

# Japan's Annexation of Korea as Its Prewar Identity Representation

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Acrimonious relationship between Japan and South Korea is, sadly, a familiar facet of international life in Northeast Asia. Mutual mudslinging over the issue of the “past” casts a dark shadow over what would otherwise be a mutually beneficial relationship. Within this intersubjective background, it is tempting to dismiss acrimony as inevitable, given the frequency with which bilateral relations plunge into an exchange of invectives across the Tsushima straits. Sensitive relationship between the two constitutes a “vexing anomaly” in which people sharing many similarities — political, social, and cultural — are incapable of fully appreciating each other’s existence. As Victor Cha states, “[t]he Japan-ROK relationship has been marked by highly volatile behavior throughout its postwar history,”<sup>1)</sup> a clear hangover from the bitter experiences of the prewar decades — for South Korea in particular, but for Japan to a lesser extent as well.

The acrimony that haunts Japan and South Korea in the postwar era partly derives from a historically constructed Japanese identity. A long and complex legacy of Japan’s struggle with external forces has nurtured a myth of Japanese uniqueness that sets itself apart from the West, as well as from Asia. The result elevates Japanese sense of Being on to a pedestal, with the unwelcome consequence of condescension towards the rest of Asia. Japan’s hierarchicalized worldview historically represented Korea (and the Koreans) as subordinate to Japan (and the Japanese). This image of Korean Otherness has been emerging throughout the centuries, with the process continuing well after the Meiji Restoration. Such narratives were reiterated during Japan’s rapid modernization in the aftermath of the Restoration; and the nation’s subsequent rise to Great Power status bolstered Tokyo’s confidence on the international stage. This confidence elaborated on the extant sense of Japanese exceptionalism, with its ultimate “perversion” appearing in the form of Greater Far East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere and a forlorn justification for the subjugation of Asia in the name of “liberation.”<sup>2)</sup>

To be sure, suggesting that the Japanese condescension of its most immediate neighbor is a historical construct does not imply the sameness of quality throughout the decades. On the contrary, the evolving international environment, as well as domestic factors, contribute toward the temporal particularities of any given intersubjective structure. If contemporary contexts are *evenements* unique to an era, the undertones reverberating throughout the centuries depict *la longue durée* of Japanese-Korean relations and the larger context within which the two societies interact with one another. As such, one way to appreciate the present context — and also to understand the inherent Japanese mode of identity representation — it is worthwhile revisiting the

emergence and elaboration<sup>3)</sup> of the discourses of liberationism and the attendant condescension towards the Korean Other that defined the way Japan annexed Korea in the name of Asian security. This pan-Asianism is none other than the representation of Japanese Self being called upon to provide “salvation” from the purported barbarism of the West. Herein lies the root of acrimony afflicting Japan’s Asia policy for the decades to come.

I utilize the intersection of International Relations (IR) with Social Theoretic methodology in an effort at recasting the initial stages of Japanese imperialism. Identity of Self is always constructed in opposition to the Other, and it is represented through narratives in the form of speech acts.<sup>4)</sup> Speech acts, being the “*production* of the token in the performance” of expressing meanings<sup>5)</sup> — and in this article, the Japanese sense of Self — is relevant in recasting Japan’s prewar international experience as a phenomena not simply dictated through exogenously-given interests, but also deriving from how the policy elites understood the international environment. Thus, we can reconsider Japanese Self as constructed in opposition to Tokyo’s perception of the external environment, along with Korea as a potential conduit for western colonizers to invade Japan. In short, Japanese Self stood in opposition to Korean Otherness as an object needing to be tamed and disciplined.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section analyzes prewar Japanese identity construction, and how it contributed to the emergence of a particular worldview defined through “pan-Asianism” and “Asian Liberationism.” I start my historical analysis on the eve of the Kanghwa Incident of 1875, when Japan considered Korea to be a buffer against perceived threats from the continent. The ensuing decades represented Japan’s efforts at fully realizing its sense of Self as distinct from both the West and Asia, a process illustrated through the slow, but steady, erosion of Korean sovereignty. In the second section, I discuss early interactions between Japan and Korea in the 1870s, by looking at how the Meiji oligarchs rediscovered Korea. The third section discusses how Tokyo’s gradual liquidation of Korean sovereignty between 1876 and 1910 was conducted in the name of Asian security.

Throughout this article, I focus on the narratives of Japanese sense of Self. As such, I do not treat Japan as an uncontested entity. Rather, the term “Japan” is used as a signifier of dominant discourse at the time of Japan’s adventures into the Korean peninsula. Inherent in the dominant discourse was the self-professed superiority of Japan’s efforts and justification at disciplining the Korean Other. In the aggregate, these sections trace the trajectory of the emergence and elaboration of Japanese liberationism, and in turn seek to show that the practice was underpinned by a discursive agency of Japanese identity representation. The aim of this article, therefore, is *not* a new history of Japan’s annexation of Korea, but rather, a *re-reading* of this particular juncture in Japanese history, to *recast* this juncture in Japan’s international experience as a speech act manifestation of its identity representation. Therefore, this article is an attempt at a concise discourse analysis of the period between the Meiji Restoration and the Annexation of Korea. In short, imperialism was tantamount to a performative reconstruction of Japan’s Self, albeit with disastrous consequences.

