

Is Seeing Believing?

A Critical Analysis of Japanese Colonial Photographs of Korea*

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In order to assess Roland Barthes' argument that interpretation of photography depends on cultural codes embedded therein, a collection of photos from the Japanese Government-General of Chōsen (GGC), which controlled Korea 1910-1945, were examined. These colonial images and associated text, commonly in English, were aimed primarily at the West, with which the Japanese sought alignment. Of the three common categories of GGC photos, "scientific" or "anthropological" images corresponded with portrayals by Western colonial powers of the supposed inferior nature of subjugated peoples and cultures. Individuals in such pictures tend to lose their identities and are reduced to a stereotype, less human than the observer. "Before and after" photos depicted alleged GGC progress in such areas as education and infrastructure. Pictures of "happy colonial subjects" conveyed an impression of Koreans enjoying the benevolence of the new administration. While this photojournalism favorably impressed some Westerners, others employed images of the 1919 Korean uprising, and its suppression, to discredit the Japanese. The overall assessment demonstrates the polemical manipulation of photography.

Keywords: Anthropology, Coding, Colonialism, Japan, Korea, Photography, Photojournalism, Polemics

Introduction

Photography is often understood to objectively depict what is true and real. But the supposed objectivity of photography has been critiqued by many, including Roland Barthes (1915-1980), who argues that photography is neither transparent nor self-evident, but a sign saturated by culturally given codes.¹ Barthes argues that the meanings of photographs are inherently unstable and floating, and are fixed by the language that accompanies them.² If we take this critique as our departure point, we can understand that, in fact, photography is an ambiguous artifact, interpreted through complex cultural codes embedded in the images, and through explicit accompanying messages of the text.

Such critical inquiry may be particularly applicable to photojournalism by the Japanese Government-General of Chōsen³ (hereafter, GGC), which produced large numbers of photographs that were

* **Acknowledgements:** I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Academy of Korean Studies and the Center for Korean Studies at University of California, Berkeley which supported to conduct this research during my graduate school years at UC Berkeley.

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¹ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," from *Image – Music – Text*, selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 32-51.

² Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," from *Image – Music – Text*, selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 32-51.

³ Chōsen: this is a word for Korea that has multiple significations; it was first used during the Japanese Occupation. Today it is used by North Korea as a national title.

distributed throughout the world and greatly influenced how Korea and its people were perceived during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945).⁴ The photographs covered Korean art, culture, and society and were aimed at various audiences, including Koreans, Japanese, and the international community.

Before going further, we should briefly review how Korea, then called Chosŏn, was annexed to the Japanese empire. The 1894-1895 Sino-Japanese war, which took place in and around Korea, resulted in Japanese victory over China.⁵ The Treaty of Shimonoseki gave Taiwan and other territorial and commercial concessions to Japan, and also ended Korea's long tributary relationship with China, thereby clearing the way for Japanese influence to replace that of China. Starting in 1894, under Japanese auspices, the Korean government carried out a series of social, economic, political, and military reforms, the so-called Kabo Reforms, which included legal abolishment of Korea's hereditary social status, slavery, and many other forms of social privilege for the ruling elites; introduction of a new monetary system and use of Japanese currency in Korea; restructuring of government offices and their duties; and establishment of a modernized military conscription system.⁶ In 1895, Japanese minister to Korea Miura Gorō masterminded the assassination of pro-Russian Queen Min, the consort of King Kojong, thereby eliminating an obstacle to overseas expansion. The king and crown prince then fled for refuge at the Russian legation, which resulted in the end of the Kabo Reform Movement.

Russian-Japanese rivalry over Korea (and Manchuria) intensified, culminating in the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and a surprising succession of Japanese victories. Through the intervention of U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), the Russo-Japanese War was concluded with the Treaty of Portsmouth.⁷ However, there was another secret agreement between the U.S. and Japan, called the Taft-Katsura Agreement, by which the U.S. reportedly accepted a Japanese takeover of Korea while Japan acknowledged a U.S. sphere of influence in the Philippines.⁸ Japan, then, established a protectorate over Korea in 1905 and appointed a resident-general to be in charge of Korea's diplomatic affairs. Japan went on to intercede in all matters of the internal administration of Korea and dissolved the Korean army. Finally, in 1910 the new resident-general, General Terauchi Masatake (1852-1919), and the Korean Prime Minister, Yi Wan-yong (1858-1926), remembered as the betrayer of Korea, signed the treaty of annexation.⁹

The above background helps in a reading of the photographs, as one must recognize and interpret their cultural coding in social, historical, and political contexts. In addition, because of an apparent objectivity that may conceal ambiguity, photography is particularly vulnerable to manipulation in order to serve different agendas. Likewise, photographs in photojournalism are not simple illustrations but visual arguments that should not be observed as artless and uncontrived.

Photographs go through several procedures before they appear in printed material. First, photographers

⁴ During this period, in addition to those of the Japanese Government-General, there were other photographers, including Western officials, travelers, and missionaries, Korean amateur and professional photographers, and Japanese commercial photographers.

⁵ Mutsu Munemitsu, *Kenkenroku: A Diplomatic Record of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895*, ed. Gordon Mark Berger (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

⁶ Kyung Moon Hwang, *A History of Korea: An Episodic Narrative* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 129-137. Also, see Carter Eckert, "Korea's Transition to Modernity: A Will to Greatness," in *Historical Perspectives on Contemporary East Asia*, ed. Merle Goldman and Andrew Gordon. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 119-154.

⁷ Andre Schmid, *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002); Christine Kim, "Politics and Pageantry in Protectorate Korea (1905-1910): The Imperial Progresses of Sunjong," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68.3 (2009): 835-859; Alexis Dudden, *Japan's Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

⁸ Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (New York, NY and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), pp. 141-142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-184.; Hwang, *A History of Korea*, pp. 150-160.

thoughtfully select subjects, carefully arrange the settings, props, compositions, and cropping, and take the photographs with calculated light, focus and film speed. In the process of printing, photographs are usually further manipulated in both subtle and apparent ways. The printer may enhance the center of interest, remove imperfections, or make the image lighter or darker, softer or harder, cooler or warmer, and so forth. Today any image can be digitalized, and digital images are subject to an infinite array of possible manipulations, such that their connection to “reality” cannot be known to the causal viewer. Then, if they are to be included, photographs in books, articles, and other “retail” venues are often selected from archives, and cropped or otherwise manipulated to deliver the message of the writer/producer. In order to make sure the message is perfectly clear, the producer “fixes” the message with the accompanying text—either a short caption or lengthier exposition. Thus, any photograph that appears in a book or photojournalism has been the subject of a multi-part screening process by numerous agents.

Critical questions include: Who are the producers and the intended or primary target audiences, and how do we know this? Who benefits from this image? What is the image’s purpose? What techniques does the producer use to make the message attractive or believable? Who or what is left out of the message? What can others do with the information obtained from the message?

Korea According to the Japanese: A Story Told in Pictures

An old Korean proverb says that a hundred words of description are not worth one viewing. Likewise, people say seeing is believing. But is it? Ever since the Daguerreotype camera was introduced in 1839, photography dramatically changed life and became an indispensable tool for Western travelers and explorers to document their journeys into exotic worlds and their experience with “the Other.”¹⁰ Photography also accompanied Western colonial powers as they expanded into Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Pacific in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; photographs of those regions, with native peoples and indigenous cultures, were often used for imperialist propaganda.¹¹ Korea was no exception, though the major colonial photographers of people and society there were not Westerners but Japanese. They adopted photographic techniques and ideologies used in Western colonial photographs, and applied them to other Asian subjects, notably the Koreans, Formosans (Taiwanese), and Manchurians. This study examines photographs of Korea and its people produced by the GGC, which was the driving force behind assembly of photographic archives, a major publisher of mass photojournalism, and a primary disseminator of official books illustrated with photographs. The GGC used photography to create and shape an image of Korea for Koreans, Japanese, and the West, to promote Japanese political propaganda, and to create a history.

During the colonial period, the GGC produced massive amounts of photojournalism for an international audience, mainly the British, Americans, and French. The GGC also published books of photographs with Japanese text, intended to attract Japanese tourists and encourage Japanese immigration to Korea. Usage of these photographs for the purpose of tourism has been extensively explored by Western scholars including

¹⁰ The concept of the “Other” originates from the imperial conquest of “non-white” countries. Since then, the dichotomy of the Eastern World and the Western World arose and the people of the Orient became considered as the “Other,” as the non-European Self. See Carolyn Gallaher et al., *Key Concepts in Political Geography* (London and Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2009), pp. 68-69.

