposing their breasts invite similar concerns. To demonstrate their doing so as "custom" suggests that women never covered this area of their body, which is simply not true. Other pictures suggesting otherwise are just as easily found. And, again, might similar scenes be found in states recognized as "advanced," such as even Japan itself? Was it not just a few decades earlier that Westerner travelers to Japan criticized the people over their mixed bathing practices?

We can turn to a second issue with this presentation: the approach it employs to present information. A second interesting example of this misrepresentation is the presentation's use of Isabella Bird's writing of 1880s Korea. That Bird, as a woman who ventured off the beaten path to visit then exotic places, was an interesting individual is certainly not in question. But is it fair to use her writing as representative of a people? Even if so (and Bird's opinion is simply her subjective view), it is definitely inappropriate to misrepresent her writing by cutting and pasting information to bring it in line with a purpose (sometimes referred to as cherry picking"). A quick fact check reveals that Korean File's paraphrase of Bird's individual impression of Seoul as "the dirtiest city in the world," (Bird: "the foulest city on earth"), is close in meaning, but incomplete in purpose. Her original sentence qualifies this negative portrayal of Seoul with "...till I saw Peking..." (Bird 1985 [1897], 40). This minor slip alone does not interfere so much with the presentation's primary purpose: to demonstrate Korea's need for Japan assistance. Problematic is its failure to mention a later image of Seoul that she addresses later in this same book. Bird leaves Korea to travel through Northeast China (Manchuria) and the Russian Far East. Upon her return to Korea she devotes one chapter to her second visit to Korea's capital. Titled "Seoul in 1897," she describes a city that was "not recognizable," with its wide streets with "deep stone-lined channels" having replaced the "foul alleys" she remembered from her first visit. It was also a city preparing to welcome a French hotel and had already erected "shops with glass fronts" (Bird 1985 [1897], 435). In other words, Seoul had embarked on a development project to remake itself into a modern city prior to Japanese annexation.

A third problem is in the way the film clip argues Japanese justification of its colonial occupation of the Korean peninsula is its reduction of rather complicated issues into simple terms. It does this through strategically targeting two policies that Japanese

imperial history in Korea continues to endure harsh criticism: the Japanization of Korean names and the recruitment of military comfort women. In both cases the presentation builds on kernels of truth to characterize the totality of the policy. Korean File argues 1) that, rather than being forced to adopt Japanese two-kanji surnames, Japan *permitted* Koreans to Japanize their names to hide their Korean identity, and 2) the term “sex slaves” is an improper depiction of comfort women: they were “mere prostitutes” recruited, rather than forced, to provide sex services for the Japanese military. Here again the Koreans were allowed the right to make choices. These policies were not imposed upon them. Rather than completely false, both statements carry some truth but are incomplete, and thus misrepresentative of this history. There were Koreans in China and Japan who adopted Japanese names to fight discrimination. But the policy for which the Japanese attract criticism is the late 1930s decision to pressure the Korean people to Japanize their name structure. The colonizers were particularly concerned with women who even today maintain their maiden name; they do not adopt their husband’s name. The Japanese in 1940 considered this unnatural; the government refuses to recognize a marriage where couples maintain different last names at present. This policy pressured an estimated eighty percent of Koreans into officially changing their surnames. As for the Korean File’s comfort women contention that this policy targeted only prostitutes who could choose and collect fees for their services, Sarah Soh’s research concludes that while there were “comfort women” awarded such “privileges,” the term “comfort women” incorporated a variety of women laboring under a variety of conditions. Not all women were dragged from their homes or deceived through false advertisements and sent to the front lines to “comfort” the troops, as described in accounts of these women. But it is totally incorrect to conclude that the above did not happen; many women were forced to provide services against their will. Not all could choose their “clients,” and not all received even a pittance for their services. To apply one or two facts and argue them to be the case for all Koreans under the Japanese at this time oversimplifies rather complex issues. Though these descriptions tighten the overall argument that Korean File attempts to make, they are otherwise examples of irresponsible research practices.

