On the Margins of Empire: Buraku and Korean Identity in Prewar and Wartime Japan

by Jeffrey Paul Bayliss
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In recent years, the study of empire has emerged as a dominant trend in Japanese history. In sharp contrast to earlier works that relegated the outer regions, or *gaichi*, of the Japanese empire to Japanese international relations, diplomatic history, and economic history, these recent works have revealed the extent to which Japan's colonies and its own subjects abroad were integrated into the world of the home islands, or *naichi*. While some of these works have shed valuable light on the complex and fraught relationship between Japanese imperial subjects and colonial subjects abroad, as Jeffrey Paul Bayliss points out in his introduction, the similarly complex and at times violent relationships between marginalized and majority populations in Japan proper during this same period has been conspicuously neglected. *On the Margins of Empire: Buraku and Korean Identity in Prewar and Wartime Japan* is Bayliss's effort to fill this gap. Focusing on two key populations—burakumin and zainichi Koreans (Koreans in Japan proper)—he examines how the larger context of empire, and its attendant ideologies, shaped each group's experience of discrimination, how they attempted to transform their place in society through a variety of means and strategies, and, finally, how

these two groups interacted with each other as they each attempted to carve out a space of legitimacy in a society that labeled them as inadequate imperial subjects.

Bayliss acknowledges the heavy debt he owes to previous scholars, particularly those Japanese scholars who are activists dedicated to advocating on behalf of these two groups while also meticulously examining sources to produce histories of them. At the same time, he also argues that much is lost when scholars focus on only one minority group, because many of the same issues and limitations applied to multiple groups. In the case of burakumin and zainichi Koreans, racialized ideology that legitimized imperial expansion also rendered these two groups "not quite" imperial subjects. At the same time, the application of a putative "scientific" logic based on social Darwinism and pseudo-biology relied on early modern precedents—such as the mistaken but entrenched belief that burakumin were genetically distinct from other Japanese, and possibly even sub-human—to legitimize justifications of discrimination and marginalization. In other words, by approaching the experience of marginalized groups in pre-war and wartime Japan from a comparative perspective, Bayliss argues, it is possible to shed light on aspects of Japan's modernity and imperialism left in the shadows by other studies of imperialism, or that focus on just one minority group.

Structurally, Bayliss approaches this comparative study chronologically, beginning with how discriminatory attitudes towards both groups developed within a rapidly shifting international context in the Meiji period, and extending through the politically dynamic Taishō period to the economic crisis of the early 1930s through the demands of total war mobilization and the complete devastation at the end of the war. Each chapter addresses both groups; however, while he argues for the critical need of a study that attempts to consider more than one minority group at a time, the sections on each side remain largely segregated. This study provides great detail on both burakumin and zainichi Korean

organizations, political engagement, and key figures, and for that alone, makes a valuable contribution, since there is currently little available in English-language scholarship. At the same time, an integrated approach would not only engage more effectively with complex issues such as inter-"minority group" conflicts (which he addresses only briefly in the last chapter), but it would also contribute towards making a more convincing case for why a comparative study is qualitatively superior to the single-minority group studies that have preceded it.

Chapter one establishes the historical context of discriminatory attitudes towards both burakumin and Koreans within Japan. Bayliss addresses the link between early modern precedent and Meiji-era attitudes towards both groups. In the case of burakumin, who had been subject to systematized discrimination for some time, the issuance of the "Kaihō-rei," an ordinance that "liberated" burakumin (who were also referred to by the pejoratives *eta* or *himin*) from their subordinate status, created new complications. The ordinance may have ostensibly removed the devastating stigma that had defined all burakumin social interactions in the previous era, but it did not in any way promise equality with other Japanese. As Bayliss argues, as a result of this liberation, burakumin were in theory emancipated, but simultaneously expected to know their place. At the same time, the abolition of their untouchable status also meant that burakumin now had to economically compete with non-burakumin who entered into businesses that had been the monopoly of burakumin because of the taboos associated with their work. Thus, emancipation began with ambivalence.

In the case of Koreans, somewhat surprisingly, Bayliss focuses on developing Japanese attitudes towards Korea, and Koreans there, and not towards Koreans who were already living in Japan. On one hand, since the focus of the book is on how Koreans who migrated to Japan following colonization responded to life in the *naichi*, this makes some sense. On the other hand, however, this comparison feels out of place. Bayliss highlights the significance of social Darwinism in how both

burakumin and Koreans were viewed. Whereas burakumin were accordingly deemed biologically threatening and therefore detrimental to the nation's survival, Koreans were viewed as stagnant, and thus unworthy of independence.

Ultimately, Bayliss argues that the two wars Japan engaged in during the Meiji period, the First Sino-Japanese war and the Russo-Japanese war, both were instrumental in fixing attitudes towards both burakumin and Koreans. Burakumin are increasingly seen as both criminal and racially different, and Japan's political interference in Korea, along with An Jung-geun's assassination of Itō Hirobumi, then Resident General of Korea, make Koreans also seem dangerous and untrustworthy at the precise moment they are being forced into the empire.

