

ORAL HISTORIES OF THE COLONIAL ERA

Introduction

Japanese colonization of Korea continued until the end of the Pacific War in 1945. Many of its aspects are strongly resented by many Koreans to this day, and among these most hated aspects, attempts to coerce Koreans into adopting Japanese names late in the colonial period (as part of an overall wartime material and spiritual mobilization effort) stand out.

In the first passage, below, drawn from an oral history of the colonial era, one Korean, Pak Söngp'il, retrospectively discusses his experience. However, it was also the case that there was a diversity of Korean experiences of this era: some were sacrificed for the Japanese empire or mobilized against their will (such as Chöng Chaesu, coercively recruited to the Kobe shipyards in Japan during wartime), while others (like Kang Pyöngju, who attended college and joined a bank) found limited, but nonetheless real, opportunities.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Oral Histories of the Colonial Era

Pak Söngp'il

Farmer/fisherman, (m) b. 1917, South Kyöngsang Province

So I held out a while longer, but I couldn't stand any more persecution. I finally changed my name to Otake. ...

Chong Chansu

Student (m) b. 1923, North Chölla Province

The Japanese crowded us into a school ground in Seoul and then took us to Pusan. There were thousands of us, from all over the country, some in old-fashioned Korean clothes, some in modern dress. They put us on a ship. We had no idea where we were going. ...

Kang Pyöngju

I heard that the Japanese government was recruiting managers for the Bank of Agriculture, and had decided to allow Koreans to apply. This was unusual, because the current managers were all Japanese as part of Japan's long-range plan to manage and control the farming in Korea.

Questions:

1. What is the significance of Pak changing his name to “Otake”?

Longer Selection with Questions

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Oral Histories of the Colonial Era

Pak Sōngp'il

Farmer/fisherman, (m) b. 1917, South Kyōngsang Province

I got beaten up many times by the Japanese because I resisted changing my name to Japanese. Everybody around me changed theirs, but I had lost my grandfather and then my father, and had taken over the responsibility of eldest son. That is why I tried not to change my name. But I got tired of being so badly beaten.

Out of desperation, I wrote to my aunt in Seoul, the one who had been arrested for the Independence demonstration. I asked her, should I do it? By return mail, she said, “Do you have *two fathers*? If you have two fathers, then change your name to the name of your Japanese father.” She was furious!

So I held out a while longer, but I couldn't stand any more persecution. I finally changed my name to Otake. The *O* in the Chinese characters is Korean *Tae*, the first syllable of the place where I was born. The *take*, meaning bamboo, is for the huge bamboo grove behind our house. So my name signified that I was born in Taebyōn township in the house with the bamboo grove in back.

Chong Chansu

Student (m) b. 1923, North Chōlla Province

Because our family was poor I paid for my own schooling, doing odd jobs to earn money. From fourth grade, I delivered the newspaper to pay for tuition and school supplies. I went up to Seoul for middle school, and because I had already paid for my own schooling, going up to Seoul did not faze me at all. I lived with my elder brother who was married and working in Seoul.

My draft call came on the first of October, 1944, when I was twenty-one. I wanted to run away, but my elder brother said, if that happens the Japanese will give the rest of the family a hard time. So for the good of the family, he begged me to stay put and go when I was called up. The authorities said it would only be for one year. I told my brother, even one year is too long. I will run away. But he persisted.

The Japanese crowded us into a school ground in Seoul and then took us to Pusan. There were thousands of us, from all over the country, some in old-fashioned Korean clothes, some in modern dress. They put us on a ship. We had no idea where we were going.

We ended up in Kobe, Japan, where two large companies, Mitsubishi and Kawasaki, had their shipyards. The guards herded us into long barracks, located in a suburb of Kobe. Our group had six thousand Korean, three thousand for Mitsubishi and three thousand for Kawasaki. All in those barracks. Can you imagine?

For meals we ate beans, beans, and more beans. No white rice, ever. It just didn't exist. Sometimes they gave us a small bowl of soup. Even at that, they doled out small portions. We were young and hungry and full of appetite. How can you get by with that food when you are only twenty-one? In desperation some tried to sneak more food, and then they were severely beaten. Severely! I just couldn't bear it. ...

Kang Pyŏngju

I finished college in 1932 and needed a job. I heard that the Japanese government was recruiting managers for the Bank of Agriculture, and had decided to allow Koreans to apply. This was unusual, because the current managers were all Japanese as part of Japan's long-range plan to manage and control the farming in Korea.

The bank planned to select forty people — thirty Japanese and ten Koreans. So regardless of how qualified the Koreans might be, only ten could expect jobs. And though unqualified, thirty Japanese would be chosen. More than a thousand Koreans applied. I decided to apply.

I ranked as one of the ten Koreans selected and began an orientation course. After an accounting class in Seoul came field training in the provinces. I spent two months in North P'ŏngan Province.

The base salary of a government position for a graduate of a Japanese public college was fifty-five yen a month and for graduates of private colleges (Korean or missionary) it was forty-five yen. By comparison, the county chief got sixty yen, the police chief got thirty, regular civil servants got fifteen, and policemen got only eight.

People assigned to remote areas of the provinces received an extra hardship bonus equivalent of 30 percent of their salary. Also, those living near the northern border, along the Yalu or Tuman rivers, received another seven yen. The salaries for both Japanese and Korean bank managers appeared to be the same, but the Japanese received still another extra 30 percent stipend.

Questions:

1. Why did Pak eventually change his name, and why might other Koreans have done so? What strategy did he use to preserve his identity even with the change?

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on ORAL HISTORIES OF THE COLONIAL ERA

2. How do Chŏng's and Kang's experiences compare? How might they have regarded one another?
3. What sort of opportunities might there have been for some elite, wealthy or well-educated Koreans? What sorts of discrimination does Kang suggest existed nonetheless?