## Korean Expansion as Japanese Speech Act

It is tempting to paint Japan's prewar identity as solely militarist in the sense that it was single-mindedly determined to subjugate its neighbors — China and Korea in particular — for the ultimate goal of Asian domination. A superficial review of the atrocities committed suggests that the sufferings of millions of Asians at the hands of Japanese colonizers hint at Japan's sheer disregard for the well being of Asians — its spite for their existence. Yet, this view alone is unhelpful. While Japan's prewar ambitions did result in disaster, untangling the discourse of Japanese elites since the Meiji Restoration suggests Japan had different intentions in mind. Indeed, if we consider Japan's Asian Liberationism or pan-Asianism to be its speech act,<sup>6)</sup> the worldview shared among Japanese policy makers constitutes a particular "realm of possibilities"<sup>7)</sup> representing the collective identity shared among them. If Korean expansion is treated as Japan's discursive representation of its identity, then it is possible to recast the ensuing struggles and counter-struggles as unintended consequence of intended actions: in other words, Japanese colonialism was a premature and ill-thought out pursuit of heroism gone terribly wrong.

Collective Japanese identity is a historical and discursive construct. It is constructed in relation to both exogenous and endogenous factors to which Japan was exposed: the former being Japan's geographical position and the associated international environment; and the latter deriving from reconstitution of a series of narratives purporting to distinguish Japan from the "West" as well as rest of "Asia." Exogenously, Japan's physical location in Northeast Asia adjacent to the Korean peninsula meant that it was vulnerable to attack.<sup>8)</sup> Also, the prospect of China being devoured by western powers suggested to Meiji oligarchs that preventive diplomacy needed to be instituted in order to guarantee Japanese autonomy. In other words, prime concern among policy elites was the potentials for the domino effect of colonization reaching Japanese shores. Endogenously, the narrative construction of "Japan in Asia" steadily eroded the notion of Japan as an Asian nation, and instead, instilled the belief that Japan possessed unique characteristics, being neither a western, nor Asian, entity.<sup>9)</sup> Put differently, the centuries-old attempt at reaffirming its distinction from the Beijing court was given further boost as Japanese elites saw China's independence wither away by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From this emerged the dominant discourse of Japanese exceptionalism in its unique capability to ward off westerners, and at the same time, to avoid the fate of Asia — a prosaic object of subjugation — befalling on itself.<sup>10)</sup>

Thus, the prewar construction of Japanese identity derives from the emergence of a particular sense of Japanese Being which defined the nation to be neither the West, nor Asian, but rather, a unique entity endowed with divine blessing, as manifested through *kokutai* ideology.<sup>11)</sup> It is also a product of elaboration, taking its cue from both internal, as well as external, factors surrounding Japan at the time of Meiji Restoration: the need to consolidate power domestically, as well as externally, in the country's pursuit to rapidly modernize itself. To be sure, it was in Japan's national interest at the time to repeal unequal treaties — a process seen as tantamount to the country's exit from Asia and its power-political identification with the West.<sup>12)</sup> At the same time, however, the constraints of the international environment fused with the necessity for autonomy to construct a realm of possibility for Japan to produce a "sentence token"<sup>13)</sup> representing

its sense of Self in relation to perceived external threats. It is as if the political necessity to reaffirm autonomy had converged with the extant narratives of *kokutai* to concoct an idea of Japanese mission to “liberate” Asia.<sup>14)</sup> This newly emergent “realm of possibility” had acquired a life of its own, being reified into an incontestable concept within which the cognitive milieu of subsequent policy makers was congealed.<sup>15)</sup>

This is the intersubjective context within which Japanese gaze turned on Korea. Just when western encroachment on China became inevitable, Korea’s independence, and consequently Japan’s autonomy, became a pressing issue. Meiji oligarchs realized from the earliest days that the fate of Korean peninsula would determine Japan’s survival.<sup>16)</sup> The perceived threat to Korean survival and Japanese self-preservation turned Korea into an object of desire for Japanese elites. Put differently, policy makers’ sense of exceptionalism, and the concomitant condescension towards Koreans, was translated into Tokyo’s sense of “obligation” towards its neighbor to help maintain security in Northeast Asia.<sup>17)</sup> If this was the intended action, then the outcome in the form of expansion, annexation, and subjugation, was the unintended consequence. Throughout the ensuing process, Korea transgressed from an object of desire into an entity needing to be tamed and disciplined, eventually becoming an imperial subject — a mere tool for the preservation of *kokutai*. Hence, Japan’s experience on the Korean peninsula represented a speech act of identity representation in which the barbaric and backward Korean Other<sup>18)</sup> was justifiably — in the eyes of Japanese elites — disciplined and tamed for the benefit of liberationist Japan. This, they thought, was the only way to ward off the West and protect Asia’s moral and spiritual integrity. The gradual process of Korean annexation can thus be re-read as policy elites’ performative reconstruction of Japanese identity, whose perception-gap between reality of the international environment and dream comes back to haunt Japan in the postwar years.<sup>19)</sup>

### Rediscovering the Korean Other

Rediscovery of the Korean “otherness” has been a continual process predating the Meiji Restoration — a time scope that is beyond the remit of this article. A symbolic disjuncture came in the seventh century when Japan, unlike Korea, ceased *kowtowing* to Chinese courts in an apparent bid to proclaim autonomy from the Chinese sphere of influence, an effort at reaffirming Japan’s purported divine exceptionalism. Centuries later, exceptionalism, coupled with the strategic need to maintain independence after seeing China fall into the hands of western powers, provided a double-movement: on the one hand, Japan was inevitably Asian in its geographical disposition; but at the same time, Japan sought to distance itself from Asia upon witnessing China being eaten alive by barbarians. In other words, this double-movement provided a new impetus for the reconstruction of Japan’s superiority complex. Such identity reconstruction encouraged Japanese elites to cast a contemptuous gaze over Korea which remained under Chinese suzerainty — evidence enough in the eyes of Meiji oligarchs, that Korea remained firmly within backward Asia, and in order for Japan to dissociate itself from the ravages afflicting Asia, they saw no choice, but to promote Japan’s own influence over Korea.<sup>20)</sup>