The documents that Korean File introduces to “prove” its arguments also require careful attention. Rather than their authenticity—as with the photographs it is assumed that they are so—our concerns rest on appropriateness. Korean File introduces two documents in connection with the comfort women issue, a “help wanted advertisement” and a report by the U.S. government. The former document suggests that the recruitment procedure for women followed a natural procedure: advertise and those interested will apply for the job. This appears valid if 1) the individual could read Japanese and 2) if she could understand the subtle nuances behind “comfort,” and what specific tasks were expected of her, both not spelled out in the advertisement. A further question remains as to what percentage of the estimated 200,000 women did the Japanese advertisement attract through this practice? The document provided by U.S. military officials who discovered comfort women in northern Burma after the war also raises a number of interesting questions. How was the information in the report conveyed to the American soldiers? Did they speak Korean, or did the women speak English (either case being extremely unlikely)? Or, were there people present to interpret the women’s testimony for them? Did they translate their words correctly? If

so, were there words accurately translated, and did Korean File accurately represent their testimony in its presentation? Finally, to what extent could the information gained be applied to the total population of comfort women?

Korean File also conveniently provides a citation for the U.S. report. Thus, we can easily compare the question of the presentation's accuracy vis-à-vis the actual report. Here we see a degree of poetic license on the part of Korean File. The United States' file informs that the 20 "comfort girls" interrogated represented a minority of 703 such girls brought to Burma (today Myanmar) from 1942. It informs that the women were deceived into believing that the nature of their employment was "work connected with visiting the wounded in hospitals, rolling bandages, and generally making the soldiers happy" to allow the participants to "pay off family debts" and perhaps "settle in a new land." The fate awaiting these generally "ignorant and uneducated" girls was as residents of a "large two-story house" that was subjected to scheduled visits by members of the different branches of the Japanese military (Sunday, 18th division; Monday, Cavalry; etc.). The report also provided such details of hours of operation, costs for services, and the time allotment for this interaction. The girls in this particular house were able to keep 40 to 50 percent of their earnings, depending on their contract conditions. Thus, we see the Korean File again "cherry picking" information to support its message: the girls did receive payment for their services rendering the term "sex slave" inaccurate. It fails to inform, for example, the report's categorization of this house as "near luxury," when compared to other comfort houses.

Korean File presents a skewed presentation that attempts to 1) justify Japan's 35-year intrusion onto the Korean peninsula and 2) "correct" two of the highly criticized policies that the Japanese introduced during their colonial tenure. The "forced" name changes represented one attempt by the Japanese to erase Korean identity through its assimilation policy. Its addressing the comfort women issue targets the most notorious of Japan's wartime policies. The content of this presentation, however, offers a short introduction to a greater variety of colonial-era issues that continue to circulate in both contemporary Japanese and Korean societies. I feel obliged to add that Japan is not unique as a victimizer attempting to hide, alter, or justify its contested history. An international survey on how different states present in classroom (textbooks) and social (museums) education their historical traditions would, I believe, reveal that Japan's approach (as described above) is not unique; it is the norm rather than an exception. Are the victimized better at narrating their views of this history? From now we turn to examining a YouTube presentation crafted to instruct on their position in this history.

Koreans: Brutal Japanese Colonialism Stifled Us

Koreans to date have mostly arranged their rebuttals to Japanese claims of benevolent colonial rule on the domestic front. The Korean History Channel's "The Japanese Occupation of Korea, 1910—1945" represents an effort to internationalize their position on this period of shame. It corresponds with a more recent effort by both sides to instruct foreign populations in their respective interpretations of this history, efforts that include aggressive attempts to influence how these states represent Korean-Japanese issues in their own publications. The Korean History Channel's documentary, at 10:23-minutes, is three times as long as the Japanese Korean File. It offers voice

narration rather than text. Limiting this narration to English, suggests its primary targets are foreign populations. The presentation's primary message—that the Japanese had long planned to annex Korea, and that its administration was brutal—is one to which the Korean people have long been exposed. The background music includes drums rolls often used in other films dealing with Japan-Korea relations, such as *2009 Lost Memories*.

