

Imperial Japan's 'Civilization' Rule in the 1910s and Korean Sentiments: The Causes of the National-Scale Dissemination of the March First Movement*

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I. Overview of the March First Movement

On the First of March 1919, when the Japanese Government-General of Joseon was confident that its “civilization” (*bunmei*) colonial rule had achieved considerable success, Koreans revolted nationwide against Japanese rule. The nationwide resistance set off in Seoul at 2 pm on that day eventually spread to the entire country. Starting from Gyeonggi and Pyeongan Provinces, the movement disseminated mainly through networks of railroads and roads. By mid-March, it reached rural counties and, finally, villages in mountains. It peaked from late March to early April but was ruthlessly quashed by police and troops around late April and early May. The colonial police estimated that there were 1,214 protests with approximately 1.1 million participants, but given that these figures are from colonial authorities, who are prone to minimizing the scale of natives' liberation activities, the actual numbers were likely much higher. Moreover, considering the fact that the protests sometimes took place several times on the same day at the same location and that small-scale protests in remote areas often went unreported, it is not implausible that the number of protests exceeded 2,000 incidents and the number of participants reached approxi-

mately two million.¹

At the beginning, the thirty three representatives of the Korean people were the main instigators, but it has been revealed that intellectuals, including students and religious leaders, and religious organizations, such as Christianity and Cheondogyo (Religion of the Heavenly Way), made significant contributions to the dissemination of the movement. In the later stages, however, protests spread and evolved by the grassroots power of the peasant class. The phrase “a spark of fire has spread like a wildfire on a field” was not simply literary rhetoric; Koreans nationwide rose up on their own against Japanese rule, risking their lives. Although the goals and scales of the protests were different, almost every member of the Korean nation stood in opposition and fought against the Japanese colonial rule in their own way. It was an unprecedented national-scale movement against colonial power in world history.

The movement was manifested in many different ways, but most incidents were nonviolent protests, especially those led by students and religious leaders. In rural towns, protests commonly took place on market days, when a large number of locals would congregate: mobilizing the market crowd, protesters would shout together “*Daehan Dokrip Manse!* (Independence for Korea!).” Even in cases where violence was involved, weapons were clubs, sickles, and stones at best, and the violence was targeted mostly at low-level colonial agencies, such as village offices, military police outposts, and police stations. Nevertheless, violence from protesters was rare until brutal crackdowns by Japanese police and civilian bodies of veterans and firemen began and until the protestors needed to rescue arrested compatriots. The colonial government recorded the number of victims during the suppression of this Movement to be 7,645 deaths, 45,562 injuries, and 49,811 arrests.²

² This paper is a shortened revision of Kwon Tae-eok's “'Civilization' project of Japan and Korean's perception in the 1910s,” *Korean Culture* 61 (March 2013).

¹ Kim Jin-bong. *Samilundongsayeongu [A Study on the History of March First Movement]* (Paju: Kookhak, 2000), 198-99. cf. The population of Korea at that time was approximately 16.7 million.

² *Ibid.*, 296.

II. Nationwide Protests and the Cultural Change of the 1910s

What made this anti-colonialist movement spread nationwide when there was no leadership that orchestrated it? What are the factors that made it possible? The March First Movement was a collection of individual grass-roots revolts without a control tower; therefore, it is not easy to summarize its causes into one or two factors. Imperial Japan analyzed the main causes of this massive-scale rebellion to be (1) the misinterpretation of Woodrow Wilson's Self-Determination Doctrine and (2) the spread of a rumor that King Gojong was poisoned to death.³ The Imperial analysis implies that the Movement was a mishap occasioned by the misinterpretation and rumor, obviously identifying these two as the main factors that ignited Koreans' rebellion.

World War I itself was a significant event in world history. It brought dramatic shifts in the views of intellectuals living under colonial rule. The war revealed the true face of Western Civilization—full of contradictions and absurdities and not 'all good and beautiful'—and cast doubts on its pretending world views.⁴ Hence, the demand grew for reform of the world order from one ruled by the law of the jungle to one ruled by human principles; the optimism that a new society founded on justice would eventually arrive also grew. In the same vein, a hope emerged for a new world where the proletariat and the colonized would be no longer oppressed.⁵ At the

³ Joseon Military Office Headquarters, "Public Sentiments Before the Riots," in *Classified-Reports on 1919 Joseon Riots* (1919).

⁴ Kwon Bodeu-rae, "Jinhwaronuy Gaengsaeng, Inryuuy Tansaeng—Cheongubaeksipnyeondaeuy Insikronjeok Jeonhwangwa Samilundong" [Rebirth of Evolutionism, Birth of Homo Sapiens—Epistemological Shift and the March First Movement], in *Cheongubaeksipgunyeon Samwol Ilile Muda [Asking to the First of March 1919]*, eds. Park Hyeon-ho and Ryu Joon-pil (Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University Press, 2009), 123.

⁵ Heo Soo, "Jeilcha Segyedaejeon Jongjeon-hu Gaejoronuy Hwaksankwa Hanguk Jisikin" [Dissemination of Reconstructionism Aftermath of World War I and the Intellectuals of Korea], *Ibid.*

conclusion of World War I in 1918, the US president, Woodrow Wilson, proposed fourteen provisions of principle for the new world order, which included the proclamation of the self-determination of nations. The Wilson Doctrine was interpreted as an ideological justification for weak and small nations to fight for their rights to life. The thirty three representatives who planned the March First Movement knew that the doctrine did not apply to Joseon under Japan's colonial rule, one of the winning allies in World War I, but their aim was to show the world that Korea, as a nation, had the will to gain independence. Whatever its original intention was, Wilson's self-determination doctrine turned into an ideology that provided a justification for oppressed peoples to fight for their liberation.⁶ In addition to the close of World War I, the year of 1918 had witnessed Russia's Socialist Revolution, the German Revolution, and the Independence of Poland. Even Japan experienced some public disturbances and allowed the establishment of its first parliamentary cabinet. This fluctuating state of affairs in the world accelerated and set the stage for the eruption of the March First Movement.

