

The Japanese Colonial Legacy In Korea

North and South Korea are nations that while filled with contempt for Japan have used the foundations that Japan laid during the colonial period to further industrialization. Japan's colonization of Korea is critical in understanding what enabled Korea to industrialize in the period since 1961.

Japan's program of colonial industrialization is unique in the world. Japan was the only colonizer to locate various heavy industry in its colonies. By 1945 the industrial plants in Korea accounted for about a quarter of Japan's industrial base. Japan's colonization of Korea was therefore much more comparable to the relationship between England and Ireland than that of European colonization of Asia or Africa. Japan's push to create colonial industry led Japan to build a vast network of railroads, ports, and a system of hydro-electric dams and heavy industrial plants around the Yalu River in what is now North Korea. The Japanese to facilitate and manage the industrialization of a colony also put in place a strong central government.

Although Japan's colonial industrialism in Korea was aimed at advancing Japanese policies and goals and not those of the Korean populace; colonization left Korea with distinct advantages over other developing countries at the end of World War Two. Korea was left with a base for industrializing, a high level of literacy, experience with modern commerce, and close ties to Japan. Japan's colonial heavy industrial plants were located primarily around the Yalu River in North Korea. Because of this the North had an edge in industrialization. For many years the North had the fastest growth rates of the communist countries, and its cities were on par with those of Eastern Europe. It was not until the early 1970's that the South surpassed the North in levels of industrialization. Because most of the heavy industrial plants were either located in North Korea or destroyed by the Korean War the groundwork for industrialization that South Korea received from Japanese colonialism consisted mostly of social changes. During colonialism Korea's populace in increasing numbers moved to cities and became urbanized these new urbanites worked in factories and were used to the organization of modern commerce. The Japanese also let a small number of Koreans develop into a semi-elite. Although this group never held powerful positions many of them were educated in Japanese schools, and became either involved in the military or worked as businessmen, bureaucrats, lawyers, and doctors. This elite provided much of the leadership and framework for post World War Two Korean Government in Korea. They had an intimate knowledge of Japanese companies, language, organizational structure, and government.

The Korean elites that emerged after the liberation of 1945 and helped steer Korea's economic policies under Park Chung Hee had an intimate knowledge of Japan. Some of them like Park had been educated in Japanese schools, some had worked for the Japanese, and nearly all of them spoke fluent Japanese. It was this

closeness to Japan both geographically and culturally that made it natural for the Koreans to use the Japanese model of industrialization when Japan's economy boomed in the 1960's and 1970's. The leaders of Korea were ambivalent about relying on Japan, on one hand they felt a profound respect for Japan and its successes and on the other a deep hatred for what Japan had done to Korea in the past. But Japan still served as a model for Park Chung Hee who normalized relations with Japan in 1965 and turned to Japan for technology, equipment, and a model for development.

Some nationalistic Korean scholars say that Japan's colonialism slowed Korea's growth by exploiting Korea and disturbing its economy. But these views of Korea ignore the fundamental role that Japan's policies of industrial colonialism played in allowing Korea to Industrialize during the 1960's. Japan's colonialism improved infrastructure, urbanized the nation, educated much of the populace, gave the public experience with modern commerce, and indoctrinated Korean elites in the Japanese language and culture. It was Korean elites history and close ties with Japan that made them turn naturally to Japan to provide a development model. Japan's legacy of colonialism in Korea is felt not only in the many graves and monuments that attest to Japanese brutality but also in the modern cities of South Korea and the heavy industries along the Yalu River in the North.