

*Japan's Colonization of Korea:
Discourse and Power*

By Alexis Dudden
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Review by John Feffer

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Japan's colonization of Korea. There will certainly be no celebrations in Seoul or Pyongyang to mark the occasion. But there are still those in Japan who wax nostalgic about their half-century of colonialism, who think the Koreans ingrates for not appreciating all that Japan did for them.

In December, Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura suggested that 2005 be recognized as the anniversary of Japan's rule over Korea, then told reporters afterward that his comments were not meant to celebrate the occasion. Why else had he brought up the subject? It is never easy to talk about empire, particularly for the repudiated imperialists.

And yet, in their heyday, imperialists often could not talk about anything but empire. Talking about empire — "discourse" as the academics like to say — is an integral part of waging empire.

In her excellent new book, Alexis Dudden describes how Japan's colonial policy relied on a transformation of language. In order to make its seizure of the territory legitimate in the eyes of the world, Japan had to describe its policy in terms that other countries understood. In its victories over China and Russia at the turn of the century, Japan demonstrated that it was the military equal of the West. The Meiji-era economic reforms had brought the country into the ranks of the world's most developed countries. But Japan also wanted to be recognized as an empire among equals. To do this, it had to learn how to speak like an empire.



Dudden curiously doesn't mention, met a similar fate, leading one of the envoys to commit suicide in protest). As the *Times* of London pompously editorialized in 1907, "We ourselves have had such long experience of dealing with barbaric or semi-barbaric potentates that we can easily appreciate the position of the Japanese in Korea."

To elicit such comments from the West, Japan needed to acquire competency in the language of international law. It learned quickly that it was much more effective to work within the rhetoric of this emerging discourse than to flout convention. It brought in the French legal scholar Gustave Boissonade to remake its domestic laws. It signed a series of international conventions. It played the same game as the other colonial powers: Making fine speeches about uplifting the colonies and obeying international laws all the while extracting resources for its war efforts and exempting its colonial subjects from the emerging international standards of human rights.

Dudden describes, for instance, the Japanese torture of Korean suspects in the alleged assassination attempt on Governor General Terauchi in 1910. Although Boissonade had insisted that Japan abolish the use of torture at home, the Japanese managed to exclude "native offenders" from this particular provision. Their argument was clever: Koreans had always used flogging so it was not appropriate to break with a tradition.

women and children into sexual slavery. Was it a violation of the international law? Hardly. The 1921 agreement allowed signatories to exclude their colonial possessions from jurisdiction.

Colonialism was, in other words, perfectly legal — as long as aspiring colonial powers learned to talk about their politics the right way. During the Meiji era, the Japanese learned how to dress like the West, eat beef and cheese like the West, and conduct trade and war like the West. As it established its own sphere of colonial influence, Japan also learned how to talk like the West.

When Koreans protested in their own language or even in English, the West neither listened nor understood. Empire is not just about the power of words, as Alexis Dudden's book amply explains, but about their powerlessness as well.

Dudden begins her book with a sorrowful story. In 1901, envoys of King Kojong visited the second international conference on peace at The Hague in a desperate mission to win international support for Korean sovereignty. By ignoring the Koreans, the assembled delegates essentially recognized Japan's claims over the country. (An earlier delegation to the first international conference, which

An even more glaring contrast between rhetoric and practice concerned the case of the so-called "comfort women." Japan signed the "International Arrangement and Conventions for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children" in 1921. During its war in the Pacific, however, Japan drafted hundreds of thousands of