However, what provoked the wider population of the Korean public was the rumor of the assassination of King Gojong by poison. King Gojong suddenly died on the twenty eighth of January 1919, and the rumor that he had been poisoned to death by Imperial Japan soon became rampant. Gojong was the symbol of Korean resistance against Japanese invasion,⁷ and there was nothing that could provoke more anger from Koreans than his assassination. Mourning for his death quickly spread nationwide: Confucian scholars wore mourning clothes, built worshipping platforms, and paid tribute to him. As the date (March third) of the emperor's entombment approached, mourners thronged in Seoul, disseminating the news of the independence proclamation and protests on March First

⁶ Shin Yong-ha and Shin Il-cheol, "Jesambungwa Jonghaptoron – Samilundong Chilsipjuneon Ginyeon Symposium" [Comprehensive Debates of 3 People at the Symposium for the 70th Anniversary of the March First Movement], in *Samilundongwa Minjoktongil [March First Movement and National Unification]* (Seoul: Donga Daily), 267-69 & 269-70.

⁷ Lee Tae-jin, *Gojongsideaeyu Jaejomyeong [Reexamining the Era of King Gojong]*, (Seoul: Taehaksa, 2000). ※ Refer to the book on King Gojong's resistance against the Japanese annexation of Korea and his effort to protect Korea's sovereignty.

throughout the country.

These two events were undoubtedly critical factors for the start and spread of the March First Movement, but their effects were not potent enough to underpin its national scale. Participating in the Independence Movement itself carried great risks, because at that time, Imperial Japan ruled Korea with an iron fist, largely relying on military police and troops. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine the self-determination doctrine and Go-jong's death as the sole causes of the national-scale rebellion. There must have been additional, more crucial reasons that immediately concerned the lives of the Korean people.

The field of South Korean history has accumulated a considerable amount of research on the subject of the March First Movement, but it has not clearly identified the causes of its national-scale dissemination. Aside from addressing the two events setting the background of the movement, research has not advanced further than addressing Imperial Japan's "brutal rule" as the immediate internal cause of the massive rebellion. Japan's brutal military rule in the 1910s, epitomized by military police, is inarguably the main cause, but it cannot account for all aspects of Japan's colonial rule in the 1910s. However, Mabuchi Sadatoshi has offered an interesting perspective. He noted that the most persistent and fiercest protestors among the movement were those in the peasant class and that the most relentless and fiercest revolts took place in agrarian areas. Resistance was particularly fierce in the provinces of Gyeonggi, Gyeongbuk, and Hwanghae, where peasants' indigenous development of crops and products had been frustrated by Japanese colonial power.⁸ His study has identified that this dynamic factor was directly linked to the lives of the Korean peasantry. Nonetheless, the resentment of the peasantry is still insufficient to explain the national scale of the movement, because the movement encompassed Koreans from various sectors and classes, not just farmers and peasants.

In 1989, South Korea hosted a number of academic events in celebra-

⁸ Mabuchi Sadatoshi, "Characteristics of Joseon's Agriculture in the First World War Era and the March First Movement – Agricultural Production and Colonial Landownership," *The Journal of Joseon History* 12, no. 3 (1975).

tion of the seventieth anniversary of the March First Movement. One of the outcomes was *Studies on March First Liberation Movement of People* (1989), a collection of works by young historians of the Korean History Society, who based their analyses on a Marxist approach. Their works reflected desire to bring about a social revolution in contemporary Korean society, seeking lessons from the achievements of the historic movement. Although their analyses included colonial Joseon's class stratification, they identified that the main force of strife in the movement came from the whole mass of people, with the exception of a small minority of pro-Japanese collaborators. This generic definition of people comes from the fact that colonial Joseon's class stratification was not fully progressed due to its limited development of capitalism. Nevertheless, their research has altered the character of the March First Movement from being a bourgeois-nationalist movement to being a nationalist-liberation movement.⁹

Criticizing the nationalist and Marxist interpretations of the Movement, Yong-jick Kim was the first among South Korean historians to argue for placing the research focus on collective identity and its foundation—namely, ‘culture.’ Adopting theories from the American social science field, he characterized the March First Movement as a national and social movement that arose in the nation-building process of non-western countries. He also argued that the movement was a congeries of three disparate movements with two distinct methods of mobilization—proactive mobilization by public-sphere leaders and reactive mobilization via traditional resources such as local leadership and communal identity.¹⁰ His study has great significance for introducing concepts from world history experiences

⁹ Bae Seong-joon, “Samil Undonguy Nongminbonggiyeok Yangsang [Elements of March First Movements as Peasants’ Uprising],” in *Cheongubaeksipgunyeon Samwol Ilile Muda [Asking to the First of March 1919]*, eds. Park Hyeon-ho and Ryu Joon-pil (Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University Press, 2009), 289.

¹⁰ Kim Yong-jick, “Formation of a Modern State and National Social Movement in Modern Korea: March First Movement (1919) in Comparative Historical Perspective,” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1992), trans. Kim Yong-jick, “Sahoeundonguro Bon Samilundong (*March First Movement seen from Social Movement*), *Hangukjeongchihakheobo [Korean Political Science Review]*, 28-1.

to the analysis of the March First Movement, thus inspiring many Korean historians. However, in concentrating on establishing a theoretical framework, he failed to underpin his theory with facts; for instance, he emphasized culture as an important factor of the movement but did not provide a concrete analysis in relation to historical facts. Nevertheless, his characterization of the March First Movement as a national and social movement remains significant in the research field, and it will be an important subject of discussion in the future.