¹¹ See Paul Landau and Susan Griffin, *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

Hyung Il Pai.¹² However, for the most part this study focuses on the importance and function of Japanese colonial photojournalism for political agendas. We will also explore how the Western treatment of other peoples was used in the codex for the Japanese to describe the Koreans.

This colonial photojournalism was for Western viewers and readers as the text was written in English, and English and French equivalents for Japanese weights and measures were included in the appendices. The most significant books were the *Annual Report on Reforms and Progress in Chōsen (Korea)* published from 1907 to 1910, and the *Annual Report on Administration of Chōsen* published from 1911 to 1937. These annual reports include general remarks, introducing the Korean people, history, culture, and places of interest, and Japanese improvements in the areas of finance and economy, production and industry, education, religion, charity and relief, sanitation, communication, civil engineering, police, justice, and local administration. Every issue also includes high-quality photographs and statistical compilations. The significance of the *Annual Report* can be attributed to two factors: most books about Korea during the colonial period depended heavily on such official accounts, and annual reports were the sole accessible sources. The CGG also produced a number of photography books including *Chōsen in Pictures* (1921), *Chōsen of Today* (1929), and *The Thriving Chōsen* (1930). In addition, some GGC-affiliated organizations published photography books; for example, Chōsen Central Bank produced a photo journal called *Pictorial Chōsen and Manchuria* (1920). There were numerous short pamphlets on specific subjects, such as *Relations between the Government and Christianity in Chōsen* (1921) and *Korea and Irrigation* (1928). All the photojournalism published by the Japanese colonial government in the English language had purpose. As Andrew Grajdanzev (1944) captures this polemic: “facts which [the Japanese] present are for the most part correct, but they are carefully selected and their interpretation is often biased (p. 3).”

Japanese photojournalism utilized several kinds of representations of Korea. These representations were meant to be part of programmatic justification of Japanese colonial rule of Korea and to garner international support (mainly British and American) of the Japanese paternalistic role as an improver and preserver of the peninsula. These photographs can be divided into three categories: “scientific and anthropological images”, “before-and-after images”, and “happy colonial subjects.”

Not Quite Science: The Japanese Use of “Scientific” and “Anthropological” Photography

To frame their own colonized subjects in Asia, the GGC adopted the Western colonial discourse of “the Other”, originally applied to non-European races. In the late nineteenth century, anthropological methodology and theories were used by European colonial governments to justify their rule over different races. These studies served as a pseudoscientific foundation for the division of the human races based on skin color, hair, eye, and bone structure, and ostensible connections between physical and mental characteristics. Within this essentially racist classification system was a disturbing hierarchy: Caucasians or whites were the most advanced and superior in terms of human evolution, whereas sub-Saharan Africans were considered inferior.

¹² See Hyung Il Pai’s articles and books including “Travel Guides to the Empire: The Production of Tourist Images in Colonial Korea,” in Conference volume on *Consuming Korean Tradition in Early and Late Modernity*, Chapter 3, ed. Laurel Kendall (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010); “Staging ‘Koreana’ for the Tourist Gaze: Imperialist Nostalgia and the Circulation of Picture Postcards,” *History of Photography*, 37:3 (2013): 301-311; *Heritage Management in Korea and Japan: The Politics of Antiquity and Identity* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2013); “Monumentalizing the Ruins of Korean Antiquity: Early Travel Photography and Itinerary of Seoul’s Heritage Destinations,” *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 21 (2014): 331-347.

The Mongoloid or “yellow” race was positioned somewhere in the middle.¹³ One tool used to help categorize different races was the “anthropometric photograph,” in which the subject was placed in front of a measuring grid for easy cross-comparison, and the frontal and side views were photographed.¹⁴ The GGC had scholar-officials who applied this methodology to Koreans.

From 1911 to 1917, seven major investigations measuring Korean physical attributes were carried out by an anthropological team headed by Torii Ryujo. The team traveled through Korea measuring and photographically documenting Korean people, both male and female, in different age groups, and from about 140 localities. The team produced over 38,000 dry glass plate photographs, which are now in the photographic collection of the National Museum of Korea.

Figures 1 and 2 show Korean women and men, of different ages and physiques, arranged in rows. The photographs were taken in front view and profile view, and even from behind (not shown). In Figure 3, nine men are carefully alternated so that all their physical characteristics are clearly visible. These photos are similar to Western anthropological photographs. For example, Figures 4 and 5 are European images of a Chinese man and an African woman, naked and standing against a grid, within the case of the woman, an instrument measuring the size of the head. In these photos, individual identities are erased and the subjects become objectified and categorized as a racial “type.”



Figure 1 & 2. Anonymous photographer, Japan. Korean Men and Women, Seosan, South Chungcheong Province, 1915. Courtesy of The Photographic Archives of The National Museum of Korea, Seoul, Korea.

¹³ The idea of distinguishing humans based on physical traits was first proposed by Johann Blumenbach in his book *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775).

¹⁴ The standard measuring grid was invented by J. H. Lamprey, the secretary of the London Ethnographical Society.

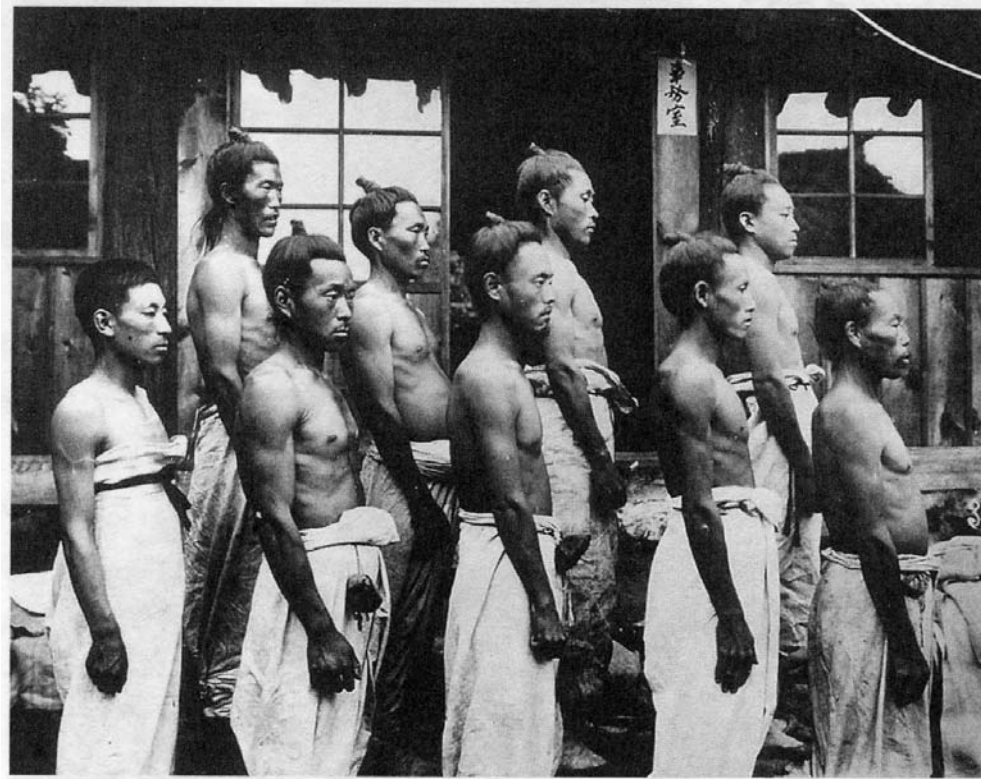


Figure 3. Anonymous photographer, Japan. Nine Korean Men, Deokwon, South Hamgyeong Province, 1911. Courtesy of The Photographic Archives of The National Museum of Korea, Seoul, Korea.

