[**Ancient Korean History**](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/ancient.html)

[**History of Korea**](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/history.html)


According to legend, the first acknowledged kingdom in Korea emerged in 2333 BC. Tan'gun Wang'gom, the first great ruler of Korea, established his capital at Asadal (now P'yong'yang) and called his kingdom Choson, a name that means "Land of the Morning Calm." The Tan'gun legend not only reflects Korean ideals, but helped develop the pride of a people with a long history and an ancient culture. Through the centuries, Koreans have preserved this legend which became a source of spiritual comfort in times of crisis. Much of what Westerners find so irrational and inconsistent with legends such as this represents the whole foundation of Korean culture and is the key to understanding their history.

* [Alternative Korean History](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/nat.html)
* [Founding Legends](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/legends.html)
* [Chronology of events](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/Chronology_of_events.html)
* [Chronology of rulers](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/old_rulers_main.html)
* [Cultural achievements](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/korean_arts_main.html)
* [Essays](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/Treatise_TP.html)

This page is concerned with all things related to ancient Korean history, the era running from Korea's mythical dynastic beginnings in 2333 BC to the death of King T'aejong of Silla, who unified the Korean peninsula, in 661 AD. You will also find information here concerning the prehistory of Korea as it has been reconstructed by archaeological research.

[**Koryo Dynasty**](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/koryo.html)

[**History of Korea**](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/history.html)



You have entered the fascinating world of the Koryo Dynasty, 918-1392 AD. The Koryo Dynasty successfully achieved the unification of the Latter Three Kingdoms. King T'aejo laid the foundation of the dynasty that would last close to five hundred years. The birth of this newly found Korean identity set the stage for generations to come. The period went through political, social, and cultural changes. Viewed as the transition period between Silla and the Choson, its importance is sometimes neglected in summary treatments of Korean history. Yet in many ways, the Koryo period proved seminal, for the events of the next millennium.

[**Choson Dynasty**](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/choson.html)

[**History of Korea**](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/history.html)

This is the gateway for the exploration of Korea's Choson Dynasty. The period began in 1392 and ended in 1910. The Choson Dynasty is commonly regarded as the last 'traditional' kingdom before the onslaught of 'modern' culture in the 'land of the morning calm.'

Here are some areas of the Choson dynasty that you can explore:

[Choson Society](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/social.html)

[Choson Culture](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/Choson_Culture.html)

[Choson Politics](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/cpoli.html)

[Personalities](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/biography.html)

[**Colonial Period**](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/colony.html)

[**History of Korea**](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/history.html)

The Colonial Period officially began in 1910 when Korea was annexed by Japan. This was a time when Korea was under Japanese rule until the end of the Second World War. Usually the Colonial Period is divided into three phases:

 [The First Phase of Colonial Rule (1910-1919)](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/colonialism.html)

 [Cultural Policy (1919-1931)](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/cultpoli1919.html)

 [Manchurian Invasion to Liberation (1931-1945)](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/manchu.html)

## The First Phase of Colonialism

After the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), Japan asserted herself as a power among her Asian neighbors. Japan's next move was to establish the Protectorate Treaty (1905). Conducted under the auspices of [Ito Hirobumi](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/ito.html) and forced upon [Emperor Kojong](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/kojong.html), the Protectorate Treaty increased Japanese power on the peninsula. It also created the office of resident-general which came to control foreign and domestic affairs. Finally, with the forced abdication of Emperor Sunjong, Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910.

From the onset of the [Meiji Restoration](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/meiji.html), Japan had its eye on Korea. The resident-governor of Chosen (the new name of the colony) had absolute power. Under the first governor-general, Terauchi Masatake, Koreans suffered great oppression. He was the first of many to attempt the forced acculturation of Koreans and the systematic destruction of the Korean identity.

Terauchi first tried to justify colonialism by proclaiming that because of the deep historical and cultural ties between Korea and Japan, there was a natural "affinity" between the two countries. His goal was the complete assimilation of Koreans into the Japanese mainstream.

Terauchi implemented policies that targeted all forms of organized opposition. All newspapers were suspended, political organizations were disbanded, and the right of assembly was banned. In one fatal swoop, political opposition was stymied. Despite these efforts, underground movements sprang into action and abroad, nationalist organizations rallied for international support of the Korean cause.

The next major target was the [education system](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/education.html). During this period, hundreds of school were built. However, the system was skewed to discriminate against Korean. For Japanese children, the quality of the facilities and curriculum was much higher. For Koreans, the purpose of an education was simply to mold students into loyal Japanese subjects. Higher education was severely limited and even then, the emphasis was on vocational training. However, some yangban elite, as well as their children, were [collaborators](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/collaborators.html) within the new system since many could already speak Japanese (due to their prestigious education received before annexation). However, the new education policies created many problems for the younger generation for the Korean identity was being warped by a Japanese sensibility. In fact, many underground movements strove to preserve the Korean culture by promoting the use of the language and tradition.