For nearly twenty years following Yong-jick Kim's work, interest on the March First Movement in general has largely declined, and the focus of the research has shifted to regional case studies, owing to the development of local governments in South Korea. This shift in research trends is related to two circumstances: one, the weakening of the will to solve real-world problems in parallel with the political and social democratization of South Korea, and two, the self-criticism of South Korean historians for having missed diverse aspects of the movement by focusing on social classes and nation, two overarching subjects of historical discourse. These self-criticisms resulted in a new book, *Asking to the First of March 1919*. As indicated by its editors in the preface, the book contains many "articles criticizing the methods of remembering and representing the March First Movement rather than directly discussing the event." This statement exhibits traits of post-colonialism, which still exerts a significant influence on the current academic field. In addition, the book anatomizes societal changes brought by the 1910s, such as the problem of mass society, the influences of mass media, and the formation of people as political agents, thus presenting many new areas of research.¹¹ The formation of mass society and emergence of mass media are indispensable factors when discussing the causes of the national-scale dissemination of the March First movement.

This paper may also be construed as part of the aforementioned post-colonial trend in that it looks into culture beyond the scope of nation and

¹¹ H. Park and J. Ryu, Preface to *Cheongubaeksipgunyeon Samwol Ilile Mutda [Asking to the First of March 1919]*.

social class, but its main focus is to identify factors that caused the nation-scale dissemination of the resistance to the idiosyncrasies of Japanese colonialism in the 1910s. The Japanese Government-General in Korea conducted a massive scale of colonial restructuring under the name of civilization, upsetting the entire foundation of Korean society from the very bottom. The colonial reform denounced Korean traditions and customs, which had been formed through long historical experiences, and the dramatic changes affected and angered Koreans from all walks of life. The Japanese occupation was the first true colonial rule that Koreans had ever experienced, and the associated political, economic, and social changes—that is, the cultural changes—came as a cultural shock to all Koreans. With these circumstances in mind, the paper attempts to identify the motivations of Koreans' national-scale participation in the March First Movement by investigating the characteristics of Japanese colonial rule in the 1910s and the culture shock that Koreans experienced.

III. Characteristics of the Japanese Colonial Rule of the 1910s and the March First Movement

The military rule in the 1910s, epitomized by military police, is often mentioned as a cause of the March First Movement. Even the Japanese referred to their governor-general's policy on Joseon at that time as the tyranny of good intentions. However, a colonial government is not a charity, so it is absurd to assume that good intentions were involved from the very beginning. As Jürgen Osterhammel defined it, colonialism is essentially “any relationship between masters and servants, but one in which an entire society is robbed of its historical line of development, externally manipulated and transformed according to the needs and interests of the colonial rulers,” and “modern colonialism is based on the will to make peripheral societies subservient to the ‘metropolises.’”¹² Moreover, Japan practiced an extreme

¹² Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism-A Theoretical Overview*, trans. Shelly L. Frish (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995), 31.

form of colonialism, executing an assimilation policy of incorporating Korea permanently into the Japanese Empire and thereby replacing Korea's traditional institutions and values with Japan's modernized ones.

Japan's primary purpose in assimilating Korea was to transform it into a supplier of food and resources and a military base for the invasion of the continent. After the Russo-Japanese War, Japan immediately began replicating its economic system in Korea. Both countries valued their currencies the same, which eliminated any functional differences, and shared a common external tariff system. The Japanese land system was also adopted to modernize property ownership in Joseon.¹³ Thus, Joseon's economy ended up on the fast track toward capitalization, and along with it, traditional society rapidly disintegrated.

In addition to economic restructuring, Joseon's administrative institutions underwent dramatic reformation, and a modern and rational legal system including a judiciary was adopted. For instance, in 1914, *myeons* (town-level regional units) were merged and rearranged, and in 1917, a new system of township, wherein a *myeon* became the smallest administrative unit that governed town affairs, was implemented. Consequently, community traditions were obliterated, and the colonial government's policies could penetrate to bottom-level rural communities.¹⁴ As the modern system of administration was shaped, Koreans came to experience an incomparably more powerful form of government than they had previously under the Joseon Dynasty, and the will of the power holder could control and interfere every part of the land and people. The centralized governmental system facilitated efficiency and rationality across Korean society and settle-

¹³ Kim Nak-yeon, *The Korean Economy under Japanese Colonial Rule*, (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 2002), 56.

¹⁴ Kim Ik-han, "Cheongubaeksipnyeondae Iljeuy Jibang Jibae Jeongchaek – Hangejongguhoek Tongpyehapgwa Myeonjelul Jongsimuro [The Japanese Policy of Local Governance in the 1910s – Focusing on Merging and Rearranging Administrative Units and the Myeon System]," *Sahoewa Yeoksa [Society and History]* 50 (1996); Hong Sunk-won, "Iljehogiyu Myeon Unyeonggwa 'Joseon Myeonje'-uy Seongrip [The Management of Myeon in the Early Japanese Colonial Era and Establishment of Joseon's Myeon System]," *Yeoksawa Hyeonsil [History and Reality]* 23 (1997).

ment of the capitalist economic order which was subordinate to Imperial Japan. All these changes were stipulated by numerous new laws and ordinances, such that the new jargon ‘shower of laws and ordinances (法令雨下)’ was coined and circulated at that time.

Meanwhile, the Japanese colonial government meticulously built infrastructure and facilities to fit military purposes. For example, the first governor-general of Joseon, Masatake Terauchi, who was a continental expansionist in the Japanese military and a railroad expert, began the construction of the Gyeongwon and Honam railroad lines immediately after the annexation in 1910. By 1915, his government completed a total of 1,000 miles of railroad network. With the completion of the Aprojok Railroad Bridge in 1911, the railroads crossing the peninsula and those running to Manchuria were made to have the same standard gauge and were connected as one route.¹⁵ When Korean peasants were mobilized to construct the new railroads at that time, they were ordered to build them “as broad as to allow the two largest gun carriages to pass each other.”¹⁶ In short, Imperial Japan was conducting two projects simultaneously under the name of civilization: economic incorporation of Joseon into Japan and militarized transformation of the peninsula for the continental invasion.