### *A Myth of Divinity*

*Kaikoku* after 1854 meant exposing Japan to international society and the *realpolitik* of colonialism. As Maruyama Masao notes, *kaikoku* inevitably made Japan vulnerable to predation by western powers, and the Meiji government saw no choice but to embark upon its own program of continental expansion in an effort at securing autonomy.<sup>21)</sup> A Foreign Ministry official, Yanaiba Sakimitsu, recognized this vulnerability immediately following the Restoration, prompting him to circulate a memorandum on 28 July 1870 urging that,

Japan's geographical position surrounded by sea makes its defense extremely difficult. The only way through which we can secure survival, therefore, is to expand into Korea and Manchuria [now that] the European and American expansion into Asia seems inevitable.<sup>22)</sup>

It was a representation of a shared realization that the Meiji leaders realized from the earliest stages of *kaikoku* that Korea was a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan.<sup>23)</sup>

To be sure, this perceived threat was nothing new. Generations of Japanese rulers felt vulnerable since the failed Mongol invasion of the late-thirteenth century. George Alexander Lensen points out that

The Mongol invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281, though ultimately defeated by storm, left a lasting mark on Japanese thinking that natural forces had come to their aid both times gave the Japanese confidence and confirmed the traditional belief that theirs was a sacred land. That the onslaught had come by way of Korea instilled in the Japanese perennial fear that the peninsula might again become a springboard of attack against them.<sup>24)</sup>

*Kamikaze* evoked within Japanese policy elites a sense of divine protection for Japan — a unique quality enjoyed by no other nation. This divine confidence fused with the image of Korean Other as symbolising Japan's vulnerability, adding momentum to the construction of a unique Japanese Self that eventually legitimized continental expansion by the 1870s. Toyotomi Hideyoshi's failed campaign of 1592 became a legend upon which the "heroic" accounts of Japanese warriors were elaborated into a national myth which gave further momentum for the elaboration of Japanese condescension towards Korea.<sup>25)</sup> It was a platform upon which Korea's image as a puppet of China, a weakling unable to fend for itself, emerged.<sup>26)</sup> When it was juxtaposed with the perception of Korea as representing Japan's susceptibility, it provided Meiji oligarchs with the justification that a "divine" Japan had every right to exploit Korea for the safety of the Far East in general, and Japan in particular.<sup>27)</sup>

### *The Discursive Construction of Korean Petulance*

Korea is a crucial node in the defense of Japan, given the prospect of encroaching western colonialism. Hence, the resolution of the "Korean problem" by securing a foothold on the Korean peninsula became a primary objective for the nascent Meiji government.<sup>28)</sup> It began by attempting to re-establish diplomatic relations with Korea.

Until the Restoration, diplomatic intercourse between the two governments was conducted via the Tsushima clan, with the Shogunate in Edo having no direct contact with Seoul.<sup>29)</sup> In an effort at instigating direct relations with Korea, Tokyo dispatched a communication from Emperor Meiji outlining the government's intention to open direct diplomatic channel. However, to the dismay of Japanese leaders, Korea rejected the communication on the grounds that the seal of the Japanese emperor was illegitimate and could not be recognised, arguing that the term "emperor" was reserved for China, and Japan had no business designating its sovereign as such.<sup>30)</sup> The Korean Court saw it as Japanese audacity to use a title reserved for Chinese emperors; but for the Japanese government, the Korean rejection was seen as its arrogance in rejecting a friendly overture from an emperor whose divine ancestry mythologically derives from the Sun Goddess.

The accreditation incident was a significant embarrassment for the Japanese government. Foreign Ministry service officer, Sada Hakuchi, noted in 1870 that Korean actions represented its "arrogance towards Japanese benevolence."<sup>31)</sup> The Foreign Ministry memo circulated in April 1870 spoke of Korean "rudeness" and concluded that "Korea, as a backward country and lacking in resources," must accept Japanese emperor's credentials; otherwise a failure to comply will compel Japan to "ply open" Korea.<sup>32)</sup> Kido Takayoshi, a junior imperial councillor, called Korea arrogant,<sup>33)</sup> and in his letter to a Court Noble, Iwakura Tomomi, he wrote that "if the Koreans did not acknowledge the error of their ways, Japan should condemn them publicly and launch an attack to establish influence in Korea."<sup>34)</sup> These narratives discursively construct a petulant Korean Other in relation to a righteous Japanese Self, whose divine sincerity was rebuffed in an inauspicious act of Korean indolence. This unfortunate incident only hardened Japanese resolve to right the wrongs.

The perceived imperative to preserve Japanese sense of dignity following the humiliation provided an impetus for the emergence of *seikan-ron* by 1873.<sup>35)</sup> I shall not dwell on the details of the *seikan-ron* debate, but it is crucial to point out that the debate was borne of Japanese frustration with Korea, as well as a by-product of domestic political settlement in the immediate post-Restoration era.<sup>36)</sup> The outcome of the debate solidified Japanese leaders' collective image of Korea — by showing the outside world that Japan was intent on being a major player on the international stage, even if the ramifications of its ambition were uncertain.<sup>37)</sup> In other words, the debate constituted an important juncture in Japan's speech-act, since the series of events in these post-Restoration years elaborated a Japanese sense of Self in relation to the petulant Korean Other. As Marlene Mayo notes, "there had been much pressure both within the government and from outside, 1868-1873, to punish the Koreans for refusing to accept the official greeting of the Emperor and to acknowledge the change from Shogunal to imperial rule,"<sup>38)</sup> and that the debate was not *whether* Japan should or should not send expedition forces to Korea, but *when*.<sup>39)</sup> Following the debate in February 1874, Home Minister Okubo Toshimichi and Finance Minister Okuma Shigenobu circulated a memo to the cabinet reiterating Korean rudeness and that a punishment be meted out.<sup>40)</sup> It became an opportune moment for Meiji oligarchs to realize Japan's newly established identity as an exceptional example of an Asian nation fending for itself. The punishment eventually materialised in the form of Kanhwa Incident in 1875.