The next major aspect of Korean society that was restructured was land. Traditionally, land was the symbol of wealth. As such, a complex system of absentee landlords, partial owner-tenants, and cultivator-laborers developed whereby legal proof of land rights was not necessary to work or own land. Unfortunately, Terauchi's new Land Survey Bureau conducted cadastral surveys that reestablished ownership by basis of written proof (ie- deeds, titles, and similar documents). For those who could not provide such documents, like the lower class and partial owners, land could not be claimed by traditional "cultivator rights" alone. Consequently, the majority of Korean land was bought up by Japanese developers. One of the most infamous corporations that bought land was the Oriental Development Company which came to own almost 300,000 acres of land. The company's goal was to resettle Korea with Japanese emigrants. Although the plan did not succeed, it added tremendously to the bitter and hostile environment of the time.

Against this backdrop of political, economic, and social repression came the March First Movement. Instrumental in shaping [the nationalist cause](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/provgovt.html) and tremendous in its impact and implications, the March First Movement was the first major demonstration that mobilized the masses into action. As a massive protest against their colonial oppressors, the demonstrations were peaceful in nature. However, the police force responded with naked violence, firing upon demonstrator and innocent bystander alike. Although the March First Movement did not succeed in that Korea remained under Japanese control, it did stimulate nationalism and was the impetus for the creation of the [Provisional Government](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/provgovt.html)

The official Japanese count of casualties included 553 killed, 1,409 injured, and 12,522 arrested. However, a Korean nationalist estimate included over 7,500 deaths, about 15,000 injured, and around 45,000 arrests. After the riots were suppressed, the Japanese changed their colonial policy to ensure that demonstrations such as these would not occur.

Under the new governor-general, Saito Makoto, a seemingly more relaxed colonial policy was implemented. Called the Cultural Policy (Bunka Seiji), Saito's reforms superficially gave Koreans more freedom but created an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust.

**Manchurian Invasion to Liberation (1931-1945)**

This period marked a significant change in Japan's policy towards its colonies. In Korea, the relative freedom of the past decade during the cultural policy, was beginning to change. Japan needed the active support of all the Korean people, rather than the indirect support of the elite and the indifference of the majority of the population. As Japan began to expand its imperial empire, it required the active support of the majority of the Korean population for Japan's economic and military plans. The Governor-Generals of the time, Ugaki Kazushige (July 1931-August 1936) and Minami Jiro (August 1936-1942) marked manage of strong rule in Korea. These two Governors of the colony would implement policies which directly contributed to the deterioration of the Korea culture and national identity. The result was a forced assimilation of the Koreans into the Japanese society. It was not until the end of the Second World War in 1945, that Korea was finally liberated from Japanese colonial rule.

**Main Subjects of the Late Colonial Period**

**Economic and War Mobilization**

In 1931, rice production in Korea increased due to the implementation of programs aimed at by the Japanese government. The increase in rice production was for the most part exported to Japan, so that the Korean population would suffer from lack of food left at home. This rice policy changed in 1934, when Governor-General Ugaki stopped the increase production and export of rice from the colony to its mother country. This was largely due to the fact that the Japanese agricultural community placed pressure on their government to stop the importation of rice from Korea. The Japanese rice cultivators did not want to compete with cheap Korean rice products. The new policy on rice production was also complimented by the agricultural diversification plan of 1933, which was mottoed, "cotton in the south, sheep in the north." Koreans were allowed to produce rice for their own consumption, but the new policy towards cotton and wool products limited the amount of rice available to the Korean population. Cotton fiber and wool were important to the Japanese so there was a shift in the demand from rice to these clothing products.

Japanese investment in Korea also increased. The pool of resources available in the colony attracted Japanese industry to form. Textiles and other industrial developments occurred throughout Korea because of the greater amount of natural and mineral resources in Korea. Besides the excess in natural resources, there was also an abundant amount of cheap, unskilled labor. Displaced landless peasants migrated to urban areas in order to gain some sort of economic stability. This increased the labor pool in Korea that could be harnessed towards industrialization.

Koreans also developed economically during this time period, but they were always hindered in economic mobility because of their ethnic standing. Some Korean entrepreneurs emerged and succeeded during the colonial period, but they could not compete with Japanese business or industry. In much the same way, Korean workers were always relegated to secondary jobs in an ethnically demarcated workplace. Koreans found themselves not only on the bottom of the social hierarchy but also the bottom of the labor hierarchy, as well. Koreans were paid wages which were lower than the Japanese even in situations where both groups did the same job.

All of these economic constraints helped Japan control the Korean population as well as to assist in the Japanese [War Mobilization](http://myhome.shinbiro.com/~mss1/war2.html) of the 1930's and 1940's. All economic policies were directed to contribute to the well-being of the Japanese Empire, while the Korean people were only a secondary priority in the Japanese plans to achieve dominance in Asia.