The problem, however, was that such projects required an enormous amount of money, but Japan at that time was under financial constraints. Japan barely managed to overcome its fiscal deficit after the Russo-Japanese War with the fortune from World War I, so naturally, it did not have any financial resources to support its colonial reconstructions. As a result, its colonial projects were stagnated and did not progress as planned; hence, it needed to procure necessary resources from the colony. The purpose of its cadastral surveys included the procurement of financial resources, and they were successfully executed, increasing the land tax revenue by 1.8 times between 1910 and 1918. From these additional sources of financing,

¹⁵ Jung Jae-jung, *Iljechimryakgwa Hangukcheoldo [Japanese Invasion and Korean Railroads]* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1999), 106-28 & 141-43.

¹⁶ Hayashi Shigeki, “Reviewing the Old and Learning the New,” in *Memoirs of Joseon*, eds. Wada Yachio *et al.* (Tokyo: [Keijō Chikazawa Shoten], 1940), 70.

the colonial government was able to collect 2.7 times more taxes in 1918 than in 1910 before the cadastral surveys.¹⁷ Despite the tax increase, the colonial government still suffered from financial difficulties and employed various ways to coerce donations. In particular, new railroad constructions in the 1910s drew many complaints about the coercion of donations. All these facts show that the colonial government propelled construction and reformation projects without sufficient financial resources, incurring resentment from natives. What were the reasons for the Japanese Government-General of Joseon to push forward those projects despite insufficient finances? In 1907, Japan had already attempted to deploy two divisions of troops in Korea, deeming Russia as a potential enemy in the Imperial Japan's National Defense Policy and enhancing its armaments. In addition, the world of the 1910s experienced a number of dramatic, history-changing events, such as the Xinhai Revolution in China in 1911, the start of World War I in 1914, and the Russian Revolution in 1917. Japan's military saw this fluctuating geopolitical state of affairs as an opportunity to extend its influence to the continent—Manchuria and China. With this ambition, Imperial Japan hurried the development of Korea in order to transform it into the departure point and military base for the invasion.¹⁸

Another driving force for Japan was its desire to prove that it was a *bona fide* civilized nation that could govern a colony of its own. Although it was able to join the “club of civilized nations” winning the Russo-Japanese War, Japan was still required to prove itself to be as qualified as any Western power, for civilizational criteria for its membership were those of the West. Thus, for Japan, the colonial rule of Korea was closely tied to its honor. To be acknowledged by Western powers, Japan annually published an English report of its reformation and development of Korea,¹⁹ and such

¹⁷ Kim Ok-geun, *Iljeha Joseonjaejeongsang Nongo [A Study of Joseon's Financial History Under the Imperial Japanese Rule]* (Seoul: [Iljogak], 1994), 14 & 27.

¹⁸ Akira Iriye, *Ilbonuy Oykyo [Japan and the Wider World: From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present]*, trans. Lee Sunghwan (Seoul: [Pureunsan], 1993), 73-81.

¹⁹ The American Council of Christian Churches—Committee of Asian Relations [ACCC], “Hangukuy Jeongse (1) – Choygeun Sageondeule Daehan Mokgyeokjadeuluy Sinbingseong

promotional efforts helped it earn praise for its civilization rule in Joseon. Although Japan's colonialist restructuring of Joseon's economy and militarization of its land under the guise of civilization was praised internationally, the problem were the Koreans. Because all the policies and projects were centered on the interests of the empire, it was difficult to satisfy the expectations of Koreans from the outset, no matter how much civilization they presumably achieved. Moreover, these policies placed excessive burdens on Korean people and alienated them from their long-standing traditional order. Additionally, the Government-General and Japanese assumed the role of preceptors of civilization who were enlightening uncivilized Koreans. This arrogance further provoked antagonism from Koreans.

Japan rationalized its colonial rule and exploitation under the name of civilization, and it was, in fact, successful to a certain extent. However, Japan's rationale was not very persuasive to Koreans: Japan had belonged to the same sphere of civilization as Korea, their societal developmental stages had not been much different, and Japanese superiority relied on what was borrowed from foreign civilization. Moreover, Joseon had been reputed to be more civilized in the sphere of Chinese Civilization before Western imperialists extended their influence to the East. Although it was true that Japan was a step ahead in acquiring civilization as noticed by some of the Japanese, it was not a great achievement to the minds of Korean intellectuals.²⁰ Furthermore, the customs²¹ and behavior of low-class Japanese, who came as henchmen of pillaging Joseon, looked far from civilized in the eyes of the Koreans.²²

Issneun Jeungeon [The Korean Situations (1) -Credible Testimonies on Recent Events by Witnesses],” in *Dokripundongsa Jaryojip [Resources of Independence Movement History]* 2, eds. (Seoul: National Institute of Korean History, 1972), 448-49.

²⁰ Anonymous, “Sentiment of Low-Class Koreans” in *Works of the Entire Korea* 43 (1909.4), vol. 3 [*Documents of Modern-era Japanese Perceptions of Joseon*] (Tokyo: [Ryokuin Shobō], 1999), 78-79.

²¹ Shakuo Ikuo, “*The Enforcement of Disciplines*,” (1909), *Ibid.*, 201-02

²² Takasaki Soji, *Sikminji Joseonyu Ilbonindeul – Gunineseo Sangin, Geurigo Geishaggaji [The Japanese in Colonial Joseon – From Soldiers, Merchants, to Geishas]*, trans. Lee Gyusu, (Seoul: [Yeoksa Bipyeongsa], 2006), 17-28.