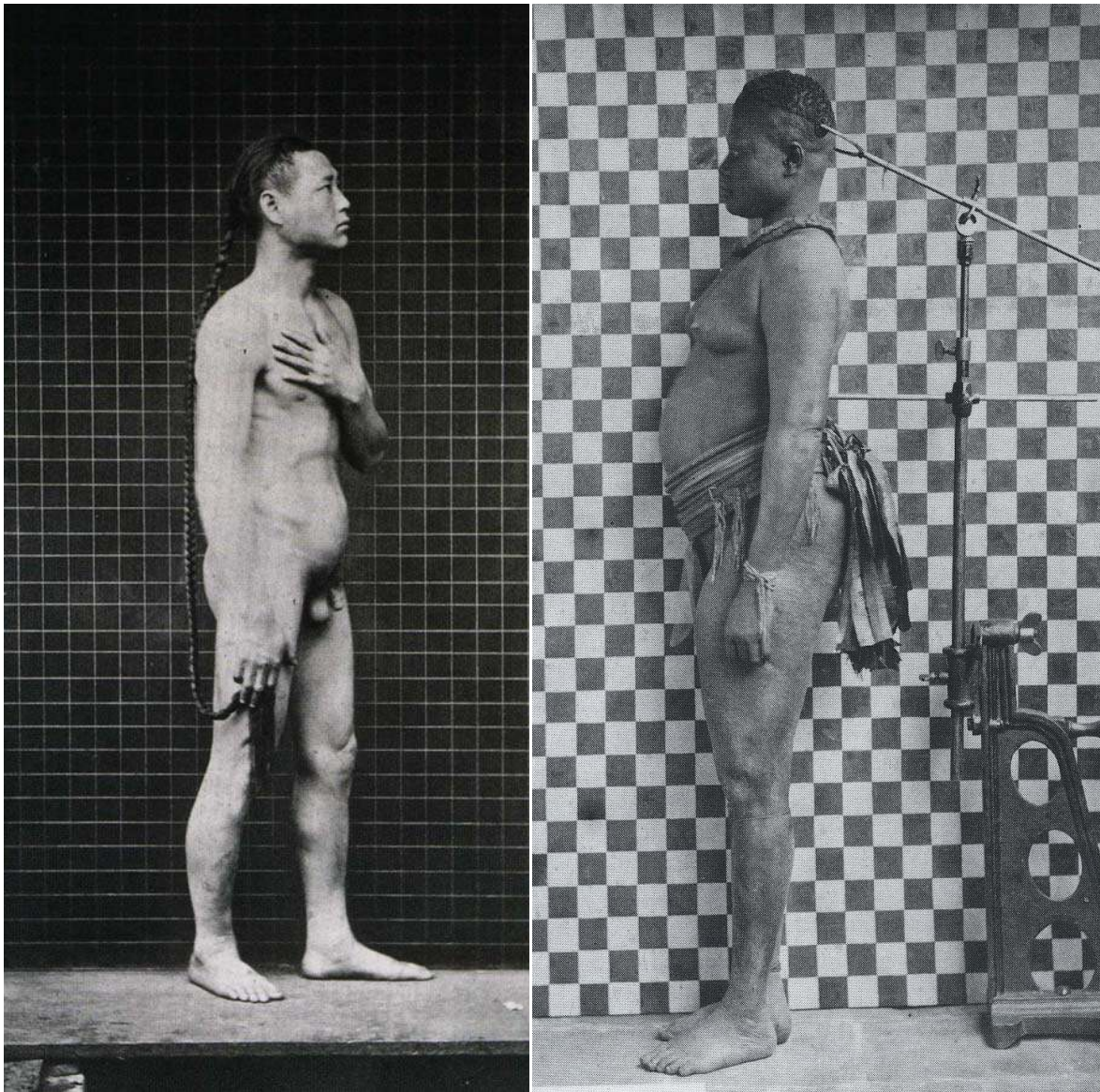


Figure 4 & 5. J. H. Lamprey. Chinese Male c. 1870 (left); Maurice Vidal Portman, Burko. Profile View of the Same Woman' ["Woman of the Takeda tribe, age about 40 years"], c. 1893 (right).

The colonial photograph thus acts as a metaphor that “represents an appearance which through analogy stands for something other than itself.”¹⁵ When individuals appear in photographs, they lose part or all of their individualities, including their names, ages, and occupations, and became mere subjects of anthropological research. All Korean individuals in the colonial photography archives had lost their identities and been transformed into a “stereotype”, different and less human than the observer.

To Westerners it is ironic that the Japanese applied this methodology to members of their own race, Koreans, but the Japanese did not see themselves as part of the same race found in the rest of East Asia. Westerners too, after witnessing Japan’s victories over China in 1895 and Russia in 1905, along with Japan’s rapid industrialization and growing military power, accepted the special position of Japan in Asia.

¹⁵ Patricia C. Albers and William R. James, “Private and Public Images: A Study of Photographic Contrasts in Postcard Pictures of Great Basin Indians, 1898-1919,” *Visual Anthropology* 3, nos. 2/3 (1990), p. 347.

Britain became allied with Japan through a treaty, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902, and the United States and Japan formed an understanding of mutual interests through the Taft-Katsura Agreement of 1905. Western observers subsequently paid close attention to how one Asian country was managing a protectorate and governing a colony in another Asian country. For example, Edwin Maxey, Professor of Public Law and Diplomacy at the University of Nebraska, wrote in 1910:

Japan is now performing an experiment, which is, from one point of view, new in the history of the world. Western nations have assumed political control of Eastern peoples in a number of cases. This has been done in turn by each of the great Western nations. Protectorates are therefore nothing new. However, never before in the history of the world has one oriental nation assumed a protectorate over another. There have previously been attempts upon the part of one oriental nation to conquer another: even peace-loving China has made such attempts: but a thoroughgoing reconstruction of the political institutions of another people is a work, which no oriental nation except Japan has ever attempted. Such work has hitherto been undertaken only by Caucasians. The experiment of Japan in Korea is, therefore, unique, and is worthy of careful study by all interested in political or ethnic science. Not only because of its unique character is this experiment worthy of study, but because of the effect which its success or failure is likely to produce upon the future course of history.¹⁶

These formal or “scientific studies” led to an alignment of Japanese with Europeans. Westerners not only recognized the new and powerful Japanese imperialist state politically, they even adjusted their existing anthropological “facts.” The official catalogue of the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910 exemplifies this re-assessment and adjustment of the idea of Japanese “race”:

One curious similarity runs through the whole, that is, the striking similitude between [the Japanese] and our own people. The resemblance manifests itself in manner, physical stamp, and shape of head. To any one acquainted with the principles of phrenology the resemblance is very marked. This last point is indicated by the large proportion of the brain in front of and above the ear.¹⁷

It is not strange that the Japanese, fully aware of this Western gaze and attention, and strategically seeking to align with Western power and powers, adopted Western methodology and ideologies. Japanese strategy was successful in part because Western readers and audiences were already familiar with the visual codes and symbols in the photographs that the Japanese presented, through several centuries of Western scholarly ethnographies, travel journals, and pictorial representations of the Other. As early as 1895 and continuing through the 1930s, the Japanese government had teams of “official scholars” conduct systematic cultural research, investigations, and excavations. These officials traveled around the Korean peninsula, collected, and compiled information on Korean archaeology, anthropology, art, and relics, as well as natural resources. These scholars included the well-known Japanese archaeologist Yagi Sozaburo, the art and architectural historian Sekino Tadashi, the historian Imanishi Ryu, sociologists Akiba Takashi and Akamatzu Chijo, and anthropologists Torii Ryuzo, Zensho Eisuke, and Marayama Chijun. When conducting these projects, they were always accompanied by photographers, who, under their direction, photographed Korea’s people, activities, objects, architecture, and natural resources. These types of photographs were common among colonial powers of the time and were evaluated by the GGC as sources of information for academic research, possible expropriation of cultural artifacts, and grounds to justify and legitimize colonial rule.

¹⁶ Edwin Maxey, “The Reconstruction of Korea,” *Political Science Quarterly* 25, No. 4 (Dec., 1910): 673.

¹⁷ Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 96; this was translated and quoted by Ann Maxwell, *Colonial Photography & Exhibitions: Representations of the “Native” People and the Making of European Identities* (London, England and New York, NY: Leicester University Press, 1999), p. 70.