As stated above, “The Japanese Occupation of Korea” aims to portray the Japanese as from decades, if not centuries, past having a greedy eye on annexing its neighbor across the East Sea, the Korean peninsula. It indirectly suggests that this was the ambition of Hideyoshi Toyotomi in the 1590s, when his armies twice invaded the peninsula, by quoting Japan's first governor general of Korea Terauchi Masatake who claimed in 1910 that Japan had “succeeded” Japan where Hideyoshi had failed “in sending troops to Joseon [Korea].” The documentary draws a direct six-decade line from Yoshida Shōin through Saigō Takamori and the *SeiKanron* (invade Korea debate), to Itō and Terauchi to outline Japan's long held zeal for acquiring the Korean peninsula. Japanese rule was unusually brutal. In fact, it claims, following annexation these imperialists embarked on “a chapter of the most brutal history of colonial rule in the world.” It lists the Japanese crimes to support this claim: it distorted the ancient Tan'gun and Manchurian history; it forced Koreans to adopt Japanese names; it prohibited their use of their own Korean language; it turned young Korean girls into “sex toys” for the military's pleasure; and it mobilized Korean men to fight its wars of invasion. In this regard, it adopts themes that overlap with those covered by *Korean File*, but by spinning them in a quite different way.

While it is rather difficult to argue against a narrative of victimization (and Koreans situate much of their history around the 3000 or so times it faced foreign invasion), we can see in the Korean History Channel's presentation several historical misrepresentations of points at the center of this argument. Like the above Japanese statements a number require greater contextualization. Leaving aside Hideyoshi's ambitions (he appears to have had his eyes on China), tracing this history from Yoshida Shōin's teachings presents one telling example. First, it is true that Yoshida advocated Japan's extension of its influence onto the Korean peninsula, and no doubt instructed his students on this point. This was a lesson he had learned from previous generations of Edo-era (1603—1868) thinkers who advanced expansion as a policy to combat alleged Russian intrusions that they saw as threatening to Japanese sovereignty. These Russians targeting Ezo (presently Hokkaido) influenced their advising the Tokugawa government to annex this island to the north of Honshu (Ezo then; Hokkaido today). Securing peripheral territories to strengthen national defense had been a response deemed acceptable for this purpose, primarily in Europe, for centuries. Yoshida adopted, and expanded, on this reasoning. This does not justify Yoshida's suggestion that Japan annex Korea, but simply provides a context to help us understand the reasoning behind his words.

But placing blame on Yoshida for the *SeiKanron* misconstrues this history. First, Yoshida had been dead for 13 years, having been executed by the Tokugawa government for an unrelated crime in 1859. Second, the intentions behind this debate at this point in time was to punish Korea for refusing to entertain Japan's requests to modernize their diplomatic relations that treated Japan as its inferior. Any ideas of

absorbing the peninsula were most likely premature, at least in 1873. The intentions of Saigō Takamori, who the documentary depicts as an agent of invasion, remain rather vague: Was he interested in inflicting punishment or simply reasoning with Koreans at this time? My intention here is not to condone the Japanese thinking at this critical time in the two countries' history, but to inject complexity into our understanding of these events; the interpretation offered by the documentary is a simplified version of Japanese diplomatic activity vis-à-vis Korea in late Edo and early Meiji (1868—1912). This is not to say that ideas put forth by Yoshida had disappeared, they just were not seen as feasible at this early point in Meiji history.

Did his students carry the words of their master into the future? As the documentary instructs, Itō Hirobumi did eventually assume the position of Japan's first Resident General of Korea after the two peoples finalized (not without undo pressure) a protectorate treaty in 1905. But is it accurate to link Yoshida's calls for Japan establishing suzerain relations over Korea to the cautionary advances Itō made once he assumed his position in Korea? Though the clip suggests that Yoshida influenced carrying to Itō, as well as to a later resident general in Terauchi Masatake, the views of the two men were not entirely the same, with the latter Terauchi advancing a much more aggressive policy in Korea. The Korean narrative also (incorrectly) places him in the Yoshida classroom, perhaps seated alongside Itō (and several other influential leaders of the 1868 Meiji Restoration). Terauchi and Itō hailed from from the same domain (Chōshū), but the former general was just seven years old when Yoshida was executed, thus limiting the possibility that he benefited from Yoshida's teachings. A more appropriate figure might have been Yamagata Aritomo, who was instrumental in Japan's formation of a modern military, but not directly connected with Korea even though he might well have joined fellow military figures in arguing for Korean annexation as early as 1895, after Japan defeated China in war.