## Korean Other as An Object of Desire

The period between the Kanghwa Incident of 1875 and the Annexation of Korea in 1910 was the formative decades of Japanese identity, aspiring to become an Asian Great Power, a fete realized gradually through defeating both China and Russia in 1895 and 1905, respectively. At the same time, it elaborated on the collective prewar Japanese identity of divine entity whose duty was to liberate Asia from western encroachment. Yet, pan-Asianism had an inherent condescension towards Asia, representing it as an embodiment of backwardness. In effect, the Incident was tantamount to Japan's speech act which sought to reconstruct a worldview through which the Korean Otherness became an object of desire, both as a necessity for Japan's autonomy, and for Asia to fully realize its spiritual integrity. In short, Kanghwa was the performative manifestation of its understanding of the international environment. Physically, the Kanghwa Incident (see below) marked Japan's ascendance on to the continent. Metaphorically, too, it became a commemoration of Japan's confidence in dealing with Asian neighbors. Hence, it was not only a moment of Japan's first diplomatic victory,<sup>41)</sup> but it precipitated a long process of emergence and elaboration of Japanese prewar identity construction.

### *Taming the Korean "Other"*

The perceived arrogance of Koreans following the accreditation incident and the prospect of western powers mauling China made it an imperative for Japanese government to tame Korea — a duty bestowed upon the only Asian power morally equipped to undertake such task. Prior to the *seikan-ron* debate, the Foreign Ministry reported in 1870 that: (1) Japan must open trade relations with Korea; (2) if the overture is rejected, military actions should then be sanctioned; and (3) Korea must also be "civilised" and "freed" from Chinese influence.<sup>42)</sup> Despite the decision not to invade, the resolution of the *seikan-ron* debate in 1873 provided the rationale for putting the above idea into practice. In September 1875, a Japanese warship, *Unyo*, moored off the island of Kanghwa near Seoul, where a small contingent left the ship on a boat towards the shores of the island, ostensibly to ask for a supply of drinking water. After it came under fired from the Koreans, the Japanese navy launched a counterattack and secured control of the island. Japan promptly demanded reparations and treaty ports to be opened as part of compensation. In essence, while Japan was still obligated under *its* own unequal treaties with the West, it demanded and obtained similar obligations from the Koreans. The Treaty of Kanghwa was signed the following year in 1876. The Preamble reaffirmed the will of "The Governments of Japan and Chosen [Korea], being desirous to resume the amicable relations of yore that existed between them, and to promote the friendly feeling of both nations to a still firmer basis..."<sup>43)</sup> With the Treaty, Japan sought to establish its moral legitimacy; and suggested to the outside world that Tokyo was intent on joining the ranks of Great Powers. As Moriyama Shigeki observes, the irony of Japan's unequal treaties with the West cohabitating with its own against Korea marked a juncture in which Japan altered its non-interventionist stance to a more interventionist one.<sup>44)</sup>

Peter Duus notes that the Kanghwa Treaty marked a "major change in relations with Korea."<sup>45)</sup> Coinciding with the signing of the Treaty, Enomoto Takeaki circulated a

memorandum within the Foreign Ministry on 10 February 1876 arguing that, as a most immediate passage into and from Asia, Korea was both a “political and strategic necessity” whose security is not only crucial for Japan’s own but for the well being of Asia as a whole. As the weakest link, Enomoto stressed that Japan must station diplomatic agents and increase its influence on Korea.<sup>46)</sup> Japan’s sense of vulnerability was soon amplified by shared anxiety among the Meiji oligarchs over the perceived weakness of Korea. Being perceived in Tokyo as a puppet of an already weakened China, Meiji government felt that Korea was left dangerously vulnerable to colonialism; and since the consensus was that Korea would not be able to secure autonomy on its own, Japan had no choice but to intervene on the peninsula.<sup>47)</sup> Yet, this anxiety also presented an opportune moment for the reaffirmation of Japanese identity as an exceptional nation. Japan’s potential strength was constructed in opposition to a weak Korean Other. It was only a matter of time before Japan’s gaze turned on Korea as an object of desire — much more than a nation needing to be disciplined.

While the late 1870s saw Japan being propelled on to the international stage by making its first inroads into the continent, the next decade saw Japan steadily increase its influence over Korea and slowly decimate its sovereignty. The Meiji government initially demanded Korean domestic reforms in a hope that it would strengthen the kingdom. In September 1882, Inoue Kowashi circulated a memorandum in the cabinet in which he described Korea as weak and barbaric, and argued that for the foreseeable future Korea would never be able to gain independence. He added:

If Korea falls into the western hands — just as India and Indonesia did — it will be as if a sword is suspended over our heads ... And if Russia takes hold of Korea, that would upset the balance of power in Asia. Hence for Asia’s sake, Japan and China must cooperate to maintain Korean autonomy and prevent southward invasion by Russia.<sup>48)</sup>

Inoue’s call for Japan to cooperate with China over Korea illustrates Tokyo’s concern that a further weakening of China might precipitate a domino effect in Northeast Asia. In an earlier memorandum, Inoue urged his fellow countrymen to enter into some form of an agreement with China, the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany to secure Korean “neutrality”— a status similar to Belgium and Switzerland. He further suggested that Korea be maintained as a protectorate, not as a puppet, of China. Inoue sought to pretend that Korea was free of Chinese influence, ameliorating the likelihood of Korea collapsing into the hands of the West once China imploded.<sup>49)</sup>