Of particular interest is anthropologist Marayama Chijun's 1930s investigation of shamanistic activities. His photographers captured the Korean landscape and people's everyday activities, thus making it appear as if the photographs were documentary. In actuality, the photographers intentionally selected scenes of rural life, with its shamanistic rituals and pre-modern traditions, while ignoring the modern and urban aspect of Korean society, which reveals the political agenda that lay behind these photographs. Specifically, these photographs represent Koreans as an irrational, superstitious people and Korean society as backward. GGC's 1929 annual report on Korea asserts that:

Shamanism cannot be overlooked. The people believe that spirits are ubiquitous, and for them every place, every part of every abode, almost everything has its spirit, usually an evil one. The superstitious fear of these spirits haunts the lives of all classes. When a house takes fire, or a man contracts a disease, it is because it or he has been touched by a spirit, so sorcerers are in demand to expel such spirit by their music and dancing.¹⁸

Justifying Rule: The Genre of Before and After Photography

That the Koreans were characterized as primitive is clear, but the precise use of such classification should be examined. In the visual symbols and codes in Japanese studies of Korean society, it is understood that a programmatic political agenda was at work. Likewise, Western colonialism was often justified as the expansion of civilization and advancement of progress. Colonial governments everywhere analyzed the races and cultures of their subjugated peoples, and concluded the latter were inferior in terms of human evolution. They were considered to have primitive, childlike, and uncivilized cultures and societies that would benefit and experience progress through the protection of Western colonial powers. In this process, photography provided the visual evidence to confirm Western culture's superior position and to justify colonial rule. For example, the British government founded the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee (COVIC), and hired a top-notch photographer, Hugh Fisher, to take photographs of the whole British Empire for three years. Fisher received specific instruction that his photographs show "the native characteristics of the country and its people and the super-added characteristics due to British rule."¹⁹ In other words, the COVIC already had in mind certain kinds of images for Fisher to capture and represent in photographs so that a visual framework for British paternalism could be constructed.

The Japanese colonial government likewise adopted this "civilization and progress" discourse based on Western values and standards when popularizing its achievements in word and image. The GGC constructed a binary opposition in its representation of Korea, built on existing Western dichotomies, such as savage vs. civilized, chaos vs. order, danger vs. safety, lazy vs. industrious, unproductive vs. productive, and feudal vs. democratic. These simple oppositions gave rise to strong and appealing visual expressions that were quite effective. The "message" was a moral one: the colonizer represented the "good" half of the dichotomy, and the colonized represented the "bad" half. The colonizer was to turn the bad into the good—which is "progress."

In colonial photography, this powerful dichotomy was often expressed in temporal terms—the "before-and-after" photographs of the colonized. In fact, before-and-after photography is the visual mainstay of the propaganda of progress. The two photos of South Gate Street in Seoul, Korea (Figs. 6 & 7) illustrate this paradigm of dichotomies. The "before" photo has a caption reading *South Gate Main Entrance to the Capital*,

¹⁸ Government-General, *Chōsen of To-day*, 1929, p. 9.

¹⁹ James R. Ryan, "Visual Instructions," *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 190.

prior to 1910 when Japan took over the Administration of Chōsen. In this photo, we see a cow sitting in the middle of the street next to a primitive cart. Small shops, displaying their goods outdoors, are located on both sides of the street, and Korean people are on the street. The ox and cart lying passively in the middle of the street give the impression to Western eyes that something is “wrong”: not only is this a backward society in which oxen and handcarts dominate commercial streets, but apparently nobody is in charge, so that farm animals and useless vehicles are permitted to block the road. Compositionally, the ox and cart create a horizontal obstruction in the foreground before the beckoning gate in the background, implying a literal blockage of forward “progress” into the picture space. The photo is tightly cropped in an oval shape, which not only forces us to see the resting objects as the only important element in the picture and creates a squeezed feeling, but is also critical because a larger view would highlight the fact that there is plenty of room for anything to pass around this “obstacle,” which is therefore doing no harm whatsoever. In fact, to the twenty-first century viewer this looks like a rather charming and peaceful scene. Today’s adoration of the rustic or pastoral versus the early twentieth century emphasis on the superiority of modernity and the metropolis highlights the importance of knowing both the cultural context of photographic interpretation and subliminal messages sent by composition.

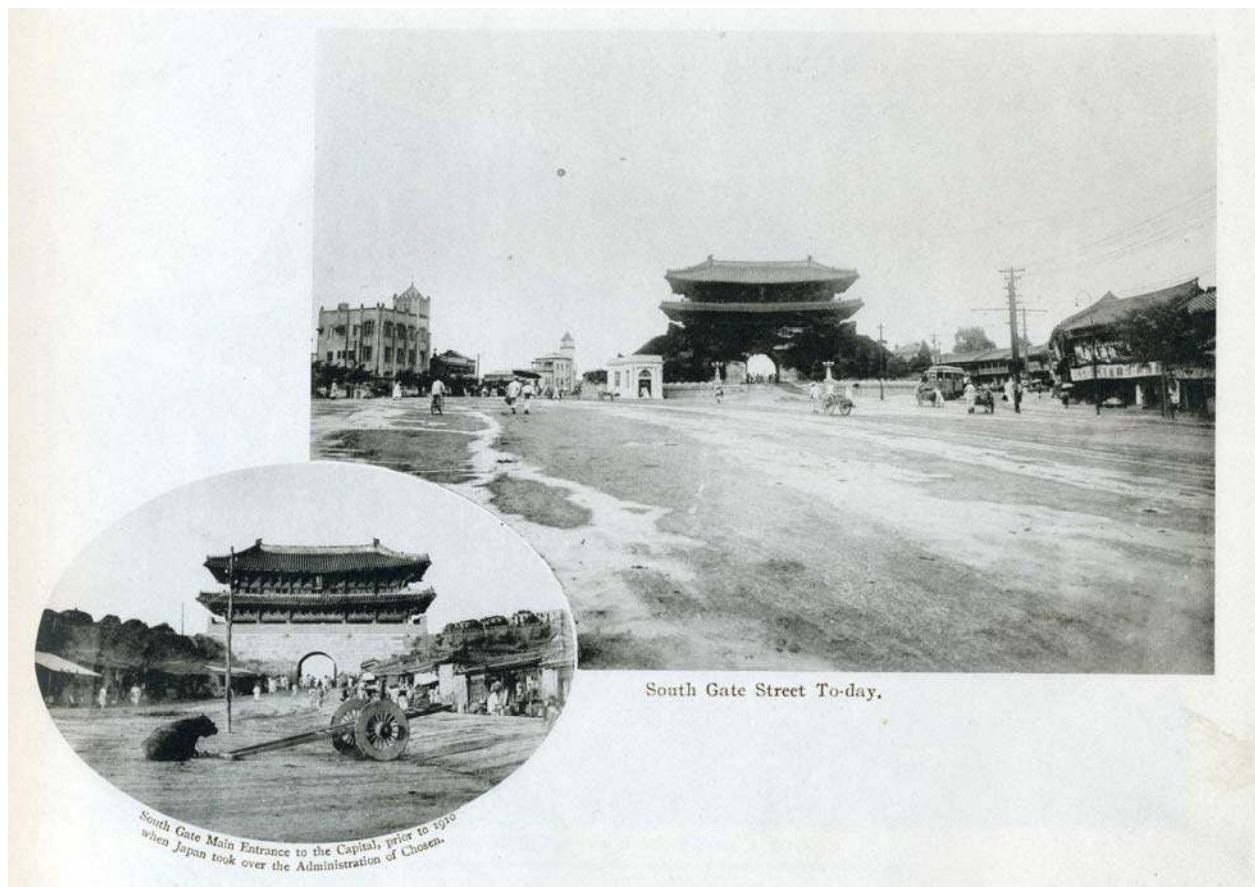


Figure 6 & 7. “Before-and-After” photographs, South Gate Main Entrance to the Capital, prior to 1910 when Japan took over the Administration of Chōsen (oval); South Gate Street Today (square). These two photographs often appear in GGC publications.

