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## **Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876-1945**

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Erik Esselstrom

With contemporary Japanese-Korean relations so inextricably entrenched within contentious politics of national identity and divergent expressions of historical consciousness, Jun Uchida's *Brokers of Empire* could not be a more welcome addition to the field of modern East Asian history. By exploring the entire span of Japan's colonial project in Korea from the 1870s until the end of the Second World War, almost entirely from the vantage point of the local Japanese settler community, the book not only builds upon several significant works in the past 15 years by Peter Duus, André Schmid, Alexis Dudden, Mark Caprio, and E. Taylor Atkins, but also exceeds each of those books in a variety of ways.<sup>(1)</sup> Richly deserving of the American Historical Association's John K. Fairbank Prize in 2012, *Brokers of Empire* stands as one of the finest English-language books to date on the highly complex social and political dynamics of Japanese colonial expansionism in Korea.

After defining the categorical terms of her narrative and the theoretical parameters of her analysis in a thorough but appropriately brief introduction, Uchida begins with two chapters that discuss the emergence and early evolution of the Japanese settler community in Korea both before and after formal annexation in

1910. "The world of settlers" (chapter one) describes in rich and substantive detail the trajectory of growth that characterized early Japanese communities in treaty port Korea as well as the social environments they encountered and constructed there during what Uchida calls "the transformation of subaltern migrants into subimperialists" (p. 93). Of particular interest is Uchida's suggestion that it was through experience as settlers in Korea that migrants from the archipelago came to cling more tightly to their national identities as Japanese, as nationalism itself was still a work in progress in the homeland. "Settlers and the state: uneasy partners" (chapter two) then outlines the early stages of a struggle between local settlers and the metropolitan state over conceptions of citizenship that would continue to shape the contours of colonial rule in Korea for decades to come. Beginning with opposition from Japanese residents to Itō Hirobumi's plans for "self-rule" in the protectorate Korean state after 1905, Uchida charts the evolution of a fascinating dichotomy in which Japanese residents often sought to secure their own rights as Japanese imperial citizens by advocating the denial of those rights to Korean imperial subjects. This anxiety became especially acute within the context of debates over Japan's official policy of "assimilation" (*dōka*) during the era of military rule in 1910-19, and the dissent voiced by Japanese settlers over these matters is the first of many examples in the book illustrating the ways in which Japanese colonial power was constrained by the activism of local residents.

The next four chapters provide a deeply textured and rigorously documented history of the Japanese settler community in Korea during the 1920s. "Building an empire of harmony" (chapter three) takes as its focus the policy of *naisen yōwa*, or "harmony between Japanese and Koreans" which emerged as a tempered version of "assimilation" (*dōka*) in response to the dramatic and widespread independence demonstrations of early 1919. Recognizing that brute military force alone could not sustain Japanese colonial control in the wake of the March First Movement, Governor-General Saitō Makoto embraced instead a policy emphasizing the necessity of cultivating legitimacy for the colonial state and encouraging collaboration with colonial subjects. Whereas Japanese settlers had often resisted earlier political initiatives of the colonial regimes, now they too understood by and large that at least some accommodation to Korean nationalism was unavoidable. Thus, state-sponsored civilian groups such as the Dōminkai worked closely with colonial authorities to propagate this "new ideological framework for guiding Korean participation in Japanese colonial citizenship" (p. 185). Such efforts were often undermined in practice, however, by deeply embedded notions of cultural superiority on the part of Japanese settlers, as Uchida illustrates in "The discourse on Korea and Koreans" (chapter four). While the construction of this "colonial archive" was intended to cultivate greater affinity between the two, the knowledge produced by both local writers and state ideologues instead reinforced conceptions of Korean backwardness and Japanese modernity, breeding an intellectual milieu in which assimilationist and discriminatory rhetoric "became virtually synonymous" (p. 201).

While the preceding two chapters make clear the forces that brought settlers and the colonial state into closer cooperation, the next two reveal ways in which Japanese settlers could nonetheless still act in opposition to state directives when local circumstances dictated such. As Uchida argues in *Industrializing the Peninsula* (chapter five), the home government in Tokyo was inclined to view Korea as a primarily agricultural colony from which resources could be extracted to facilitate the ongoing industrialization of Japan's homeland economy. Both local Japanese business leaders and burgeoning Korean capitalists, however, saw more to be gained in the pursuit of greater opportunities for industrial development on the peninsula. All of which, of course, did not preclude Japanese settlers from advocating the protection of their industrial interests from Korean competition. In short, we can see in the jockeying over economic policy between Japanese settlers, Korean business elites, the colonial government in Seoul, and the metropolitan regime in Tokyo the multi-faceted origins of Korea's industrialization emerge in the 1920s, not during the wartime era of a decade later as is so commonly believed. Likewise, with "In search of a political voice" (chapter six) Uchida lucidly explains how local Japanese settlers and Korean elites often shared a desire to strengthen their respective political positions against the authoritarian colonial state. For many Korean elites, however, this meant pressing for more genuine forms of participation that would ultimately lay the foundations of full political independence. Japanese settlers, on the other hand, sought to limit the reach of both colonial and metropolitan authorities in order best to protect their own local political and economic interests, not as any brand of support for Korean nationalist aspirations.