Japan’s obsession with Korean autonomy eventually led to the Treaty of Tientsing with China in 1885, following the failed Kapsin coup masterminded with Japanese backing. The two agreed on a “hands-off” approach towards Korea in an effort at “divert[ing] both parties towards less troublesome methods of pressing their policies.”<sup>50)</sup> The failed coup encouraged China to enhance its interventionist policy in Korea, thereby increasing the prospect of a head-on collision with Japan.<sup>51)</sup> The significance of the Treaty from the Japanese perspective, however, was that it allowed Japan to deploy troops on Korean soil. Moreover, the Treaty established Japan as China’s equal.<sup>52)</sup> Its

status as a co-equal with China was psychologically significant for the Tokyo government, since it signalled to the outside world that Japan was fully independent of Chinese influence. In the minds of the Meiji oligarchs, the Treaty was a proclamation of Japan's status as an independent state in Asia capable of asserting its autonomy and interests, even if at first, the failed coup attempt had an undesirable effect of increasing the chances of direct conflict with China.

Developments throughout the 1880s on Korea coincided with the drafting of the Meiji Constitution. This was the decade when, domestically, Meiji oligarchs were consolidating their power by turning *kokutai* into a national ideology via the promulgation of both the 1889 Constitution and 1890 *Imperial Rescript on Education*. It amplified the familial-state imaginary and the idea of Japan as a divine nation. Domestic components of *kokutai* fed into the government's perception of the international environment, boosting the image of Korea as "weak" and "barbaric." With it, the "protection" of Korea became an imperative for Japan: the "weak" Korea was called upon to reform itself, and Japan's expansion into the peninsula was designed to provide advice to that end. When *kokutai* was directed outside Japan, it became the underlying principle upon which the colonization of Asia became the means to counter foreign pressure for the benefit of Japan and Asia in general.<sup>53)</sup> However, Japanese "assistance" was insufficient to accelerate the pace of "reform" that Tokyo had anticipated. These failures added to Tokyo's sense of frustration, and engendered a countervailing sense of urgency in making sure Korea was sufficiently inoculated from western encroachment.<sup>54)</sup>

By the beginning of the 1890s, Tokyo became increasingly restive with the slow pace of Korean reforms. The further weakening of China added to the anxieties that, unless more fundamental changes were implemented in Korea, the peninsula's independence would become untenable. Its sluggish pace helped buttress the image of Korea as hopelessly weak and backward. Inoue Kaoru, as a minister to Korea in March 1895, called for "fundamental reforms" without which he thought Korea would remain an "easy prey, leaving Japan's flanks dangerously exposed."<sup>55)</sup> The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 was an explicit ploy by Japan to wrest influence of Korea away from Chinese control. Japan's victory in the War meant China ceased to be Japan's hypothetical enemy, only to be replaced by Russia. There was a psychological significance too: now that China was out of the way, Japan gained more room to expand its influence over Korea without intervention from Beijing.<sup>56)</sup> Immediately after the Sino-Japanese War in October 1895, Japanese sympathisers (helped by Japanese troops) assassinated Queen Min in an effort at accelerating the reform process.

China's defeat introduced further changes in Japanese speech-acts. Now that one of the impediments to Korean reforms, as Japan saw it, had been dispensed with, Japan turned its attention to another threat to Korean independence, and hence Japanese security — Russia. Since cooperation with China in "civilizing" Korea became irrelevant now that China proved to be too weak to be of any use to Japan — it felt alone in fending for itself against western powers in "protecting" Korea. In April 1903, Yamagata, Ito, Katsura Taro and Komura Jutarō met in Kyoto to reaffirm Japanese stance towards Korea in light of an imminent war with Russia. The four agreed that "however difficult the situation might become, Korea must never be let go."<sup>57)</sup> With

perceived threat from the West gathering momentum by the day, Japan believed itself to be the only civilized nation in Asia, duty-bound to secure Korean independence. Seen in this context, the Russo-Japanese War — another contest over the dominance of Korea — was similar in scope to the Sino-Japanese War fought ten years before. But this time round, the symbolism was more profound.

### *Dissolution of the Korean Otherness*

Duus argues that the early Japanese incursions into Korea should not be interpreted as representing Japanese desire solely to “assert Japanese political control over the peninsula or to acquire territory there.”<sup>58)</sup> Even after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Japan insisted on Korean “independence,” vis-à-vis China, and it was not until after the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 that outright annexation became an option. It was not until Japan found its previous policy of minimum interference frustratingly inadequate that its occupation of Korea came to be seen as a necessary evil, something a weakling like Korea had to endure in order to maintain stability in Asia, given that great powers were poised to make inroads into Manchuria; and that Japan felt even more threatened by the prospect of western colonizers knocking on its doors. In the end, a diplomatic necessity fused with Japan’s self-professed role to reconstruct a conceptual milieu which made Annexation look inevitable.<sup>59)</sup>

Immediately following the start of the War on 23 February 1904, Japan signed a Protocol requiring the Korean government to seek advice and consent from Japan on diplomatic, as well as military, affairs. Article 1 of the Protocol stated that the aim of the agreement was to “foster peace” in the Far East; and in Article 3, Japan pledged to guarantee Korean “independence” and “respect its territory.”<sup>60)</sup> It was a significant step towards attaining exactly the opposite effect from the Treaty of Tientsing signed in 1885: now that Japan had no obligation towards China in respecting Korea as its traditional sphere of influence, Japan granted itself free rein to intervene in Korea in the name of restoring order in the Far East. Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War and the Treaty of Portsmouth signed on 5 September 1905 further elaborated on the Japanese liberationist identity.<sup>61)</sup> This was a moment the Japanese government had been waiting for: it was recognized as an Asian Great Power, boosting Tokyo’s confidence as the true liberator of Far East. In other words, having reconstructed both the Korean, as well as Western, Other, Japan had finally come to bask in the comfort of a secure sense of Self.

