

# Intermarriage and Motherhood: The Eugenics Movements in Japan and Korea

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*Eugenics is a uniquely modern framework that achieved popularity in the international community during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This paper explores how Japan's position as the only Asian colonial power affected its interpretation of eugenics, and how this view was then applied to Korea, one of its colonies in the early and mid-twentieth century. This paper highlights the unique colonial relationship between Japan and Korea in terms of geographic and ethnic proximity to explain the particular brand of eugenics that Japan espoused. Additionally, the paper examines colonial Korea's appropriation of eugenics and how it both differs and resembles that of the Japanese model. In particular, the role of women as mothers was central to this discourse since women were appropriated by both Japan and colonial Korea for their respective nation-building endeavors.*

## **Introduction**

Though mention of eugenics tends to bring to mind the harrowing experiments of the Holocaust, eugenics is not a concept limited to Nazi Germany or any one nation-state. In fact, it is a modern framework that permeated the international community, particularly during the period between the two World Wars.<sup>1</sup> Coming into existence and prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, eugenics was one of the most influential “ideologies of the body” at this time.<sup>2</sup> Eugenics is the concept of “selective breeding” in humans, wherein the human race is improved by controlling reproduction and the hereditary traits that are passed on to future generations.<sup>3</sup> Eugenics is an inherently modern concept because its rise is inextricably tied to modern development. For

instance, the formation of the nation-state and the rise of nationalism, the dominance of science and use of statistics, and the concept of populations are all modern developments that enabled the emergence of eugenicist thought.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, technological developments such as the propagation of contraceptive devices as well as the acceptance of ideologies such as Social Darwinism also contributed to new questions surrounding reproduction and eugenics. According to Dutch historian, Frank Dikötter, it is not so much that eugenics is a set of scientific principles, but rather a modern method of discussing social issues in a “biologizing terms.”<sup>5</sup>

In the case of Asia, Japan mediated Korea’s understanding of modernity by dint of being the sole colonizer from this region. Though the eugenics movement was largely concerned with issues of reproduction and heredity, there were nuances and differences in focus from country to country. Japanese eugenicists adopted eugenics in order to emulate Western colonial powers and further cement their role as an imperial power in Asia during the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> This paper will first explore Japan’s application of eugenics, particularly concerning blood purity, and how this thinking was applied to colonial Korea. Different from how Western colonial powers handled their colonies, Japan sought assimilation with Korea at times throughout the colonial period. This unique colonial relationship is marked by both ethnic and geographical proximity, which is in turn reflected in Japan’s eugenicist policies. Next, this paper will discuss eugenic thought within Korea during the colonial period and how it was influenced and mediated by Japan. Finally, the paper will explore the ways that the Japanese colonial state’s aims in the eugenics movement intersected and overlapped with that of Korean nationalists.

### **Eugenics in Japan: Competing with the West and Blood Purity**

Japan was exposed to eugenics through Francis Galton’s *Hereditary Genius*, which was translated into Japanese shortly following its publication in 1869 in England.<sup>7</sup> Contraceptive technology entered Japan in the early 1920s, and with this technological advancement came new paradigms for human reproduction. Rather than viewing human reproduction as merely a force of nature, it became something that could be controlled.<sup>8</sup> This reflects Michel Foucault’s claim that biopolitics can produce “discourses about sex, sexuality and the body.”<sup>9</sup> In 1922, the famous American birth control advocate, Margaret Sanger, visited

Japan for the first time to give 13 lectures on birth control at a conference on “Western Thought.”<sup>10</sup> Her ideas were already circulating in Japan beforehand, and her talks sparked widespread discussions on birth control and eugenics.<sup>11</sup> From the 1920s onward, eugenic concepts were commonplace in both Japanese popular media and academic literature.<sup>12</sup> There were several eugenics journals, such as *Jinsei-Der Mensch*, and eugenicists also regularly contributed to other publications.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, starting in 1930, the Education Ministry and two Japanese newspaper companies began to host a yearly contest to find the healthiest and most “eugenically fit children” in the country.<sup>14</sup> Women who were particularly fertile were praised by the mass media as being part of a “fertile womb battalion”.<sup>15</sup> Many different groups of Japanese society seized on the discourse of eugenics for their respective aims. For instance, some Japanese feminists proposed a law that would make it more difficult for men with venereal disease to get married, which would have been Japan’s first eugenic law.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, many doctors and intellectuals considered eugenics as a way to improve Japan’s superiority and competitiveness.<sup>17</sup>