A Japanese psychoanalyst, Shu Kishida, suggested that the Imperial Japanese “projected their inferiority complex onto Koreans, which derived from truckling to European and American empires.”²³ That is, to the Japanese of that time, Koreans represented the shameful side of their own image which they wanted to throw off in order to identify themselves as part of Western civilization. In other words, Japan’s contempt of Koreans was an expression of their own inferiority complex.²⁴

In contrast, the Koreans perceived themselves as a people of distinct ethnicity with a more advanced civilization than that of the Japanese. Having been under the rule of a centralized kingdom for a long time, as mentioned by Ito Hirobumi,²⁵ they also displayed a higher sense of homogeneity. However, the lament that Koreans cared only for themselves and their families, neglecting their country, frequently appeared in Patriotic-Enlightenment-Era newspapers including *Dokrip Shinmun* (*Independence Newspaper*) during the final years of the Joseon Dynasty. It was a common persuasion of intellectuals of that time that Koreans must strengthen sense of nation and build a strong and wealthy nation, like Japanese had in defeating Russia. This patriotic-enlightenment movement invigorated the development of the press and civic engagement: a number of newspapers were launched, civic groups were formed, and magazines were published to educate Koreans on civilization and enlightenment. As a result, private schools were founded across the country, reaching 5,000 at one point.²⁶ All these activities contributed to enhancing the Koreans’ sense of nation. As the crisis of Joseon’s sovereignty become increasingly evident with the Japanese intrusion after the Russo-Japanese War, the Koreans’ sense of na-

²³ Kishida Shu, *Psychoanalysis of Bums* (Tokyo: [Seidosha], 1977), 17.

²⁴ Lee Seong-shi, “Godaesaeseo Bonun Gukmingukga [Nation States in Ancient History],” in *Gahap Omphalos Teubyeolho Jeonhu Osipnyeon Symposium: Dongasiaul Gocheo Mutnunda [Kawaii Omphalos – Special Edition of the 50th Post-War Anniversary: Rethinking East-Asian History]*, 32.

²⁵ Sotan Meika, “Difficulties of Governing Korea,” in *Joseon Achievements*, 24 (June 10, 1907), vol. 2 of *Perception of Joseon*, 190.

²⁶ The Association for Korean Modern and Contemporary History, ed., *Hanguk Geundae Hyeondaesa Ganguy [Lectures on Modern History of Korea]* (Seoul: [Hanul], 2013), 119.

tion strengthened even more. The *Donga Daily* pointed out in the 1920s that Korean nationalism emerged after colonial rule began.²⁷ Hence, it is plausible that Korean nationalism grew even stronger after the annexation in 1910, as the Japanese colonial rule forced Koreans to conform themselves to Japanese order and culture.²⁸

In the 1910s, Koreans in general could not voice their opinions or participate in society. Koreans were almost denied political rights, including the freedom of speech. In other words, they were alienated as mere objects in managing social affairs. For example, it came as a great shock to Koreans when their language, the fundamental means of communication and key to their cultural unity, was discriminated under the new social order. In Gwangsu Lee's novel *The Heartless*, there is a scene in which the main character hears a station porter shout "Heizo, Heizo" in the train and he only then realizes that he has reached Pyongyang. This seemingly trivial scene illustrates the fact that Koreans needed to know the Japanese word "Heizo" to take the train to Pyongyang—a symbol of civilization brought by Japan. The Japanese language was imposed as the official medium of instruction at schools, and teaching Korean history was not allowed.

Korean history never experienced such a state of colonialism until the Japanese annexation. The entire nation of people experienced the fall from being the main agents of their society to being mere objects, and this must have evoked despair and feelings of helplessness, loss, and anger. The changes imposed by Imperial Japan upset their conditions of life—namely, their culture—from its very roots. Customs and beliefs familiar to them were suddenly labeled as barbarous and as things to be discarded. Worse, such reformation and transformation was forcibly and humiliatingly imposed upon them by the Japanese, with whom they had a long history of

²⁷ [It was after they had lost the political key and been subjected to the rule of a different nation that the Koreans' notion of pure ethnic nation was awakened and developed]." *Donga Daily* editorial, "Mibalgyeonuy Minjung" [Undiscovered People], (Oct. 27, 1923).

²⁸ Michael Crowder, *Senegal: A Study in French Assimilation Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 36. ※ He argues that the French-style assimilation policy draws more of resistance from natives, inciting their desire to recover their own indigenous culture than the British-style indirect governance.

hostility. These findings all indicate that rebellion was inevitable. The Japanese colonial government also acknowledged that its “rapid reform of all institutions and systems” was a problem in its method of governance.²⁹

Therefore, the dramatic change in culture that affected the lives of Koreans must be investigated as a cause of the nationwide dissemination of the March First Movement. That is, what induced Koreans’ nationwide independence movement was their anger toward the Japanese civilization rule in the 1910s, which brutally, forcibly, and humiliatingly denounced Koreans’ traditional ways of living—their culture—and imposed customs and culture totally alien to them.

With this understanding, the following section examines the meeting minutes of the colonial government police and officials from immediately after the March First Movement, which include reports of public opinions of Koreans collected across the country, especially their complaints and demands.³⁰ By examining these documents, this paper investigates how the policies of the Japanese government affected Korean traditional culture and how this angered Koreans.³¹

²⁹ Park Gyeong-shik, *Joseon's March First Independence Movement*, (Tokyo: [Heibonsha], 1987), 249.

³⁰ Headquarters of the Joseon Military Police, “Reports Submitted to the Meetings of Police and Military Police Chiefs in June 1919,” in *Classified: Circumstances of the 1919 Joseon Incident* - ※ This book of documents is a collection of reports submitted at the meetings of Japanese police and military police chiefs, which collected situations and public opinions from every province of Korea immediately after the March First Movement. Although the reports have limitations, coming from the colonial ruler, they are a reliable source to find out Koreans’ public sentiments at that time, since complaints and demands of Koreans were collected secretly to prepare solutions. Henceforth in the paper, the descriptions of Koreans’ complaints and demands without a source are all from these reports.