A second area of concern is the hyperbolic expressions in the documentary's language. Foreign invasion is intrusive, humiliating, and violent under any circumstance. However, Korean presentation of this period in superlative exaggerations warrants careful consideration. One example of this is introduced above: the documentary's depiction of Japan's colonial history of their peninsula as "the most brutal" ever recorded in history. This is a claim often expressed in Korean criticism of this period. While not to go so far as the Korean File to argue the period as a near-paradise experience, the examples that the Korean History Channel clip offers for evidence do little to strengthen the Korean claim of a most brutal Japan. Japanese distortions of Korean history, and prohibitions of Korean names and language, though disturbing, hardly suggest Japanese rule as "brutal." As examples of the Japanese distortions of Korea's ancient history it lists their rendering of the story of Tan'gun, the alleged founder of the Korean people, as "myth," their situating the peninsula's northern border at the Yalu and Tumen rivers and thus negating Korea's ancient claims to what the subjugators called Manchukuo or Manchuria (today northeast China), and Japanese claiming Dokdo (J. Takeshima) as their own, rather than Korean, territory. It continues by arguing two points also covered by the Korean File: the Japanization of Korean names (the Japanese "forcing" them to do so) and the comfort women (the Japanese turning Korean women into "sex toys"). It adds that the Japanese prohibited Koreans from using their native language, an example of what the clip calls Japanese "ethnic

cleansing,” and the colonial government conscripting and drafting men into the Japanese army. Much of this history, it explains, continues to be distorted in Japanese textbooks even today.

Those acts that the Korean History Channel advances as “brutal” (even those that were unquestionably acts of brutal violence), too, require deeper insight. It introduces the Unit 731 actions, which is where experiments on living prisoners were held, exceeded the atrocities committed by the German military at Auschwitz. While not to get bogged down on numbers, this claim is unfounded: 1) the “research and development unit” claimed far fewer lives than the German concentration camp claimed more than double the number of deaths than even the highest estimate of deaths at United 731; and 2) the unit was located in Manchuria, and not in Korea.

These Korean accusations of their Japanese subjugators remain open disputes that the victimized refuse to let go and the victimizers refuse to acknowledge. They often take their side of the dispute abroad, pressuring foreign governments, publishers, and scholars to “get the story right,” that is, tell their [Korean or Japanese perspective] version. The disputes regarding the facts behind this history require resolution before the two states might decide to end their disputes over this history, and perhaps collaborate to tackle the challenging regional and global issues such as the North Korean nuclear issue, and the recent coronavirus pandemic. However, similar to the arguments found in the Korean File, those presented in the Korean documentary share a glaring shortcoming in their lack of context. The “comfort women” issue again is illustrative. The arguments that both sides introduce address the issue as polemic opposite perspectives (the women were either “mere prostitutes” or “sex toys”); both arguments come across as incomplete rather than false. A third, neutral, understanding is desperately needed. Whether the problem is Japanese unwillingness to properly resolve the issue or Korean refusal to accept Japanese proposals to bring closure, both sides need to focus their attention on truth rather than create distorted nationalist-driven interpretations, prior to their attempts to convince people that their narrative is the correct one.

Concluding Remarks

The Japanese and Korean documentaries both repeat extreme arguments that have found a home in the polemic interpretations that Japan and Korea enter into their national narratives regarding this unfortunate period in their shared history. Their arguments, both flawed, introduce important points of this history, but in ways molded to fit a parochial political purpose, rather than to search for the truths of this period.

Understanding the controversies and complexities of these three-plus decades can hardly be accomplished through watching these short YouTube presentations.

Separately they offer skewed representations of this period, but together the debate they initiate provides a base from which viewers can initiate deeper investigations into this period. On the other hand, it is problematic to accept one side or the other as this history’s “truth.” As with any resource—academic or other—recognizing its strengths, as well as its shortcomings is a critical step toward gaining its thorough understanding. Watching both presentations offers a useful initiation to the differences that separate Japan and Korea on colonial issues, primarily because they address the same issues (but from their own tunnel vision). With this realization, the Internet potentially serves as

one of many useful resources available for embarking on a goal of understanding the arguments of a particular point in time. Like the printed [newspapers and magazines, and books] mediums, and display [museum] medium, the electric medium as found on the Internet requires understanding the medium's techniques for presentation strategies before delving in to analyze its content before determining its authenticity.

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