For many Japanese eugenicists, eugenics was seen as a way to strengthen and purify the nation-state specifically so that Japan could compete with Western nations. Japanese eugenicists envisioned a “racially pure” nation-state of “New Japanese” people who possessed “anthropometrically ideal” bodies.<sup>18</sup> It was believed that only these “New Japanese” would be able to compete with people of Western nation-states in the realm of international affairs, particularly in regards to imperial “expansion and colonization.”<sup>19</sup> In this way, eugenics was closely tied to matters of nationalism, with eugenicists being either nationalists or ultranationalists.<sup>20</sup> This underscores how the inception of the nation-state contributed to the framework needed for eugenics to emerge and take hold as an ideology. Although the need for a uniform and powerful nation-state was not a concept unique to Japan, the emphasis on the purity of blood was a particular aspect that distinguished the Japanese brand of eugenicist thought.

There were two schools of thought surrounding eugenics and blood in Japan. The first camp was the “pure-blood” (or *junketsu*) position that believed mixing with other races would lead to the degeneration and corruption of the Japanese race. These people sought to preserve the “eugenic integrity” of the Japanese original race, namely the “Yamato stem-race.”<sup>21</sup> Whereas this position presumed the superiority of the

Japanese race or “blood”, the “mixed-blood” (or *konketsu*) position started from the assumption that the Japanese race was less civilized than Western races. As a result, proponents of the *konketsu* position believed that mixing races would actually strengthen the Japanese race. For instance, some proponents of this position claimed that mixing with the white race would lead to a physically superior Japanese populace that was better equipped to compete with Western powers. This was understood as part of the process during which Japan transitioned from being semi-civilized to becoming fully civilized.<sup>22</sup> The pure-blood position ultimately became more dominant, but instances where Japanese people mixed with other races still existed.<sup>23</sup>

The idea of mixing blood was not limited to only with white races, but also applied to colonized Koreans. Some colonial administrators thought that intermarriage and mixing blood with Koreans would aid in the assimilation process, under the idea of “people of the same culture and race.”<sup>24</sup> For instance, Governor General Saitō Makoto, Vice Governor Mizuno Rentarō, and Japanese Prime Minister Hara Takashi expressed in 1919 that promoting intermarriage between Koreans and Japanese would “improve communication and build harmony.”<sup>25</sup> Koreans were considered to be racially and culturally similar to the Japanese, with some even subscribing to the theory that they were descended from a common ancestor.<sup>26</sup> As a result, this mixing of similar races was conjectured to be even more beneficial to the Japanese race than mixing with white races, which were considered radically different.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, others such as colonial administrator Togo Minoru believed that intermarriage between Japanese people and non-Japanese Asians would “dissolve the soul” and taint the purity of the Japanese race.<sup>28</sup> When it came to the reality of intermarriage, Koreans’ animosity toward their colonizers dampened this enthusiasm for assimilation. Ultimately, the few public “mixed marriages” that took place were between members of the Japanese and Korean royal families,<sup>29</sup> such as the highly publicized marriage between Prince Yi Un and Princess Masako in 1920.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the debate around intermarriage with colonized Koreans reflects the uniqueness of their colonial relationship with Japan in terms of ethnic and geographical proximity. Western colonial powers did not tend to propose intermarriage as a tool of assimilation. Rather, the colonized people were labeled as “savage” populations who were racially distinct from the white colonizers.<sup>31</sup> These binary distinctions were then

translated into eugenic discourses of fit and unfit populations. Of course, Japanese still considered Korea to be inferior in certain respects, namely *mindō*, or cultural level. They justified this opinion by citing statistics on crime, disease, and illiteracy.<sup>32</sup> The low *mindō* of Koreans was used to justify Japan's colonial rule and its repressive nature. However, this discrimination differs from that of Western colonial powers that did not share the same degree of ethnic or geographic proximity with their respective colonies. For one, it is difficult to imagine British colonizers recommending intermarriage with Indians in order to strengthen their white race. This particularity of the Japanese and Korean colonial relationship had repercussions for the application of eugenicist ideas. Racial dynamics of power were more prominent with white settler colonial contexts, such as in the case of racially stratified states like South Africa due to apartheid, as well as with countries like Australia. The eugenics organizations of these nations were focused on bettering the "mental and physical health of the white population."<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, as mentioned above, the Japanese colonizers seriously considered assimilation with the colonized Koreans to the point of intermarrying and becoming one race with Koreans. The low *mindō* of Koreans was seen as something that could be improved and reformed under the tutelage of the Japanese, rather than a fundamental racial inferiority that was irreconcilable.