Uchida closes her analysis with two chapters elucidating the impact of war on the Japanese community in Korea from the early 1930s until Japan's surrender in 1945, turning first in "The Manchurian impact" (chapter seven) to the Japanese invasion of China's northeastern provinces in the autumn of 1931. Just as their homeland compatriots did, Japanese settlers in Korea eagerly embraced the formal military occupation of Manchuria and saw in it tremendous opportunity for economic advancement. Moreover, the tension that had characterized relations between local Japanese brokers of empire and their imperial state during the 1920s became less apparent, since enjoying the benefits of Japanese control in northeast China necessitated their closer cooperation with colonial and metropolitan authorities. The numerous moral suasion (*kyōka*) campaigns then being promoted at home and throughout the colonies are an effective case in point. Significantly, Uchida also highlights the paradox contained within this pattern by which her brokers of empire experienced "a combination of growing leverage and declining autonomy in the course of the 1930s" as their voice in colonial policy grew louder while their ability to function without state support weakened (p. 354). In her final section, "Citizens and subjects under total war" (chapter eight), Uchida follows this course in the transformation of relations between settlers and the state through an analysis of how what had begun in the early 1920s as a desire for "harmony between Korea and Japan" (*naisen yōwa*) became a policy of militarily enforced "unity between Korea and Japan" (*naisen ittai*) after full scale war with China erupted in 1937. Although the enthusiastic activities of local groups such as the Ryokki Renmei (Green Flag League) provide additional evidence of ever-deepening connections between the wartime ideals of settlers and the state, Uchida reminds us that in the implementation of "imperialization" (*kōminka*) policies after 1940 old patterns of local resistance to state policies could still be detected. As the imperial state tried to eliminate distinctions between Koreans and Japanese in order to utilize more efficiently Korean resources (material and human) in the war effort, local Japanese settlers often rejected any moves designed to dismantle the structures of power and privilege upon which they depended to dominate local Koreans. The book ends with a poignant and well-conceived conclusion in which Uchida not only reiterates her core interpretive interventions, but also reflects upon the legacies of Japanese colonial experience in Korea for the problem of politicized wartime memories in East Asian society today.

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in the author's command of a dizzying array of sources in Japanese and Korean. Very few scholars to tackle this subject before have done so with such mastery of relevant materials in both languages. Even more impressive, however, is the interpretive depth of Uchida's analysis, especially concerning the interconnectivity of domestic Japanese politics and colonial settler activism. The political behavior of Japanese settlers in Korea, Uchida contends, is inseparable from the concurrent construction of imperial democracy on the home islands, and she makes a persuasive case for this view.

Equally significant is Uchida's delicate treatment of Korean collaboration during the Japanese colonial era. Through her focus on local conditions and actors, the interplay between Japanese business people, state officials, and Korean elites is understood within a proper context that illuminates the gritty inner workings of colonialism from the ground up, thereby upending the sort of ahistorical moral judgments on 'collaborators' quite common in much post-war East Asian scholarship.

Uchida's contributions in *Brokers of Empire* to our understanding of modern colonialism itself are also substantial. By drawing many comparisons between the Japanese presence in Korea and French rule in North Africa, for example, she situates Japanese imperialism within the broader framework of global empire-building at the turn of the 20th century and in doing so renders Japanese experience globally comprehensible, rather than nationally exceptional. Perhaps most importantly, Uchida reveals the colonial state to be riddled with ideological contradictions and bound by numerous practical limitations. The impact of the Japanese colonial government on Korean life cannot be adequately understood from a perspective that privileges only the regime. What Uchida does so brilliantly is construct a multi-layered conception of colonial power within which local Japanese settlers and business leaders, resident Korean social elites, Japanese civilian and military colonial officials, and metropolitan bureaucrats and politicians in Tokyo all vigorously contended for influence and advantage. To examine Japanese imperialism through the lens of settler society then, Uchida rightly concludes, is 'to look beneath and through the state' and 'deepen our understanding about the dispersal of power' in a colonial environment (p. 396).

The academic study of Japanese imperialism in English has experienced a boom during the past 20 years with the appearance of a terrific variety of studies on the Japanese colonial occupations of Manchuria, Taiwan and Korea. While *Brokers of Empire* is ostensibly a book about Japanese colonialism in Korea, no one writing on any geographical region of the Japanese empire can afford to ignore this work. Moreover, scholars of European empire in Asia and Africa also stand to learn much from what Uchida offers here. *Brokers of Empire* is a remarkable achievement that sets a high standard for future scholarship on the history of modern East Asia and imperialism itself.

## Notes

1. Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), André Schmid, *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York, NY, 2002), Alexis Dudden, *Japan's Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power* (Honolulu, HI, 2005), Mark Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (Washington, DC, 2009), E. Taylor Atkins, *Primitive Selves: Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910-1945* (Berkeley, CA, 2010). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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