Deciding that the Protocol alone was inadequate in congealing the sacrosanct Self, Tokyo proceeded to strip diplomatic rights from Korea and placed it under its full protection in the Protectorate Treaty (the Japanese-Korean Convention) signed on 17 November 1905. It was seen by the Meiji government as a necessary step towards the maintenance of peace and order in Asia. Ito Hirobumi’s letter of accreditation stated that the Treaty was “essential for the maintenance of peace in the Far East.”<sup>62)</sup> The Protectorate Treaty established Japanese Residency-General — in effect a Japanese colonial government in Korea. When Ito was appointed the first Resident-General, he delivered a speech outlining Japan’s obligations towards Korea: “[i]f [reforms] are neglected and no means devised for relieving it, [Japanese] Empire will not only be violating its responsibility as protector of Korea, but will also itself have to suffer in the

end.”<sup>63)</sup> Ito’s deliberation represented Japan’s intention to proactively influence the outcome of events on the peninsula. The accelerated pace towards Annexation was the very performance of Japan’s self-professed duty to liberate Asia.

While the Korean sovereignty was steadily eroding, some Japanese conservatives, both inside and outside the government, felt frustrated at what they thought to be the sluggish pace towards Annexation. Conservative lobbyists with strong influence within policy-circles, such as Uchida Ryohei, repeatedly assailed the government for its reluctance towards outright annexation of the peninsula. Uchida reminisced later, in 1932, that a faster Annexation would have been more beneficial to Japan since “unrest in the Far East always had its roots in Korea.”<sup>64)</sup> Despite lobbying by conservatives, Ito was cautious. When Ogawa Heikichi urged him in 1907, he retorted that “since Korea had a long history unlike Taiwan, rapid annexation of Korea would be counterproductive.”<sup>65)</sup>

Ito maintained his cautious approach. Initially, he sought to preserve a token Korean independence, but he began to change his mind. The cabinet of Prime Minister Katsura Taro agreed on 6 July 1909 that the “Annexation was the long-term goal of the imperial government.”<sup>66)</sup> This agreement came after Ito finally succumbed to demands by Katsura and Foreign Minister Komura Jutaro that annexation was the only option available for resolving the “Korea problem.” By now, the situation in Korea looked “hopeless” in the eyes of Japanese leadership. The reforms, they thought, were too slow in coming, and the colonial government faced persistent guerrilla attacks against Japanese interests on the peninsula. Immediately before the annexation, on 16 August 1910, Army General Terauchi Masatake, who succeeded Ito after his assassination,<sup>67)</sup> told the Korean prime minister that, “Japan had fought on behalf of Korea and sacrificed many lives. But the situation is such that Japan sees no alternative but to unify the two countries in order to protect the Korean imperial household and its people.”<sup>68)</sup> The Treaty of Annexation was “signed” on 22 August 1910.<sup>69)</sup> The preamble to the Treaty read that “The Emperor of Japan and the King of Korea, in recognition of the close and friendly relations between the two countries, have signed this Treaty to further well being and happiness, and to aspire for eternal peace in the Far East.”<sup>70)</sup> Just 35 years since Japanese troops landed on the island of Kanghwa, the sovereignty of Korea was liquidated in the name of its “protection” and “security” of the Far East.

Hence, what started out rather slowly gathered momentum by the time Japan defeated Russia and re-entered the world stage as a significant Asian power. Japan’s national interest in securing a foothold on the continent, given its threat perception, is evident here; but at the same time, Japanese identity as a divinely exceptional nation, duty-bound to liberate the rest of Asia provided “grammar” with which to justify such national interest. In other words, Japan’s annexation of Korea was a performative reaffirmation of its self-professed role. It is with such an intersubjective frame of reference that the characteristics of Japanese expansion into Korean peninsula can be recast as one form of prewar identity representation.

## Conclusion

Re-reading the history of Japanese expansion into Korea as a speech-act of prewar Japanese identity reveals that the Japanese sense of Self was constituted within an incessant reconstruction of Korean Otherness — from petulant and arrogant kingdom that rejected Japan's initial approach following the Meiji Restoration; the hopelessly backward people whose vulnerability imperilled Japan's security; to barbaric people waiting to be disciplined into a respectable subject of a benevolent empire. It is the reconstruction of Korean otherness which reaffirmed Japan's sense of divinity and exceptionalism, and justified Tokyo's policy of aggression against Korea in the name of Asian "liberation."<sup>71)</sup> In the process, Korea's subject position in opposition to Japanese sense of Self constantly kept on shifting between an object of concern and an object of desire: "concern" because Japanese anxiety over Korean autonomy from China, Russia, and the West in general, misconstrued Japan's own sense of security; and "desire," since by taming the Korean Other, the Japanese Self was in turn realized. The intersubjective shroud of Japanese liberationism provided a platform upon which the sufferings of Koreans were forgotten, and allowed discipline to be substituted in place of pain. The inherent irony, of course, is that the liberation turned out to be incarceration for Asia, and a proverbial *seppuku* for Japan.

The speech-act of Japan's prewar identity representation enabled Tokyo to feel comfortable enough in pressing ahead with its imperialist policy: the recurrent persecution of insurgents — both before and after the Annexation — was repeatedly reconstructed as necessary evil in taming the ungrateful and barbaric Koreans.<sup>72)</sup> At the same time, the speech-act prevented Japan from empathizing with its colonial subjects: even after the Annexation, Koreans never achieved the status as a "genuine" imperial subject. The dichotomy of Koreans as imperial subjects *in practice* cohabitated with the notion of Korean Otherness within the empire as fundamentally distinct from Japanese Self.<sup>73)</sup>

There was an irony in this speech-act. That is, the more the Japanese tried to discipline Koreans, the more its purported legitimacy was lost on the subjects, making it an imperative — in the eyes of the colonizers — to discipline them further.<sup>74)</sup> Perhaps, this irony is symptomatic of the contradictions inherent in the overall Japanese imperial design: what was done in the name of the well being of Asia exacerbated the seeds of conflict, forcing Japan to become embroiled in an intractable position. Within this conceptual quagmire, Japanese leadership lost track of the Korean Otherness leading to the blurring of Japanese Self. Japan paid dearly for this in 1945, and it is still paying-off the debt.