In some sense, Japan's colonization efforts were informed by eugenic concerns to begin with, such as a fear of overpopulation. Prominent Neo-Malthusian thinker and birth control advocate, Abe Isoo, linked overpopulation to Japan's imperialist aggression.<sup>34</sup> Since overpopulation resulted in the need for more land to house the surplus population, he believed that overpopulation directly contributed to Japan's imperialist expansion.<sup>35</sup> As a result, he opposed Japanese invasion of Manchuria because he thought it would not solve the problem of Japan's overpopulation. Japanese' outward migration to colonies like Korea was not as successful as originally anticipated because the colonial administration had difficulty convincing Japanese farmers to migrate to Korea due to a lower standard of living and a lack of understanding about life in Korea.<sup>36</sup>

However, Japan ended up invading Manchuria in 1931, leading to a 14-year period of warfare with China until the end of World War II in 1945.<sup>37</sup> This wartime period shifted Japan's priorities from preventing overpopulation to a "give birth and multiply" policy to provide more manpower to the empire.<sup>38</sup> This led to an environment that was no longer

possible for birth control advocates to be straightforward about their support of limiting births. Moreover, two laws were passed in 1940 in Japan that reflected this new priority of multiplying the population: the National Physical Fitness Law and the National Eugenics Law. The National Eugenics Law restricted abortion while the National Physical Fitness Law examined minors for diseases and physical capabilities.<sup>39</sup> By limiting abortion, the National Eugenics Law attempted to keep the birthrate high, while the National Physical Fitness Law brought the health of minors under surveillance of the government. If minors had venereal disease or tuberculosis, they were monitored closely to make sure that they healed.<sup>40</sup> These laws reflect the institutionalization of eugenicist thought and attempts by the government to enact biopower over its populations.

### **Eugenics in Korea: Japanese Influence and Nationalism**

Similar to Japan, eugenics discourse began to propagate in Korean media starting from the early 1920s. This is when the first mention of the Korean term for eugenics, *usaeng*, can be found in Korean print media.<sup>41</sup> In 1933, the Korean Eugenics Association was founded by prominent figures in the movement such as doctor and well-known social reformer Yi Kapsu.<sup>42</sup>

Similar to many other modern and Western concepts introduced during the colonial period, Korea's understanding of eugenics was mediated through the Japanese colonial state. For instance, overpopulation began to be discussed in Korean media because of Japanese discourse on the topic, as can be seen by the 1921 *Tonga Ilbo* article, "A New Understanding of the Population Problem."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Koreans' cognizance of Japan's increased interest in birth control led to more discussions on the topic within Korea.<sup>44</sup> At this time, many Japanese books were being translated into Korean, such as sexologist Sawada Junjio's *Actual Contraception and Possibilities of Limiting Births*.<sup>45</sup> This kind of unidirectional knowledge sharing contributed to similarities in the discourse on birth control between Japan and Korea, specifically in terms of the presence of eugenic arguments and neo-Malthusian ideas in both countries' print media.<sup>46</sup>

As is the case for many colonies, issues of nation and nationalism were pressing in colonial Korea. For instance, prominent nationalist thinker Yi Kwang-su criticized the use of birth control by young women because he believed that "mother-based modernizing" should be the priority of all women. He went so far as to state that if the time comes

when women do not like to “nurse and raise children, a major disaster will result.”<sup>47</sup> Rather than supporting women’s individual freedom to choose their marriage partners and have children, the focus was on strengthening the nation by helping mothers birth “robust children for the nation.”<sup>48</sup> Women’s bodies functioned as sites for “regulation and control” and were mobilized to support a strong and healthy nation.<sup>49</sup> The healthy body of a mother was seen as a reflection of a healthy nation, and clearly her reproductive function was expected to be in service of the nation.