³¹ The social and technological development brought by the Japanese civilization rule of the 1910s, such as networks of railroads and roads, establishment of mass society, and new metal printing technology, must have contributed to the nationwide dissemination of the March First Movement. However, this paper focuses on the factors concerning Korean sentiments—their complaints and demands.

IV. Causes of the National-Scale Uprising

1. Denouncing of Customs

To re-discover and re-invent traditionally unregulated social customs as objects of management is said to be an aspect of modern society.³² The most noticeable change that Koreans felt deeply under the colonial rule was the interference and surveillance by authorities that penetrated into every part of their lives. Even worse, it was violently forced upon them by the military police's "Jocho-Gyosei (助長行政)" or promotion policy. This interference created greater discontent when it involved economic matters. In particular, when the interference directly threatened the livelihood of the peasantry—for example, denying the right of the commons after the surveys of forests and fields (Gyeongbuk Province) or banning swidden farming (Gangwon Province)—it evoked strong resistance. James Scott's study on the economy of the Southeast Asian peasantry reveals that restrictions on common access to mountains and forests were what made peasants suffer most under colonial rule.³³ The Japanese colonial government even banned tobacco cultivation and home brewery for the purpose of private consumption.

In terms of traditional customs, the public cemetery law drew constant complaints. All thirteen provinces in Korea raised discontent toward the law, demanding a return. Although the public cemetery system allowed for practical use of land and was a reasonable policy to a certain extent, it went against the Korean customs and sensitivities of the time. In fact, it is unsurprising that the public cemetery law drew such strong resistance from the Koreans 100 years ago, especially when it was imposed upon them by a for-

³² Lee Cheol-wu, "Iljeo Jibaeyu Beopjeokgujo [The Legal Construction of the Japanese Colonial Rule]" & Matsuda Toshihiko, "Junakdamchong-ul Tonghae Bon Cheongubaeksipnyeondae Joseonuy Sanghwanggwaw Minjung" [The 1910s Joseon's Social Situations and People, Focusing on Eavesdropping at Pubs," 381-84, in *Iljeo Siminji Sigiuy Tongchicheje Hyeongseong [Development of the Japanese Colonial Government System]*, ed. Kim Dong-no (Seoul: [Hyeon], 2006).

³³ James C. Scott, *Nongmin-uy Dodeok Gyeongje [The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia]*, trans. Kim Chundong (Seoul: [Akanes], 2004), 92-93.

eign colonial invader, given the fact that a propitious site for a grave (明堂) is still in the Korean discourse of the twenty-first century.

Another source of resentment was sanitation policing. In the imperial period, hygienicists equated filthiness with barbarism and cleanliness with civilization, functioning as a catalyst for colonization. Sanitation and hygiene crackdowns were used as an instrument for the colonial police to control and surveil the private living spaces of natives.³⁴ In fact, there were instances where police intruded on private residences and arrested vagrants on the pretext of sanitation inspection.³⁵

Meanwhile, aristocrats resented that they were treated in the same way as commoners (Gyeongbuk Province). What made them particularly furious was being conscripted for road constructions alongside commoners. The conscription for construction work was one of the major sources of complaints among Koreans at that time. Anger was also often directed at Korean police assistants, many of whom bullied their compatriots and played minions to the Japanese colonial powers. How Koreans perceived of them is well illustrated by the phrase “almost a band of government-authorized thugs.”³⁶ The primary reason for the anger toward them was certainly rooted in their abuses, but the collapse of the traditional caste system could also have contributed to it.

2. Collapse of the Traditional Economic Structure

After the opening of the ports, foreign trade dramatically transformed not only Joseon's economy but also its society. Importantly, the cadastral sur-

³⁴ Kwon Gi-ha, “Cheongubaeksipnyeondae Chongdokbuuy Wisaengsaepgwa Sikminji ‘Sinmin’-uy Hyeongseong [The 1910s Colonial Government's Sanitary Affairs and the Establishment of Officials and Subjects],” (MA Thesis, Yonsei University). ※ The colonial government conducted a big sanitation event twice a year, in spring and fall.

³⁵ “Uyongkkaji Dwijinda Cheongyeolul Bingjahago” [Searching Even Wardrobes on the Pretext of Sanitation], [*The Saehanminbo Daily*] 503 (1918.9.12.), 2.

³⁶ Ministry of Patriots & Veterans Affairs, *Samilundong Dokropseoneonseowa Gyeokmun: Haeoyuy Hangukdokripundongsaryo (15)- Iljeyeon 7 [Korean Declaration of Independence and Manifestos for the March First Independence Movement: Overseas Resources of Korean Independence Movement History (15) - Japan vol. 7]* (Sejong: 2002), 278.

veys expedited the commercialization of land and the deprivation of land from farmers, thus accelerating the disintegration of Joseon's traditional economic structure. According to research by Seong-wu Kim (2006), the agrarian society of Joseon maintained a system of moral economy governed by an 'integrated principle of reciprocity and redistribution.'³⁷ A moral economy pursues collective survival foremost, valuing security and equality in economic activities. It is plausible that such traditional thoughts and practices were still quite prevalent in Joseon's agrarian society around the time of the March First Movement and thus that farmers had considerable resistance to the commodity-currency economy that followed the opening of the ports.

The imposition of genetically modified crops also evoked resentment among farmers. The colonial government pushed farmers to cultivate cash crops, such as genetically modified rice, silkworms, and upland cottons, in order to target the Japanese market, but despite their high profitability, the risk was too high for Korean farmers.³⁸

Taxes also drastically increased after the annexation. As a result of the cadastral surveys, the land tax nearly doubled from slightly over 6 million won in 1910 to approximately 11.78 million won in 1919, and with the introduction of tobacco and liquor taxes, the tax revenue grew by approximately 2.7 times during the same period.³⁹ In 1920, the population of peasantry, both tenant and partial-tenant peasants, comprised 77.2%, while 47.4% of farmers owned less than 5 *danbo* of land (approx. 4958.7 m²),⁴⁰ which suggests that the majority of the farming populace was poor at that time. Therefore, any new taxation would certainly have incurred anger from farmers.