## Notes

- 1) Victor D. Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 10.
- 2) Peter Duus and Irwin Scheiner, "Socialism, Liberalism, and Marxism, 1901-31," in Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (ed), *Modern Japanese Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 147-49.
- 3) For theoretical elaboration of this process, see Margaret S. Archer, *A Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 4) See Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

- 1999); and David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (rev. ed)(Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1998).
- 5) J. R. Searle, "What is a Speech Act?," in J. R. Searle (ed), *The Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 39.
  - 6) For general discussion of speech-act and its social effects, see John S. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin, 1995).
  - 7) See Nina Tannenwald, "Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization*, 53:3 (1999), 433-68.
  - 8) George Alexander Lensen, *Balance of Intrigue: International Rivalry in Korea and Manchuria 1884-1899* (Vol.1)(Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1982), 2.
  - 9) Taku Tamaki, "Constructing 'Japan in Asia'," in Stephanie Lawson (ed), *Europe and the Asia-Pacific: Culture, Identity and Representations of Region* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), chapter 11.
  - 10) See Yamamuro Shinichi, "Ajia ninshiki no kijuku," in Furuya Tetsuo (ed), *Kindai Nippon no Ajia ninshiki* (Kyoto: Kyoto University, 1994), 8-10.
  - 11) See Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
  - 12) Seki Shizuo, "Kindai Nippon no gaiko," in Seki Shizuo (ed), *Kindai-Nippon gaiko shiso-shi nyumon* (Kyoto: Minerva shobo, 1999), 3.
  - 13) Searle, "What is a Speech Act?," 39.
  - 14) See Yoon Keun-cha, *Nippon kokumin-ron: kindai Nippon no aidentiti* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 1997).
  - 15) See Archer, *Realist Social Theory*.
  - 16) Moriyama Shigenori, *Kindai Nikkan kankeishi kenkyu* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1987), 8.
  - 17) Ho Takushu, *Meiji shoki Nikkan kankei no kenkyu* (Tokyo: Hanawa shobo, 1969), 22.
  - 18) See for example, Nam Bujin, *Kindai Nippon to Chosenjin-zo no keisei* (Tokyo: Bensei shuppan, 2002), chapter 1.
  - 19) Speech act, in this sense, is distinct from the Habermasian communicative action such that this article is not concerned with how intersubjective understandings between Japanese Self and Korean Other are constructed through rhetorical action. Rather, I treat Japanese foreign policy narratives as a speech act manifestation of Japanese identity, similar to arguments made by John Searle and J. L. Austin. See John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). For the application of Habermasian communicative action, see for example, Thomas Risse, "'Let's Argue!' Communicative Action in World Politics," *International Organization*, 54:1 (2000), 1-39; and Frank Schimmelfennig, "The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," *International Organization*, 55:1 (2001), 47-80.
  - 20) Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, "Introduction," in Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (ed), *Modern Japanese Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5-6; W. G. Beasley, *The Modern Japanese History* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed)(Tokyo: Charles Tuttle, 1982), 114; and Nakata Akira, *Kindai Nippon no Chosen ninshiki* (Tokyo: Kenbun shuppan, 1993), 4-45.
  - 21) Maruyama Masao, *Nippon no shiso* (Tokyo: Iwanami shinsho, 1961), 9; see also Masao Miyoshi, *Off Center: Power and Cultural Relations Between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 186.
  - 22) Yanaiba quoted in Ebara Takuji, Ikai Takaaki, and Ikeda Masahiro (eds), *Taigai-kan, Nippon kindai shiso taikai, vol. 12* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1988), 14-15.
  - 23) See Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Ko Daesung, *Ito Hirobumi to Chosen* (Tokyo: Shakai hyoron sha, 2001), 70-75.
  - 24) Lensen, *Balance of Intrigue* (vol. 1), 2.
  - 25) Lee Tejin, "Kankoku heigo wa seiritsu shite inai: Nippon no daikan teikoku kokken shimbaku to joyaku kyosei (1)," *Sekai*, July 1998, 302; and Ichikawa Masaki, *Ahn Joon-gun to Nikkan Kankei-shi* (Tokyo: Hara shobo, 1979), 13-16.
  - 26) Takeuchi Yoshimi, "Introduction," in Takeuchi Yoshimi (ed), *Gendai shiso taikai vol. 9: Ajia shugi* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 1963).
  - 27) For example, one Meiji ideologue, Kuga Katsunan, noted in 1895 that "the difference between leaving