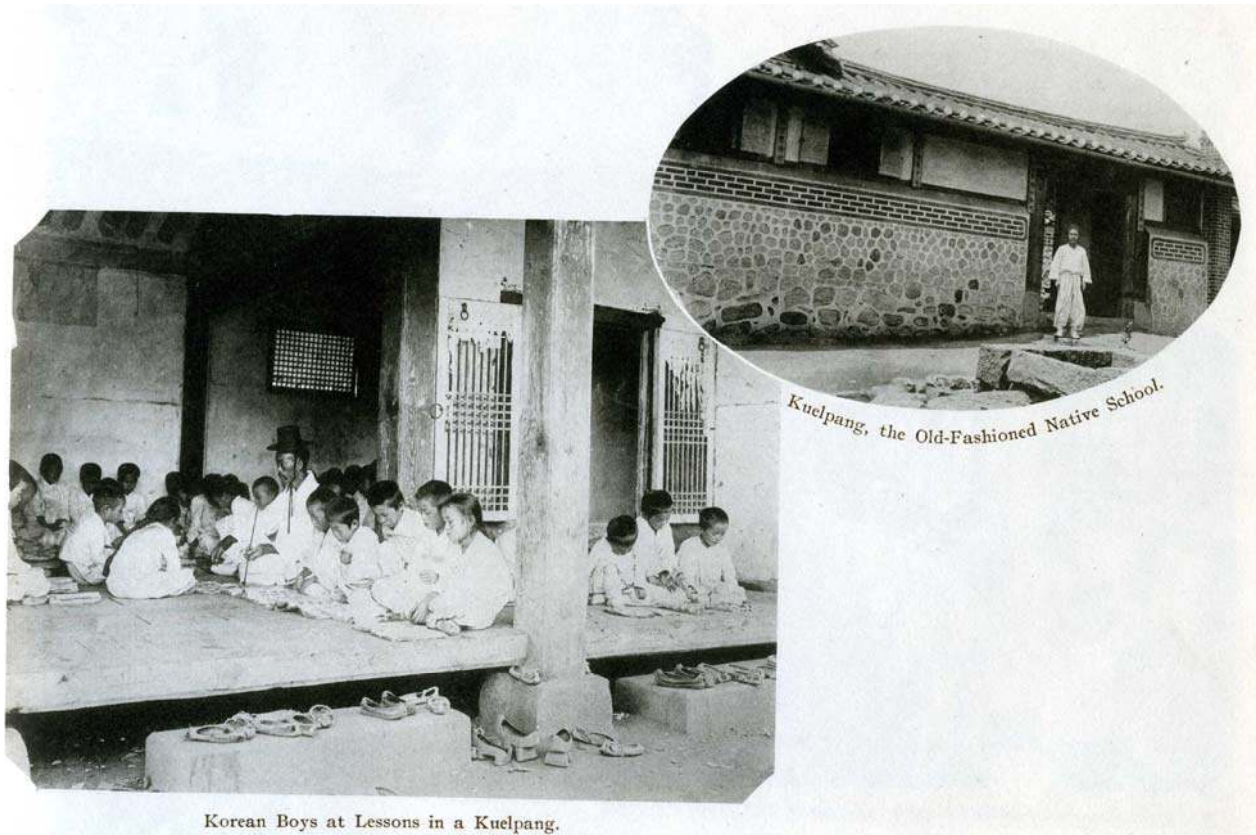
Conversely, *South Gate Street To-day* is a wide-angle shot taken far away from South Gate, which provides a much wider view of the street. The shops in the previous photo are mostly removed and the broad street is open wide for various real and potential transportation modes, including bikes, carts, buses, and trolleys. Multi-storied buildings in Western-style architecture appear on the left, two-story shops on the right display street front signage, and telephone wires and trolley lines all indicate that some “progress” has already been made. However, the huge empty street dominating the composition tells us this photograph is not about today, but about tomorrow—what will eventually be, under “modern” Japanese rule. By its very emptiness, “room for growth; room for movement” is the visual message here. Again, to our eyes, this scene might look less inviting than the alternative, but, in its time, a time before “too large” streets were frowned upon or even contemplated, this photograph would have been looked at through the lens of future possibilities. Nonetheless, regardless of the aesthetics of the scenes, or changes in interpretative contexts, in their compositions the photographs clearly juxtapose the sensation of blockage (read: stagnation) to the sensation of openness (read: unfettered possibility).

In the 1907 publication *Administrative Reforms in Korea* the Japanese Resident-General discussed 13 reform programs in Korea, including replacing the Confucian-style schools and expanding the educational system along more modern lines. In 1928, the GGC described the traditional Korean education as ineffective and impractical:

Korean education of old centered on the study of Confucianism, and had as its ultimate goal the making of public servants... After annexation, public education in the country was established on modern lines in conformity with the principles set forth in the Imperial Rescript on Education, and year by year new schools were started to keep pace with the increased desire of Koreans in general for education... As already alluded to, in an old school for Korean children nothing but Chinese writing and classics was taught, and pupils derived from them little practical knowledge of daily life, whereas in founding modern schools these subjects were given much less importance, and new subjects, such as arithmetic, geography, the Japanese language, etc., were included in the curriculum.²⁰

The emblematic photograph of the pre-modern Korean school found in almost every CGG publication shows approximately 20 young students sitting on an open floor and reading books (Figs. 8 & 9). A teacher sits among the students; although he may be speaking, there is no evident interaction between the teacher and the students. The students are not even looking at the teacher; in fact, some are sitting facing outward. Although the students appear very attentive, exactly what the students are doing is ambiguous: some appear to be listening, others reading, others writing. Although the Confucian educational system was in fact extremely hierarchical, this image sends a different message: the teacher is almost hidden among his students, implying a horizontal (egalitarian and casual), not vertical (teacher-centric and formal), classroom power structure. The most striking thing is the deteriorated building: the dark ceiling without any lighting and the paper door in rips and tatters appears to run counter to a calm and orderly learning environment. The children’s shoes are also scattered carelessly around the space. This disordered, shabby classroom environment delivers the message that the children are receiving an unproductive, unpractical, and uncivilized education.

²⁰ *Annual Report* (1927-1928), pp. 77-78.



Korean Boys at Lessons in a Kuelpang.

Figure 8 & 9. “Before-and-After” photographs: these two are “before” photographs. *Korean Boys at Lessons in a Kuelpang* (left); *Kuelpang, The Old-Fashioned Native School* (right). The left photograph often appears in GGC publications.

In contrast, the GGC shows several “after” photographs of modern schools under Japanese rule (Figs. 10, 11, 12, and 13). The visual symbols in these photographs are uniformity, orderliness, and focus. All the students wear school uniforms, have the same hairstyles, and sit or work at identical desks or tables. They sit or stand in rows and they face a teacher in front. The educational facilities are modern buildings; in Figure 11 the contrasting horizontals and verticals of the architecture reinforce the sense of absolute order. This image focuses entirely on the teacher; the pupils are depersonalized as we see only the backs of their heads. It is evident that the teacher is reading and the students are following along in their books. For the twentieth century Western viewer who is familiar with these visual elements and the culture and colonial narrative of “progress,” the message of the photographs was easily understood: the reformed education is regulated, hierarchical, and systemized, thus productive and advanced. But beyond this, and perhaps more insidious, the “before” images deliver a sense of community and individualism, while the “after” images subtly normalize concentrated authoritarian power, conformity, and the subjugation of individual identity. The photographs and the text reinforce each other. In the annual reports, the GGC writes that, under the Japanese reformed educational program, many Korean students received education in diverse subjects in modern institutions. They also claim that Korean students who went through elementary and secondary education continued their educations in higher institutions or even abroad.

However, Western missionaries who worked among the Koreans gave contradictory accounts.