**Forced Assimilation**

Forced Assimilation of the Koreans to the Japanese social structure came in many forms, including education, language, religion, and names. The Japanese felt that in order to fully benefit from the manpower of Korea, the Koreans needed to be assimilated. The war effort and in order to build a strong colonial base, all contributed to the new policy to assimilate the Koreans. The goal was to eradicate all differences between the Japanese citizen and the Korean colonist so that the Koreans would assist in the building and maintenance of the Japanese empire.

Education was the key to changing the mentality of the Korean youth, the future of the colony. In 1934, Governor-General Ugaki changed the educational policies of the colony, by passing the new Rescript on Education. The edict revised the curriculum of colonial schools by adding more hours spent on studying the Japanese language, ethics, and history. The next Governor-General, Minami, continued the reforms of education by adding the Pledge of Imperial Subjects, which all students were required to recite. Students were also required to learn and speak only Japanese and the study of Korean history and the Korean language were eradicated. This was extended to the general public later on, when government officials, businesses, and banks all adopted this exclusive use of only the Japanese language. Korean newspapers and magazines were eliminated, which might have contribute to mass resistance. Language depravation was a very effective means of eliminating the cultural and national identity of the Koreans, because it forced them to accept the dominant Japanese culture.

Another form of oppressive assimilation was the introduction in 1935 of forcing students and government officials to attend the Shinto ceremonies. Many from the Christian community objected to this by closing their churches and schools, which lead to their eventual expulsion and arrest. Koreans had to relinquish their right to freedom of religion. They had to accept the Emperor of Japan as their own, leading to further assimilation into the Japanese culture.

The Japanese government's plan was to bring all of its continental acquisitions together by assimilating them into Japanese society. The war effort was another way that the Japanese could accomplish this policy. Political mass organizations under the direction of occupational governments brought groups of laborers, tenant farmers, and intellectuals together in order to assist Japan's assimilation of Koreans. This policy began again from student groups. Japanese colonizers began by assimilating the population most susceptible to influences from the Island Empire. Youth and students were usually the first to be affected by the assimilation policy of the 1930's and 1940's.

Of all the edicts which attempted to assimilate the Koreans, the harshest one was implemented in 1939 with the Names Order. Koreans were forced to loose their lineage by taking a Japanese name and dropping their Korean one. All Koreans had to register with the government their new Japanese name. This was another attempt at assimilation in the Japanese hopes that their colonial empire would grow and prosper, by having the Koreans adopt the Japanese mentality through a change in names. This was especially damaging to the cultural identity of the Koreans who were loosing all which distinguished them as Korean.

**Resistance**

Coming out the relative freedom of the Cultural policy of the 1920's, the harsher measures of imperial rule made resistance more difficult than before. Throughout the colonial period, Korean nationalist attempted to gain liberation from Japanese colonial rule, such as the March First Movement of 1919 and the Kwangju Student Movement of 1929. With the introduction of the new Governor-General Ugaki, and especially Minami, who was a former Minister of War and one of the leading generals in the Manchurian Incident, resistance was minimized to guerrilla warfare. There were others who collaborated with the colonial government, during this time. But the majority of the Koreans were locked in a middle ground between resistance and collaboration.

Resistance was left to either guerrilla fighters or political figure in exile. The guerrilla threat was usually located in Manchuria and North China, where leaders such as Kim Il-song (Kim Il Sung) and Ch'oe Hyon managed to survive the colonial period. In the 1930's resistance movements like the Righteous Brotherhood (*Uiyoltan*) and other communist forces in Korea and China, as well as the Korean nationalists joined forces in order to throw away the shackles of colonial rule. Other, like Syngman Rhee, who was abroad in America, used diplomatic channels in order to gain support for the Korean cause. However, the resistance movements of this period never achieved the prominence and mass support of the Korean people as in the 1920's, because of the possible threats of torture , imprisonment, work camps, or death.

Collaborators were still present during this time. The only way to try and succeed in the colonial period was to collaborate with the Japanese government. For the majority, this was not a simple choice between getting ahead and being patriotic. A real dilemma occurred in the country, as people had to sustain their livelihood, but wanted to preserve their national and cultural identity. This paradox exemplified the problems of Koreans during the colonial period.

**Liberation**

Liberation of Korea contributed to the division of Korea and the different development in the two regions. Collaboration was a question which were not answered sufficiently, even today. Families were divided and many Koreans at the end of the war were miles away from home, usually in mining or military communities in Japan or Manchuria. Also, liberation brought many leaders during the colonial period back to Korea in order to bid for control of the new government. The colonial period brought with it many ill effects which would be felt for a long time to come.

At the end of the Second World War, in 1945, Koreans finally gained independence from their colonial rulers. Japan had lost the war, and the colony was about to embark on another journey, where it would be divided in two by the contending "super powers," of the United States and The Soviet Union. The 38th parallel became the border between the communist north and the capitalist south as it became one of the fronts for the Cold War. The Berlin wall has fallen, but Korea remains divided. The exploration of these interesting relationships in a geopolitical setting are explored in the next two sections of the Korean History home page. The fact that Korea is still divided is one that will become history in the near future as political leaders attempt to come up with a solution for these questions.