Korean women’s burden in this regard was twofold, since they had two nations to serve during the colonial period, namely Korea and Japan. Japan’s aforementioned period of wartime mobilization intensified the discourse on motherhood and nation. Though in the early 1930s, Korean women had been vocal about eugenics and birth control as a path to achieve liberation, their voices were ultimately supplanted by male intellectuals and doctors. Rather than focusing on women’s liberation and control over reproduction, the emphasis was placed on overpopulation during the wartime mobilization period, “state-sponsored protections of maternal and children’s health”, as well as “medicalized eugenics.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, similar to Japan, birth control activities became more limited at this time as well.

The wartime emphasis on “give birth and multiply” lent itself to a pro-motherhood eugenics both in Japan and Korea. In Japan, a 1942 national health campaign sought to protect mothers and children and required every pregnant woman to register with the state so that they could receive “proper care and attention.”<sup>51</sup> Japan also implemented programs on maternal health in Korea starting from the late 1920s. For instance, the government pushed a modern midwifery system in order to prevent infanticides and abortions and taught domestic science in girls’ schools to spread knowledge on pregnancy and child rearing.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the traditional custom of early marriage was condemned, and medical research was conducted on women’s reproductive systems. All of these were in an effort to improve the fertility of Korean women.<sup>53</sup> These attempts to protect women’s fertility and keep infants healthy were strategically deployed to maintain a healthy population for “industrial and military goals of imperial expansion.”<sup>54</sup>

Physical fitness was also emphasized for women, particularly mothers, to ensure the birth of healthy children. This followed a Lamarckian train of logic that physical and mental education for women would affect the quality of their children, and thus lead to healthier future

generations.<sup>55</sup> Western women's bodies were considered healthier and superior childbearing bodies that Korean women should aspire to attain.<sup>56</sup> In order to accomplish this, Korean women's bodies were expected to be subjected to discipline and exercise.<sup>57</sup> Similar to the *konketsu* view mentioned above, Korean women's bodies were assumed to be comparatively inferior to that of Western women. In both Japan and Korea, there was a sense of needing to "catch up" with Western powers through the use of eugenics. Especially among the Korean elites, there was a belief that Korea had been colonized due to its own weakness. As a result, there was an emphasis on self-strengthening in order to prove that Korea was capable of being an independent nation.

Korean social reformers attempted to modernize Korea through the eugenics movement. Attempting to avoid censure for being collaborators with the colonial state, they aligned themselves with the West but not Japan when it came to ideas surrounding health and eugenics.<sup>58</sup> However, their views were generally in agreement with those of the Japanese colonial authority.<sup>59</sup> These reformers were often scientists and physicians who sought to use their expertise in order to merge the scientific with the social in service of the nation.<sup>60</sup> Particularly when it came to their thoughts on women's duties to the nation, their views neatly dovetailed with that of the colonial state's. Eventually, women in Korea were defined by their maternal roles, and their reproduction was seen as manipulable in order to meet the needs of the "family, society, nation and empire."<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

As a uniquely modern ideology, eugenics has close ties to colonialism and imperialism. In extreme cases, eugenics was wielded as tool to perpetuate and exacerbate racial tensions and oppress other ethnic groups. While Korea as a colony was considered inferior to Japan, Korea's ethnic and geographical proximity allowed for a distinct dynamic with its colonizer. In particular, the pure blood versus mixed blood debate in the Japanese eugenics movement revealed contrasting tensions in this colonial relationship. Rather than expressing fear over proximity to the "savage" colonized locals, which was the case for white colonizers in Asian and African countries,<sup>62</sup> Japanese colonizers considered bringing up Korea's *mindō* through intermarriage. The ultimate goal of this kind of approach was to assimilate Koreans into the Japanese empire.



Though this strategy never came to fruition, the existence of this debate reflects the unique colonial relationship between these two countries and how it affects their discourse on eugenics. When it comes to Korea's interpretation of the eugenics movement, it closely mirrored that of Japan's because the Westernization and modernization of Korea were mediated through the Japanese during the colonial period. However, this is also due to the fact that in some cases, the colonial state's aims and that of the Korean domestic nationalists overlapped. Both sought to appropriate women's reproductive functions for the nation: the Japanese state for their wartime mobilization efforts and imperialist expansion, and the Korean nationalists for self-strengthening purposes. In essence, both Korean and Japanese eugenics movements accepted the relative inferiority of their own people and sought to resemble Western powers via eugenic policies and efforts. Since eugenics is closely tied to reproduction, women's bodies, especially those of mothers, became important sites of discourse for both Japanese and Korean eugenicists during the colonial period.

## Notes

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