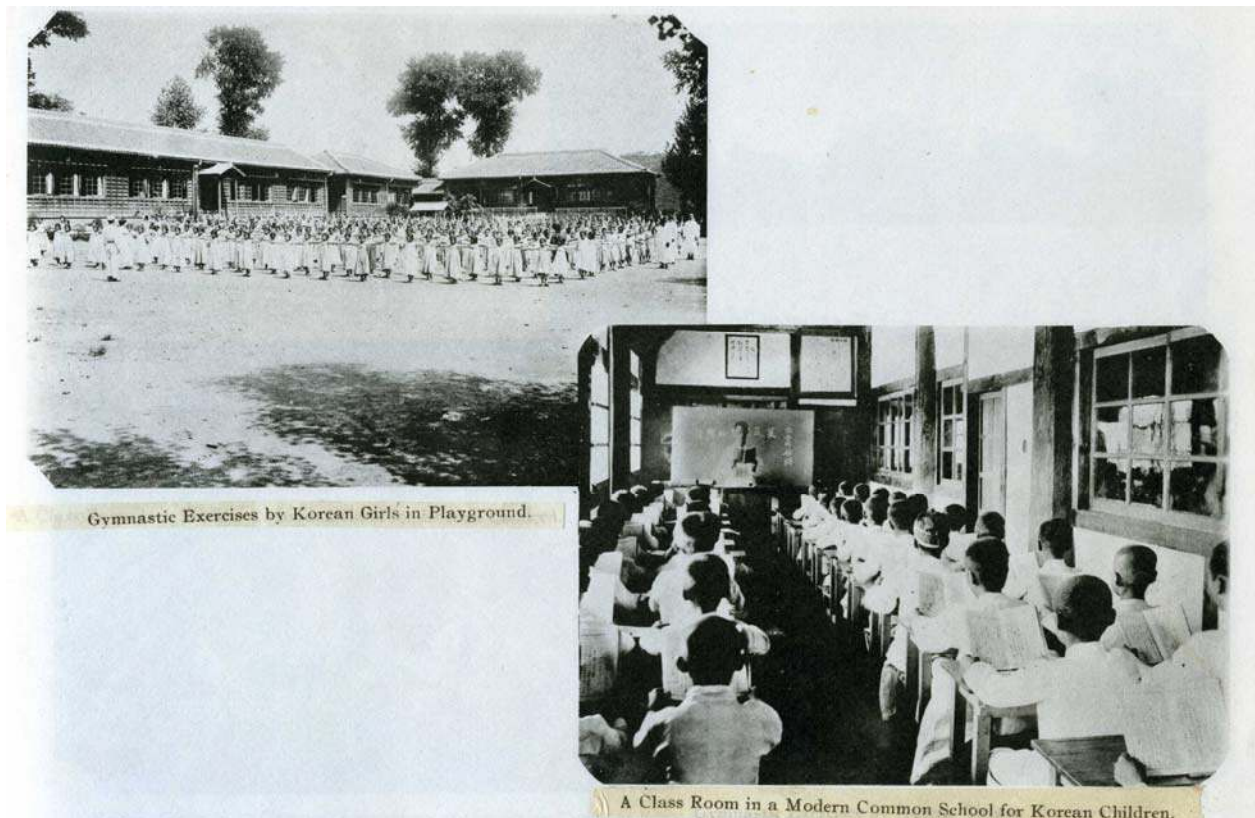


Figure 10 & 11. “Before-and-After” photographs: these two are “after” photographs, *Gymnastic Exercise by Korean Girls in Playground* (upper left); *A Class Room in a Modern Common School for Korean Children* (lower right).

The self-interestedness of the Imperial Japanese rule in Korea is well exemplified in the educational system. A study of it discovers three determining principles: (1) Koreans shall be converted into Japanese, (2) Emphasis shall be laid upon a technical education, but (3) Koreans shall not be entrusted with a liberal higher education. In order to accomplish the first of those aims, the chief subject of study in the common school curriculum is the Japanese language... Korean history is banned... In its place is a history of Japan with Korean history interspersed here and there, much as colonial history is mentioned in a history class in a school in England... It is in the interest of the Japanese imperial idea that Korea should be kept ignorant of modern events, and the authorities are afraid of a thoroughgoing liberal education. Other than the three special colleges, one each of law, medicine, and technical, there are neither academies, colleges, nor a university provided by the government in Korea. The academies that existed before annexation have been abolished and replaced by “Higher Common Schools” of a much lower standard.²¹

Under Japanese rule, education in Korea was in fact limited to primary education. “Although 55.2 Korean children per thousand attended primary school, only 2.8 students per thousand went beyond primary school education.”²²

Another education project presented by the GGC was a “compilation of Korean history.” The GGC wrote that “[the compilation of Korean history] was started in the early days of the present regime, and for the furtherance of it a comparatively large sum of money is yearly appropriated. It was made a Government enterprise because the Koreans, under the influence of Chinese culture, paid much more attention to the history

²¹ *The Korean Situation: Authentic Accounts of Recent Events by Eye Witnesses*, New York, 1919, pp. 112-113. Published by The Commission on Relations with the Orient of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.

²² Grajdanzev, *Modern Korea*, 1944, p. 265.

of China than to their own.”²³

In other words, Korean scholars were unwilling or unable to write their own history, so the Japanese had to help them. Among the many books written about Korea, most take a deprecatory tone such as, Sekino Tadashi’s *Chōsen Bijutsushi* or *History of Korean Art*. A typical passage reads:

The Korean people have been minions of the Chinese, so their art has lacked originality and has always aped Chinese art... The [Korean] national character is generally effeminate, lacking a broad mind and open heart, so its typical art is small in scale and insipidly decorative or gaudy.²⁴

Furthermore, Tadashi claims that the founder of the Korean Dangun (the Korean Dynasty) was a mythical figure, Korea actually began as a Han Chinese colony, and Korea’s last dynasty before Japanese colonization was characterized by political strife and essentially doomed. It stood to reason that Korea was destined to be the colony of a more powerful country. He treats Korean culture as entirely derivative, and writes that no “Korean” culture without Han Chinese cultural domination could either exist or possibly be of interest:

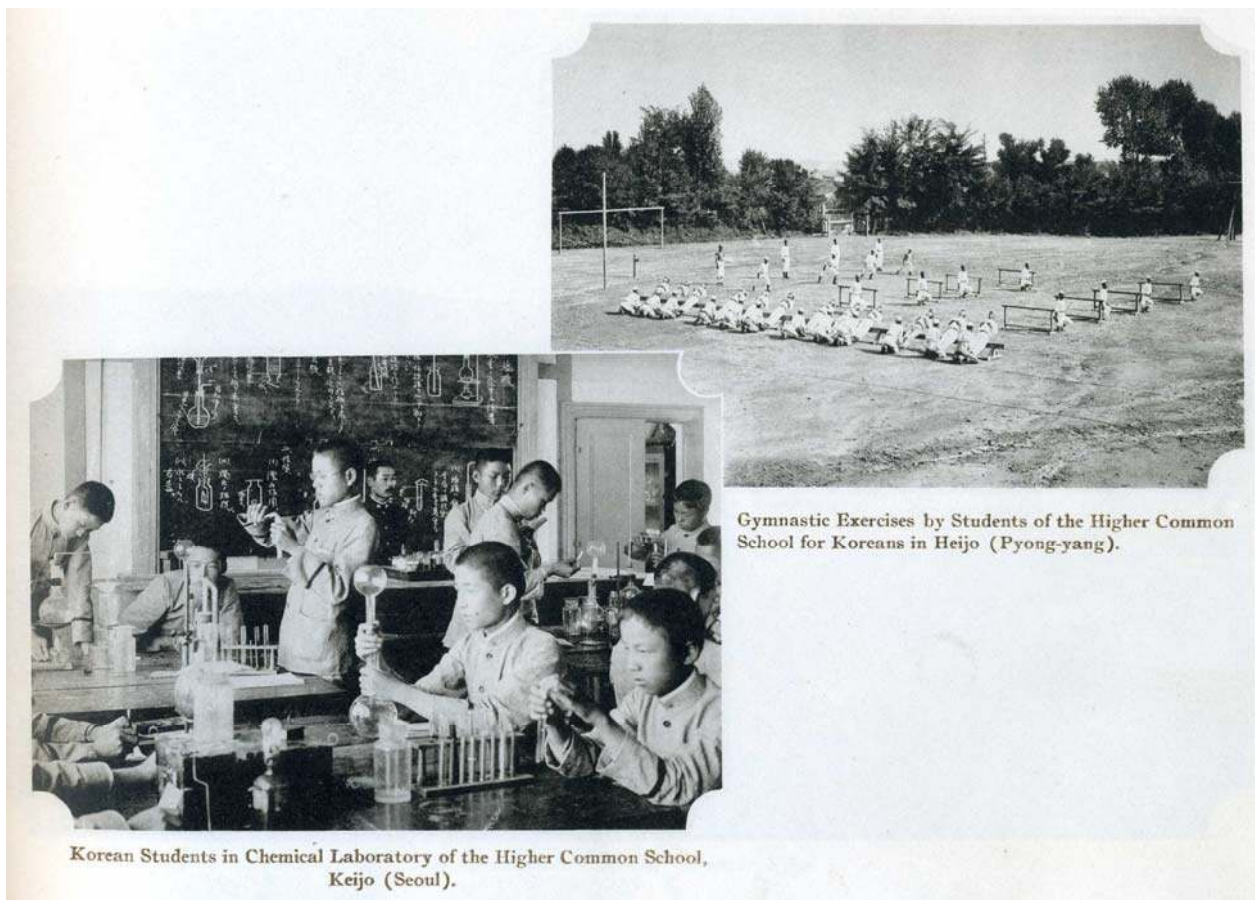


Figure 12 & 13. “Before-and-After” photographs: These two are “after” photographs. Korean Students in Chemical laboratory of the Higher Common School, Keijo (Seoul); Gymnastic Exercises by Students of the Higher Common School for Koreans in Heijo (Pyong-yang) (upper right).

²³ Government-General of Chōsen, *Chōsen of To-day*, 1929, p. 18.

²⁴ Sekino Tadashi, *Chōsen Bijutsushi*, trans. Sim Wu-seong (Seoul, Korea: Tongmunseon, 2003), p. 70.