- Korea in the hands of China, on the one hand, and placing it in Japan's hands, on the other, is evident with respect to the prospects for international peace and order in East Asia." Quoted in Ebara Yoshiyasu, "Nisshin-senso ni okeru Kuga Katsunan no taigai seisaku-ron," *Nippon rekishi*, June 1993, 81.
- 28) See Beasely, *The Modern History of Japan*, 114-15; and Donald Calman, *The Nature and Origin of Japanese Imperialism: A Reinterpretation of the Great Crisis of 1873* (London: Routledge, 1992), chapter 7.
  - 29) See for example, Fukuhara Mantaro, *Kindai Nippon no taikan seisaku* (Tokyo: Tokyo shoseki, 1991), 94.
  - 30) See for example, Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*, 30-31.
  - 31) Frederick Foo Chien, *The Opening of Korea: A Study of Chinese Diplomacy 1876-1885* (New York: The Shoe String Press, 1967), 20.
  - 32) Quoted in Ebara et al, *Taigai-kan*, 12-13.
  - 33) Fukuhara, *Kindai Nippon*, 96.
  - 34) Kido quoted in Duus, *Abacus and the Sword*, 32-33.
  - 35) Ochiai Hiroki, "Meiji shoki no gaisei-ron to higashi-Ajia," in Furuya Tetsuo and Yamamuro Shinichi (eds), *Kindai Nippon ni okeru higashi-Ajia mondai* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kobunkan, 2001), 96-98.
  - 36) Ichikawa, *Ahn Joon-gun to Nikkan kankeishi*, 23-24; and Hilary Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea: 1868-1910* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), chapter 1.
  - 37) Ho, *Meiji-shoki Nikkan kankei no kenkyu*, 40.
  - 38) Marlene J. Mayo, "The Korean crisis of 1873 and Early Meiji Foreign Policy," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 31:4 (1972), 798.
  - 39) *Ibid.*, 814-15; and Calman, *The Nature and Origins of Japanese Imperialism*, chapter 7.
  - 40) Quoted in Ebara et al, *Taigai-kan*, 40.
  - 41) Ho, *Meiji-shoki Nikkan kankei*, 53.
  - 42) Unno Fukuju, *Nikkan heigo* (Tokyo: Iwanami shinsho, 1995), 10.
  - 43) Chien, *The Opening*, 47.
  - 44) Moriyama, *Nikkan heigo*, 17.
  - 45) *Ibid.*, 48.
  - 46) Quoted in Ebara et al, *Taigai-kan*, 43-46.
  - 47) See Unno, *Nikkan heigo*, chap. 1.
  - 48) Quoted in Ebara et al, *Taigai-kan*, 52-53.
  - 49) *Ibid.*, 53-54.
  - 50) W. G. Beasely, *The Rise of Modern Japan* (Tokyo: Charles Tuttle, 1990), 145.
  - 51) Moriyama, *Nikkan heigo*, 26-28; Ichikawa, *Ahn Joon-gun*, 38.
  - 52) See Fukuhara, *Kindai Nippon*, 157.
  - 53) Yoon, *Nippon kokumin-ron*, 32.
  - 54) It also needs to be pointed out that reforms sponsored by the Chinese was a source of annoyance for Japan as well. I thank the reviewer for this point.
  - 55) Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*, 71.
  - 56) Of course, one must not forget the Triple Intervention following the War. It dented Japanese euphoria following the victory, and Korea remained under threat from western intervention, namely Russia. But now that China was defeated, Japan felt less inhibited from pursuing its interests on the peninsula. For a brief overview of events surrounding the Triple Intervention, see for example, Beasely, *The Rise of Modern Japan*, 146-51.
  - 57) Quoted in Iriye Akira, *Nippon no gaiko* (Chuko shinsho, 1966), 38.
  - 58) Duus, *Abacus and the Sword*, 49.
  - 59) Nakatsuka Akira, *Kindai Nippon no Chosen ninshiki* (Tokyo: Kenbun Shuppan, 1993), 244-49.
  - 60) See Unno, *Nikkan heigo*, 233.
  - 61) *Ibid.*, 151.
  - 62) C. I. Eugene Kim and Han-kyo Kim, *Korea and the Politics of Imperialism, 1876-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 128.
  - 63) Quoted in *ibid.*, *Korea*, 137.
  - 64) Uchida Ryohei, "Nikkan goho," in Takeuchi (ed), *Gendai Nippon*, 206.

- 65) Quoted in Hatano Masaru, *Kindai higashi-Ajia no seiji hendo to Nippon no gaiko* (Tokyo: Keio tsushin, 1995), 88.
- 66) Moriyama Shigenori, *Kindai Nikkan kankeishi kenkyu: Chosen shokuminchi-ka to kokusai kankei* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku shuppan-kai, 1987), 218-19.
- 67) Ito's assassination by a Korean nationalist was symptomatic of the struggles and counter-struggles between Japan and Korea. While the incident itself is of great importance in and of itself, for the purposes of this article, I shall not dwell on it, since as far as the Japanese speech-act is concerned, its effect did not sway Tokyo's intention to annex Korea. See for example, Ichikawa, *Ahn Joon-gun*; and Ko, *Ito Hirobumi*.
- 68) Quoted in Unno, *Nikkan heigo*, 219.
- 69) I say "signed" since it was more of a coercion. I shall not go into the details of this process, since much research has been done on this. But it is worth noting that there are debates on the status and legitimacy of the Treaty — whether it was "void" or was "never established" to begin with. See for example, Lee Tejin, "Kankoku heigo wa seiritsu shite inai: Nippon no Daikan teikoku kokken shimbaku to joyaku kyosei (2)," *Sekai*, August 1998, 185-96.
- 70) Unno, *Nikkan heigo*, 234.
- 71) See Moriyama, *Kindai Nikkan kankei-shi kenkyu*, 251.
- 72) Hirata Yuji, *Kyoiku chokugo kokusai kankei-shi no kenkyu: kantei honyaku chokugo wo chushin to shite* (Tokyo: Kazama shobo, 1997), 407-8.
- 73) Kimura, Kan, "'Fuketsu' to 'Osore'," in Okamoto Koji (ed), *Kindai Nippon no Ajia-kan* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 1998), 116; and Yoon Keun-cha, "Shokuminchi Nipponjin no seishin kozo: 'teikoku ishiki' towa nanika," *Shiso*, 778 (April 1989), 24.
- 74) See Nakatsuka, *Kindai Nippon no Chosen ishiki*, 62.