³⁷ Kim Seong-wu, "Joseonsidae Nongminjeok Segyegwangwa Nongchonuy Unyeongwonri" [The Agrarian World View of the Joseon Peasants and Their Principles of Agrarian Community Management], *Gyeongjesahak [Review of Economic History]*, 41 (2006), 278.

³⁸ J. Scott (2004), 36: For the farmers already in financial crisis, resilient and reliable traditional crops are more reasonable choices than profitable cash crops.

³⁹ Kim Ok-geun, 14 & 27.

⁴⁰ Park Gyeong-shik, *Ilbonjegukjuuyuy Joseonjibae [The Colonial Rule of Joseon by Japanese Imperialism]* (Paju: [Cheonga], 1986), 88-89.

3. Contempt and Discrimination

Koreans were further infuriated by the disdain of the Japanese and their discriminatory laws and institutions. The discrimination that started with the annexation can be classified into four types: ① discrimination of Japanese officials and civilians toward Korean officials and civilians, ② discrimination between Japanese and Korean public officers, ③ legal and economic discrimination of Koreans, and ④ discrimination of Koreans in education. The most common incidents of ① discrimination were disdainful and insulting words and acts of the Japanese toward Koreans.

The Japanese generally treat Koreans like slaves. Some of them called even a local man of eminent wealth “yobo,” which is used these days instead of the non-polite Japanese word “omae (お前).” Accordingly, it cannot but be an insult. It is infuriating. (Gyeongnam Province).

The cases of ② were mostly concerning payment and promotion. Those of ③ were overt and covert discriminations that Koreans experienced through laws and policies as the following complaints illustrate: “no Korean is appointed head of a government office” (Gyeonggi Province), “no Korean is allowed to be head of a police office or a court” (Chungnam), “Koreans are not appointed principals of schools” (Chungnam), and “many things are kept secret to Korean officers” (Chungnam). In addition, the fact that the punishment of flogging was only applied to Koreans is suggestive of the discrimination and humiliation that Koreans must have felt at that time.

Regarding ④, discrimination in education, there was a report of complaints from Gyeongnam Province as follows:

Even in education, many colleges and high schools have been founded in Japan, providing civilized education, but Joseon has only inferior primary schools. Even though there are secondary schools, they do not teach civilized education but treat students like custodians or farm workers—even make them clean feces... (Gyeongnam Province)

In other words, it was a complaint on the obscurantist policy of the colonial government, which, while preaching civilization and equality, hardly provided the education of civilization.

4. Surge of Anti-Japanese Sentiment

Although various and specific complaints and demands poured into the Japanese colonial government, the root of all these problems lay in the anti-Japanese sentiment prevalent among the general Korean populace. This sentiment had been formed through a long history of interaction between the two countries, especially through the vivid historical memory of *Imjinwaeran* (i.e., the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592). The military police of Chungnam Province reported the harmful effects of the novel *Imjinrok* [*The Record of the Black Dragon Year*] and determined that the anti-Japanese sentiment originating from *Imjinwaeran* had formed part of the Koreans' ethnic identity.⁴¹

The anti-Japanese sentiment in the subconsciousness of Koreans surged as interactions with Japanese became more active after the opening of the ports. It was triggered by disadvantages that Koreans experienced from the exportation of rice and the intrusion of Japanese merchants and fishermen. The anti-Japanese sentiment was expressed in 1894 during the Donghak Peasant War through peasant insurgents' hostile acts toward Japanese. Moreover, the assassination of the queen (i.e., Empress Myeongseong) by hired Japanese assassins in the following year further ignited the fury of the entire nation. Apparently, even during the process of establishing the Government-General, Japanese authorities were already concerned

⁴¹ Soho Tokutomi: "One of the most difficult parts in the process of annexing and governing Joseon has been their memory of the Imjin War. Most Koreans remember this war, as every province of the country has numerous steles, signboards, tombs, books, and oral legends that commemorate it. However we try, it is impossible to eradicate all of them." translated and requested from Bongwu Ha, "Donghak Gyojo Choi Jewuuy Daeoyinsikgwa Ilbongwan [Donghak Guru Choi Jaewu's Views of the World and Japan]," in Seo Yeonho *et al.*, *Hanguk Geundae Jisikinuy Minjokjeok Jaahyeongseong: Ilje Sikminji Cheheomul Neomeoseo* [*The Development of National Identity of Modern Korean Intellectuals: Overcoming the Japanese Colonial Rule*] (Seoul: [Sohwa], 2004), 182.

about the anti-Japanese sentiment among Koreans. Such sentiment escalated further with the annexation, as a large number of Japanese then moved to Korea and enjoyed various privileges while discriminating against Koreans. The long-standing belief of Koreans, which was based on their interpretation of Confucianism, was that they were a people of superior manners, honor, and principles,⁴² and this belief aggravated their dormant hostility when the Japanese disregarded and insulted them.

5. Soaring Demand for Civilization and Frustration

During the early dissemination period of the March First Movement, Christianity and Cheondogyo played a major role in the north, while students and intellectuals took the lead in the middle and southern provinces.⁴³ They were the group of Koreans who experienced civilization first and hence had the strongest aspiration for civilization. Although the education at colonial schools was fundamentally based on the assimilation policy, it was still a gateway to civilization. In particular, students at private schools that were founded and run by missionaries were more exposed to Western civilization. Because those students had good knowledge of civilization and a strong desire to attain it, the colonial government's hypocritical civilization campaign would have particularly frustrated them. Thus, those who were more exposed to civilization naturally undertook the role of igniting the March First Movement. Additionally, most public and private schools were located in cities that were transportation hubs connected by a network of modern railroads and large new roads, and the most notable hub was Seoul, the capital city. At that time, Seoul was swarmed by a throng of people from every part of the country who came to mourn the death of King Gojong; they turned into protesters demanding independence, making Seoul the epicenter of the nationwide liberation movement. The movement naturally spread from Seoul via railroads and roads to ev-

⁴² MPVA, *Samilundong Dokropseoneonseowa Gyeokmun: Haeoyuy Hangukdokripundongsaryo (15)- Iljeyeon* 7, 189.