I suppose that before the Han Chinese immigrated to Korea, native Koreans probably had their own distinctive art and culture, but it was probably very simple and childish, so when the superior [Chinese] art and culture entered [Korea], the indigenous arts must have been overwhelmed and extinguished. Up to today, what we have discovered shows totally the characteristic traits of Han and Chin and there is no hint of native Korean features... Even though some artifacts belong to the native Koreans, their original art and culture had already been extinguished and by that time, they were assimilated with those of the Chinese.²⁵

Later Sekino explains that by the turn of the twentieth century, Korea, due to its own ineptitude, was ready to be conquered again:

During the Chosŏn dynasty, especially in the late period, the literati did nothing but engage in political strife. Confucianism stuck to cumbersome formality and lacked an authentic spirit. As for [Korean] art, it developed its uniqueness separate from Chinese influence to a certain extent, yet its frivolity and feebleness boiled over into ostentation and gaudiness.²⁶

Sekino and other Japanese scholars analyzed Korean art as a mere conduit through which the “mother” culture of China was transmitted to Japan, and emphasized Korea’s submission to great China. This attitude denigrated and ignored Korea’s own traditions, contributions, and subjective experience. The ideology and historical viewpoints established by Japanese colonial scholars became deeply rooted and have been lasting and quite influential in terms of national self-perception, as well as in the outside world’s understanding of the nature of Korean society and culture.

Another pair of “after” photographs illustrates the role of text and omission in photography. The two photos (Figs. 14 & 15) both titled *An Improved Highway* show spacious, attractive rural roads, with Figures standing in the roads to reveal their scale. The photographers or printers overexposed the images so that the roads are shining as if they are unearthly highways. However, as Roland Barthes argues, the meanings of photographs are not self-evident, but are created through the text. In this case, the text reads: “In former times Koreans had practically no roads. Since Japan undertook the administration of the country, the Government has built many highways connecting all the principal cities and towns. Automobile passenger services are maintained throughout the Peninsula.” The description indicates that the inadequate Korean roads were greatly improved and extended by the Japanese, while omitting images of these “inadequate examples.” However, this is only half the story, at best. Koreans had few vehicles to drive on roads and little cause to use them, and furthermore, during the colonial period, Koreans were obliged to register with the police whenever they traveled any significant distance. More importantly, what is also omitted from the message is that the construction of the roads was clearly for Japanese military purposes, and for the transportation of commercial goods to solidify Japanese governmental control; furthermore, the roads were built using loans from Japan with high interest rates to enrich Japanese investors and advance government, military, and commercial interests. In addition, the photojournalism omits any photographs of the Korean labor groups who protested against the forced labor and bad working conditions associated with road-building and other Japanese construction projects. Thus, two photographs purporting to show simple, presumably universally “good” things—lovely country roads—reveal only one small part of a dark and complex story. Yet so great is the power of a visual image that even after all the facts of the story are told, a viewer is still likely to remember the beautiful roads and to recall the stories behind them as only an afterthought, if at all. In fact, as long as they exist, visible

²⁵ Sekino Tadashi, *Chōsen Bijutsushi*, trans. Sim Wu-seong (Seoul, Korea: Tongmunseon, 2003), p. 95.

²⁶ Sekino Tadashi, *Chōsen Bijutsushi*, trans. Sim Wu-seong (Seoul, Korea: Tongmunseon, 2003), p. 279.

monuments—whether in stone or in pictures—are impossible to forget, and invisible stories are difficult to remember.

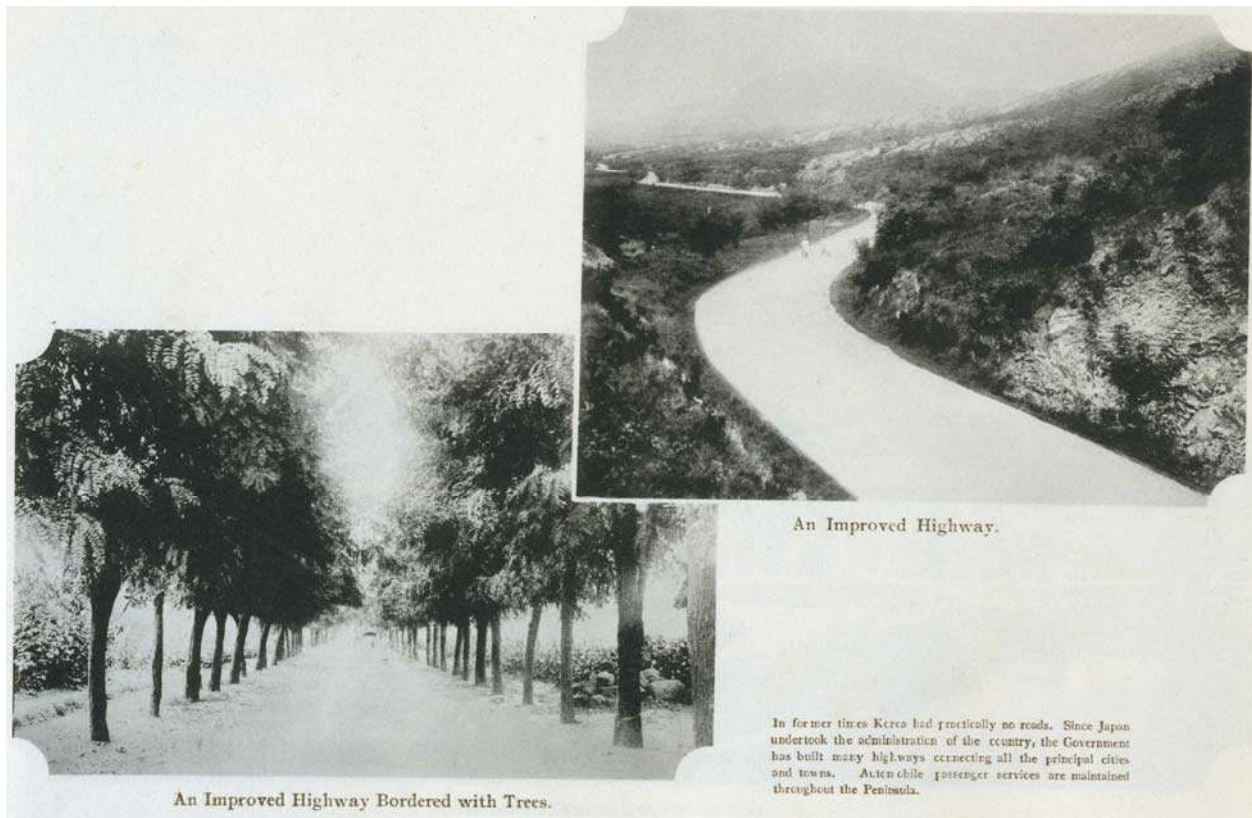


Figure 14 & 15. “After” photographs: *An Improved Highway Bordered with Trees* (lower left); *An Improved Highway* (upper right). Inscribed: “In former times Korea had practically no roads. Since Japan undertook the administration of the country, the Government has built many highways connecting all the principal cities and towns. Automobile passenger services are maintained throughout the Peninsula.”

Invented Stories: The Photographic Series of Happy Colonial Subjects

The last photographic theme is “happy colonial subjects,” depicting the fictitious-like Koreans under the Japanese government. Like the before and after photographs, these photos were meant to weave a narrative of an improved life for colonial people, who benefited from a new and improved quality. However, there are hidden histories within. One photograph entitled *Cherry Blossom Avenue at the Zoological Gardens, Keijo* shows Koreans wearing traditional dress, leisurely strolling under the cherry trees in full bloom (Fig. 16). At first glimpse, this photograph depicts the peaceful life of contented Koreans enjoying a weekend outing. The message here is that the GGC governs well and benevolently in Korea and the people have spare time and are happy and satisfied with their colonial life.



Cherry Blossom Avenue at the Zoological Gardens, Keijo

Figure 16. "Happy Colonial Subjects" photograph: Cherry Blossom Avenue at the Zoological Gardens, Keijo.