After establishing how stereotypes of burakumin and Koreans are forged over the course of the Meiji period, in chapter two, Bayliss next turns to how these communities respond to these stereotypes. As he himself acknowledges, since he is forced to rely on an archive dominated by each community's elites, his analysis of their responses—particularly in this earlier period—reflect elite attitudes that are often critical of the rest of their communities. For example, the economic elites among the burakumin—who relied on members of their community for the labor that powered their industries—practiced a policy of "conciliation." Rather than question the logic of discrimination that consigned them to a subordinate and suspect position in Japanese society, these elites focused their disapproval on those in their own community with fewer financial resources, blaming their inability (or refusal) to conform to social norms as the basis for the discrimination to which they themselves were subjected. Towards this end, this self-appointed leadership promoted education, emergency aid (in times of crisis), and economic stability as the factors that would surely elevate their own status. They also became enthusiastic boosters of the state's policies, particularly abroad, throwing their full support behind war efforts and territorial expansion.

In the case of Koreans, whose numbers in Japan were still quite limited until the 1920s, the earliest responses to Japanese stereotyping came from students who were studying abroad in major Japanese cities. Many of these students, who struggled to support themselves while studying, became increasingly aware of the derogatory and negative ways in which they—and all things Korean—were perceived.

Chapter three focuses on the post-World War I context, and how shifts in the international context appeared to offer new possibilities to these minority groups. For burakumin, being scapegoated by the press following the 1918 rice riots raised their awareness of systematic discrimination and marginalization. For Koreans, the labor shortage in the *naichi* during the wartime economic boom led to a sudden increase in the working class population of Koreans, shifting this community's concerns from those of students to those of laborers (and eventually, families). The March First movement on the Korean peninsula, and the eventual disappointment brought on by the violent suppression of this series of protests for Korean independence by the Korean Government-General, serves as significant context to shifting ideas for the Korean community in Japan. For both groups, the 1920s was a key period when efforts to gain acceptance by majority society were replaced by more politically engaged efforts to demand that majority society change both attitudes and discriminatory and marginalizing policies and practices. This chapter also introduces the key organizations that advocated on behalf on their communities: the Suiheisha for burakumin, and the Sōaikai for Koreans. However, while the Suiheisha's platform emphasized transforming majority attitudes of burakumin, the Sōaikai enjoyed the patronage of the colonial administration, and engaged in strike-breaking and community surveillance in addition to providing social welfare services for the community.

One valuable contribution Bayliss makes in this chapter is his discussion of the government officials who most often interacted with both minority groups. For example, Terauchi Masatake, who served as

the first Governor-General of colonial Korea and is often considered a key force behind the brutal "military rule" policy that dominated until the March First movement, was the Japanese prime minister when the rice riots occurred, and homed in on burakumin as a group to blame for the "criminal" behavior of rioters. This overlapping of colonial and *naichi* bureaucrats and officials helped to legitimize discriminatory attitudes towards both groups.

The next chapter addresses how different advocacy groups strategically used ethnic and class identities in their efforts to improve conditions for their communities. For example, Bayliss argues that in the case of Koreans, a small group of students shaped the Korean labor movement, emphasizing class over ethnicity, which enabled them to forge alliances with more radical Japanese labor groups. Both groups experienced growing pains as political disputes and ideological disagreements led to new groups splintering off of the more established ones. Even efforts to forge alliances with majority Japanese groups led to the anxiety that their own specific needs and interests would be obliterated by the majority group's broader concerns.

Chapters five and six shift attention to the period leading up to and during the Second Sino-Japanese War and then World War II. In addition to addressing the degree to which these minority groups were particularly vulnerable to the disastrous effects of the Great Depression, Bayliss also introduces government strategies and policies, as well as community-generated programs, intended to demonstrate the allegiance and loyalty of these groups to the nation, and their desire to contribute to the total war mobilization effort. Some, such as a specific campaign to encourage burakumin migration to Manchukuo, failed completely. Efforts to "imperialize" Koreans in a manner similar to "*kōminka*" in colonial Korea had uneven success, in part because of the continuing low level of Japanese language proficiency among Koreans, despite the tremendous growth and increasing stabilization of this group. Chapter six examines the effects of wartime mobilization and increasing surveillance and

scrutiny of the organizations that claimed to speak for these minority groups. Bayliss argues that while suppression was experienced—some groups like the Suiheisha were forced to disband—other minorities found new opportunities, such as the zainichi Koreans who were elected into the lower house of the Diet.

The book concludes with a chapter that asks why there was so little cooperation between these two groups when a shared experience of marginalization and discrimination could have led them to join forces to attempt broad changes. Bayliss suggests that despite being subject to discrimination rooted in similar forms of racialized logic, these two groups mostly viewed each other as inferiors rather than as potential allies because each subscribed to the same logic that marginalized them. For instance, for Koreans, who were familiar with *baekjeong*, or the untouchable class in Korea, burakumin were their inferiors. For burakumin, Koreans were foreigners and thus inferior to them and also incapable of being fully assimilated as good imperial subjects. Thus the privileging of race or class identities precluded the possibility of a pan-"marginalized" identity that could oppose majority society with greater effect.

Bayliss's work makes a valuable contribution by filling a gap in existing scholarship. Certainly in English-language scholarship, few works have attempted to provide as extensive a study of either group. An even more integrated approach that actively engaged with the interactions among these groups—moving beyond comparing the specific circumstances experienced by each group—would further achieve the aims Bayliss sets out in his introduction. Nonetheless, this extensive study provides a crucial first step towards examining the fraught and complex implications of imperialist ideology for those minority groups that are often overlooked in studies of the Japanese empire.