⁴³ Mabuchi, "Characteristics of Joseon's Agriculture in the First World War Era and the March 1st Movement – Agricultural Production and Colonial Landownership" 130.

ery part of the country.

Cheondogyo, a native religion founded by the Donghak Movement of the peasantry in the nineteenth century, suffered a severe backlash after the failed peasant uprising in 1894. Its leader, Sohn Byeonghui, transformed himself into a strong advocate of civilization⁴⁴ and encouraged his followers to accept civilization after he had witnessed the success of the Meiji Restoration during his exile in Japan. Under Sohn's leadership, Cheondogyo extended its influence around the upper-middle regions of the Korean peninsula and published magazines to civilize its followers. The ruling body of Cheondogyo was highly centralized; hence, when the directions were sent down from its leadership as one of the representatives of the movement, the followers immediately and uniformly joined the movement.

Through the movements of Civilization Enlightenment and Patriotic Enlightenment in the last years of Joseon, the ideology of political freedom was widely spread among Korean intellectuals, alongside ideas such as fostering industry and production, strengthening economic prosperity and military might, and cultivating patriotism through education. However, the civilized colonial rule of Imperial Japan was far from what the intellectuals understood and anticipated. The class of new intellectuals, comprising students, religious leaders, and other neo-intellectuals, had extensive knowledge of civilization, had a strong thirst for it, and were keenly aware of the changing world order. Accordingly, this new class came to stand in the frontline of resistance against the colonial rule. Since they were the major agents disseminating the March First Movement at beginning, this neo-intellectual class accounted for 21% of the prisoners who were arrested because of the protests.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Kim Jeong-in, "Cheongubaeksipnyeondae *Cheondogyohoewolbo*-lul Tonghaese Bon Minjungyu Salm" [The Life of People Described in *The Cheondogy Monthly*], *Hangukmunhwa [Korean Culture]* 30 (2002), 329.

⁴⁵ Kondo Kenichi, "*March First Uprising* (1)" (1964), 223-27, requoted in *Samil Minjokhaebangundong Yeongu [A Study on the March First National Liberation Movement]* (Seoul: Cheongnyeonsa, 1989), 238. ※ Although the figure is from the statistics of the late 1920s, only 2.7% of Koreans were 'educated,' including those taught in Seodang—traditional Korean

What they wanted most was more civilization, and their key demand was political freedom. If not independence, they at least wanted equal political rights, the right to autonomy, freedom of speech and publication, and freedom of assembly and association. The following manifesto succinctly and clearly illustrates what Koreans wanted at that time.⁴⁶

We demand the immediate independence of Joseon. It was within our freedom to conduct politics in the ways we see ideal. Being governed by others, even if it were by politics of civilization, is still against the historical tradition of Koreans. (Gyeongnam Province)

The commoners, mainly represented by the peasantry, were not adamantly against the civilization policy of the colonial government. A secret investigation report (酒幕談叢) in 1915 analyzed how the peasant class construed the new form of rule, in contrast with the Joseon-era rule. They appreciated the termination of *yangbans*' (the aristocracy of Joseon) tyranny through the abolition of the caste system, the secure procurement of private property through the development of financial institutions, and the development of transportation.⁴⁷ The fact that the peasant class in general were not totally hostile to civilization suggests that they also desired to attain a certain level of civilization.

Compared to the reactive demands discussed in (1) and (2), Korean intellectuals' demand for true civilization can be characterized proactive, even though their knowledge of civilization was accumulated through propaganda of the colonial rulers.

schools. Lee Yeo-sung and Kim Se-yong, *Sutjajoseonyeongu [Studies on Numbers of Joseon]*, book 1, (1931), 81.

⁴⁶ Demands from Gyeongnam Province also included the following examples: If independence is not possible, let Koreans elect their house representatives, appoint Crown Prince Lee Wang Governor-General of Korea, treat Korean and Japanese public servants equally, and provide equal education.

⁴⁷ Matsuda, "Jumakdamchong-ul Tonghae Bon Cheongubaeksipnyeondae Joseonuy Sanghwanggw Minjung."

V. Conclusion

It would be very difficult to explain the March First Movement with only a few causes: protests dispersedly took place across the country, with the people of diverse classes participating in these protests, who made numerous demands, whether overlapping or different. Thus, to understand the nationality or the nation-wide character of the movement, it is a better way to shift the focus of research into the cultural changes and ruptures forced by the Japanese colonial rule in 1910s. Considering culture as the totality of ways of living in a historical community, cultural change is I believe, the most effective explanation for the national resistance to the Japanese colonial rule in 1910s.

Japanese at the time tried to speed up the civilizing process of their new colony, Joseon. They took pride in their achievement, exacting admiration from Koreans who had not regarded them highly. Obsessed by the aspiration to join the club of civilized countries, they hurried to demonstrate their civilizing capacity to the Western countries, without taking into consideration the sense of pride and sentiments of Koreans. Disrupting the foundation of the Koreans' ways of living, this forcible civilizing process provoked strong and wide resistance from them.

For the first time in their history, Koreans came to experience the reality of colonial rule in its true sense. Without political rights, they were degraded into mere objects of manipulation. Their dormant anti-Japanese sentiment, especially originating from the Japanese invasion in 1952, gained an increasing presence due to their frictions with Japanese after the opening of the ports. This sentiment was accumulated and intensified by their acts of oppression, discrimination, and contempt as they forced a civilizing mission on Koreans. The nationality in one voice of the March First Movement rests on this sentiment, calling for the withdrawal of the Japanese colonial government, despite the fact that the people of different classes had different expectations and demands.

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