Viewers who know the history of this cherry blossom avenue at the zoological gardens might see this photograph very differently. After Korea came under the Japanese protectorate in 1905, the Japanese Resident-General's office occupied the main palace as its administrative buildings, and the Korean royal family was relocated to a subsidiary palace. Under the pretext of entertaining the Korean monarch, the Resident-General's office constructed a zoological and botanical park within the palatial grounds. They also demolished some palatial buildings, including the main hall, built Japanese-style buildings, and planted thousands of cherry trees, the Japanese national flower, within the palace grounds. The royal farming field, where for centuries Korean kings had symbolically planted rice to promote agriculture, was dug up and transformed into a pond (then later a skating rink), and a Japanese pavilion was built on the pond. A road was cut through the Korean royal shrines and exotic animals were imported. In 1908 the royal palace grounds, now a botanical garden and zoo, were open to the public everyday. Thus, the Korean royal palace had been transformed to an amusement park, Korean sovereignty was humiliated, and Korean national pride was symbolically and physically trivialized. Nevertheless, even if the viewer knew this history, the Japanese knew the scene would still be interpreted positively by Western eyes. After all, the parasitic feudal lord's palace had been given to the people, in keeping with democratic values. Nonetheless, the Japanese destruction of the royal palace, a major historical site and the national symbol of the Korean state, is hidden under a photograph representing a democratic scene of a happy Korean family outing in a beautiful public space.

Celebrating the Return of the Crown Prince (Fig. 17) is another photograph astutely manipulated to

support the Japanese political agenda. In this 1921 photograph, thousands of Koreans dressed in traditional white clothing, the *hanbok*, stand in rows in Post Office Square. The photo appears to be an innocent picture of Koreans enthusiastically welcoming back their Crown Prince. However, if we understand its historical background, we see how this photograph is layered in many ways to support the Japanese political agenda. The last crown prince of the Joseon dynasty, known as Young Wang, was the son of Emperor Gojong by his second wife, Princess Sunheon. He was forced by the first Resident General, Ito Hirobumi, to leave Korea at the age of eleven, ostensibly to provide him a better education. However, he was essentially a hostage. In Japan, the Crown Prince attended a military school and graduated as second lieutenant. In 1920, he married Princess Nashimotonomiya Masako of Japan (Fig. 18) while his childhood fiancée, Min Kap-wan, was abandoned and remained single for the rest of her life. The Crown Prince's stay and education in Japan "Japanized" him and during his 1918 visit to his homeland, he needed an interpreter to communicate with his father, the former Emperor Gojong. When the Crown Prince visited Korea, he dressed in a Western-style military uniform, rather than the Korean *hanbok*, and with this dress and his manner, his new identity was that of a Japanese military man. Thus, Koreans celebrating the return of the Crown Prince are welcoming back a national heir who has become, essentially, Japanese. However, if we look at this photograph carefully, the Crown Prince is absent. We see only the celebrators, who are mostly young students, with boys wearing school hats and girls in pigtailed and ribbons. They are holding Japanese flags and Japanese flags are also hung from the tower, increasing the mood of festivity. *Celebrating the Return of the Crown Prince* depicts the youth of Korea holding Japanese flags welcoming whoever or whatever is coming soon—namely, Japanese rule.



Celebrating the Return of the Crown Prince on September 3, 1921; The Crowd in Post Office Square, Keijo (Seoul).
Figure 17. "Happy Colonial Subjects" photograph: Celebrating the Return of the Crown Prince on September 3, 1921;
The Crowd in Post Office Square, Keijo.



Figure 18. Crown Prince Uimin (1897-1970) and his wife, Princess Nishimotonomiya Masako (1901-1989).

The Images of March First Movement, 1919, and the Japanese Response

In contrast, in this war of images, those advocating the side of the Korean underdogs also told their stories through photography. On March 1, 1919, in an uprising against the Japanese, Koreans throughout the land read their Declaration of Independence, signed by 33 leaders of religious and underground patriotic groups, and came out into the street, waving secretly-made Korean flags and shouting “*Daehan Dongnip Manse*” (Long Live Korean Independence). Stories and images of the March First Movement were produced by Westerners in Korea at that time and distributed widely to the Western world. For example, Carlton Waldo Kendall in his book *The Truth About Korea*, published in San Francisco in July 1919, wrote about the March First Movement with quoted descriptions from Western witnesses and included three photographs from that day (Figs. 19, 20, and 21).



Figure 19. Frank W. Schofield. Crowd Gathering for the March First Movement around Deoksu-Palace, on March 1, 1919.



Figure 20. Frank W. Schofield. Japanese Policeman on Guard, March 1, 1919.



Figure 21. Frank W. Schofield. Koreans Gathering for March First Rally around Dongnipmun, March 1, 1919.

Foreigners who witnessed the demonstrations say they were one of the most singular sights they have ever seen. The great white-clad crowds, surging and pulsating with the reawakened freedom, surrounded on all sides by the very Japanese who had inflicted upon them unnamable tortures and depredations—and yet, when at last they had the chance to wreak vengeance for their wrongs, refraining from so doing because they felt it would bring reproach upon the honor of their native land.²⁷

American missionary S. A. Beck took photographs of that day and sent them to the world. Dr. H. H. Underwood acquired the eyewitness accounts and sent them to his friends in the United States, where they were read and recorded in the U.S. Congressional Record. British Canadian missionary Frank W. Schofield (1889-1970) took the definitive photographs of the March First Movement and the Japanese response. He gave 50 photographs to a sixteen-year-old, Jeong Hwan-beom; they included images of demonstrators in front of Deoksu Palace and foreign embassies, the armed Japanese army and police guarding and blocking important areas, police arresting demonstrators, executed Koreans, and the massacre of Koreans by fire in a Jeam-ri church. Jeong delivered the film to independence fighters in Shanghai, who published five thousand booklets

²⁷ Carlton W. Kendall, *The Truth About Korea* (San Francisco, CA: The Korean National Association, 1919), p. 30.

with photographs and detailed Korean and English descriptions, and dispatched them to the world.²⁸ Another very powerful and vivid account of the March First Movement and the colonial life of Koreans under Japanese rule came in the 1919 book *The Korean Situation: Authentic Accounts of Recent Events by an Eye Witness*, which contains 34 texts from personal journals, letters, interviews, and statements by Western missionaries.

News of the Korean independence movement quickly spread. Responding to international skepticism about the quality of their rule, the Japanese GGC changed its description of its governance from “military government” to “cultural rule,” and publicized its reform programs with renewed vigor. Because of the great international impact of the March First photographs, the real purpose of including *Celebrating the Return of the Crown Prince* presented by the 1921 *Chōsen in Pictures* was to reassure a doubtful international (specifically English-speaking) community about the legitimacy of Japanese rule after the debacle of the March First Movement and its aftermath. Beyond depicting happy and excited Koreans gathering under the arrays of Japanese flags, this photograph importantly contrasts with the photos of the March First Movement.

Did these Japanese propaganda photographs work? These photographs seem to have succeeded in delivering their message. British writer John Otway Percy Bland wrote in 1921: “I am convinced that the general conditions of the Korean peasantry and their standard of living are appreciably higher than ever they were, or could have been, under Korean administration.”²⁹ Likewise, Dr. Arthur Judson Brown, Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church of the United States, despite some misgivings, saw much merit in Japan’s program. In 1919 he wrote: “The Japanese have done wonders in Korea. Grant that many of the reforms may be found in a well-regulated penal colony, and a citation of them does not meet all the questions that may be fairly raised. The reforms are nonetheless valuable and praiseworthy.”³⁰

Conclusion

The examination of this small selection of photographs shows that, in the case of official Japanese propaganda, the depiction of the Korean colonial experience is much like many other historic documentations of an oppressed people. In many of these cases the photography is not objective, but polemical. Historians searching for an erased past often turn to evidence of photographs, even more so than esoteric texts and historical documents, rendering photography among the most powerful of consciousness-shaping tools. Nevertheless it is a deceptive medium. Often deciphered as “primary” material, it does not in fact always represent the real experience of the subjects, particularly in the case of the oppressed and colonized. Personal stories and experience may serve us better. As we saw with the March First movement and the more recent Arab Spring, a proliferation of witness accounts, photographs, and notes on personal experience creates a more richly saturated and in situ narrative. However, the question of looking further into “historic” and “contemporary political photographs” and critically examining their context continues to be a key issue in understanding cultures that are obscured or dominated by colonizing forces.

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²⁸ Jeong Hwan-beom, “Gudu *mitchange Samil undong sajingwa pillum sumgyeo Imjeonge Jeondal* (Delivering Photographs and Films on the March First Movement to Provisionary Government by hiding them in the outsole of a shoe),” *Wolgan Joseon*, May 1997.

²⁹ J. O. P. Bland, *China, Korea, and Japan* (London, England: W. Heinemann, 1921), p. 205.

³⁰ Arthur Judson Brown, *The Mastery of the Far East* (New York, NY: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1919), p. 366.

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