

**[International Conference in Honor of the
80th Anniversary of the Liberation of Korea]**

Searching for New Perspectives on Contemporary History of Korea: Rethinking
Decolonization, Military Occupations, and the Ideas for a Democratic Korea


August 4-5 2025 / KCCI, Seoul

[Hosted by Northeast Asian History Foundation,
Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies (SNU), Institute of Social Sciences (SNU)]

Conference Proceeding

Between the Collapse of the Japanese Empire and Normalization with South Korea

Toyomi ASANO
Waseda University



This paper aims to discuss the origins of historical issues in relation to diplomatic history, thereby establishing an intellectual foundation for calm dialogue between nations. It examines how emotional issues related to the collective memory that shapes a nation were discussed and suppressed in diplomatic negotiations.

First, it traces the process by which the Japanese Empire, which had become the cause of “aggression” in the war, was occupied and dismantled, focusing on the perceptions of the Edwin Pauley Reparations Mission. This process reveals the existence of a regional concept that sought to divide and dismantle the empire and reorganize it into a “region” quickly, composed of independent nations, including the former imperial nation and ex-colonized nations.

This paper examines how each national emotion became entangled in the international political issues, surrounding the treatment of forcibly mobilized and evacuated peoples and their private property, resulting from the failure of the quick imperial dismantlement.

What became clear is that the claims between the two sides were composed of property claims deeply linked to wartime mobilization and

colonial rule. Furthermore, due to the forced relocation of people and territorial division accompanying the dissolution of the empire, social discussions over ex-colonial relationships associated with property and people were disregarded, reducing the issue to a simple matter of monetary value. This led to intense conflict between the two national sentiments over the amount of compensation.

The claims that South Korea had against Japan consisted of claims to the property of the Governor-General's Office and companies headquartered in Korea located in Japan, as well as claims arising from old public bonds and claims issued by the Governor-General's Office, such as the Korea Development Bond, and the minimum legal claims of Koreans, known as "determined debts." The amount specified in the War Reparations Settlement Document was left almost unchanged, but its substance consisted of property that had been part of the imperial society but was placed outside the independent Korea.

On the other hand, the Japanese government also faced compensation demands from repatriates who had relied on the use of lost property for substantial public compensation, while asserting claims to Japanese private property in Korea.

Furthermore, even the settlement of claims arising from the liquidation of the imperial social order and the total war conducted under it was complex. However, relying on Korea's claim that the annexation itself was illegal, the process of converting claims into monetary value became increasingly fluid, simplified, and emotional.

Also, standards of decolonization were not clear. Japan relied on international law regarding territorial separation and refused to accept a legal interpretation that would retroactively apply Military Government Order No. 33 to the time of acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration. Additionally, with South Korea's claims to property in Japan in mind, Japan retained assets of the Governor-General's Office and the Korean royal family that had been frozen during the occupation period under Allied military directives. On top of that, Japan was asserting a "reverse claim" for private property left behind by repatriates in South Korea.

In this emotionally charged situation between Japan and South Ko-

rea, the United States mediated by having Japan recognize the retroactive effect of military government orders in exchange for South Korea making claims with the intention of confiscation. By severing the diplomatic monetary exchanges from the national sentiments and meanings of each side, the United States effectively contained the emotional conflict.

In the present day, how should the issue of war compensation, which remains entangled with ethnic sentiments, be positioned within this broader historical context? In short, it can be concluded that, within the political context of the time, these claims were politically offset. Both the spiritual compensation for war victims sought by Koreans and Japan's "counterclaim" tied to how to view the colonial era were ultimately regarded as political claims and deemed completely resolved.

The framework of economic cooperation, which sought practical changes in the material world, severed emotional conflicts linked to numbers from the realm of meaning and reduced them to the size of simple physical support. However, it is worth noting that this framework did not initially enjoy the support of Japanese society as a whole. Among the repatriates, there were indeed progressive forces that argued that attention should be paid not only to guarantees for Japanese repatriates but also to the suffering of other nations as war victims.

However, in the end, no shared memory was created between the two nations, and the universal values each side upheld remained at odds, politically sealed off until the democratization of South Korea and the onset of the globalization era. In other words, U.S.-South Korea relations and U.S.-Japan relations functioned not only as a security framework but also as an economic framework for the reconstruction of the material world, with the United States serving as the hub. Economic cooperation such as technology transfer and loans was carried out separately from claims that could sway emotions, contributing to the material reconstruction of the two countries. Meanwhile, the compensation paid to repatriated Japanese in Japan, a measure implemented in 1967, was a mechanically calculated payment based on the length of their stay, implemented in 1967, while the issue of compensation for war victims in South Korea became a major driving force for democratization, continu-

ing to shake the Japan-South Korea relationship.

Now, the role of the United States, which has sealed off mutual national sentiments, is undergoing significant change, and empirically substantiating the structure of this containment will serve as foundational work for resuming the stalled dialogue. By calmly examining the structure of the clash of social meanings in each nation, without taking sides, but focusing on the connection between cultural memory and experience as well as universal human values and compensation, we can clarify how claims rooted in wartime experiences and colonial rule have been moralized and have come to exert a significant influence on the evaluation and attitudes of individuals in both Japan and South Korea.

The tasks of unraveling the connection between the settlement of imperialism and war reparations, delving into its emotional dimension, and linking it to the collective experiences of the wartime and occupation periods and universal values, and tracing it back to the postwar and liberation periods, remains a contemporary challenge. Discussing such sensitive issues calmly, delving into the moral and emotional dimensions that underpin each individual's political stance, and engaging in cross-national dialogue will provide a starting point for such dialogue. The framework for normalized diplomatic relations achieved through political settlement has been exposed to objections from the people since the 1980s, alongside the progress of democratization in Asia.

Toyomi ASANO is a professor in the Dept. of Political Science and Economics at Waseda University. Through arguing for the development of economic corporation program as a materialistic aspect of decolonization, he has concentrated on the spiritual aspect of decolonization. Through his involvement in Reconciliation Studies (<https://memory.waseda.jp/en>), he is trying to show possible ways in which the dignity and human rights of all victims can be assured by multinational cooperation.