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Les études en anthropologie raciale en Corée colonisée : la défense des « origines communes nippo-coréennes » contre l’autochtonisme et le courant eugéniste (1916-1940)

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Racial Anthropology in Colonial Korea: “Japanese-Korean Common Ancestry” vs Nativism and Eugenics (1916–1940)

Les études en anthropologie raciale en Corée colonisée : la défense des « origines communes nippo-coréennes » contre l’autochtonisme et le courant eugéniste (1916-1940)

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- 1 (This paper is a digest of two earlier publications in French and English.)
- 2 Japan laid the groundwork for its colonisation of Korea, made a protectorate from 1905 to 1910 then annexed from 1910 to 1945, via research in the humanities and social sciences. This included the 1884 discovery of a stele commemorating King Gwanggaeto of Goguryeo 廣開土 (early 5th century), found near the Manchurian border by an officer from the Japanese diplomatic contingent. This discovery sparked feverish interest in the history of Japanese-Korean relations in ancient times, a fever that reached its peak during the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Attention focused in particular on the legendary figure of Empress Jingū (r. 201–269), said to have “conquered” the Korean peninsula in the third century. The stele was seen as archaeological proof of these events, which previously had only been recounted in the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (720). From then on, as demonstrated by Stefan Tanaka, Japan and Korea were seen as sharing a common history and the idea of “returning to Korea” gained traction in turn-of-the-century Japan.² Seen from this perspective, Japan’s occupation of Korea was not about colonial domination—that being the preserve of the Western powers—but about restoring the natural order. Such ideas also proliferated in political circles at the time, culminating in policies to assimilate Korea into Japan after its annexation on 22 August 1910.

- 3 This paper opens with an introduction to the origins of Japanese physical anthropology, highlighting the views espoused by researchers posted to colonial Korea and their defence of “continental imperialism” as defined by Hannah Arendt: in other words, annexationist practices legitimised by a supposed ethnic proximity between conqueror and conquered. The second half of the paper focuses on the eugenics movement in Japan and how it clashed with the official discourse on assimilation.

1. Japanese anthropology and the idea of assimilation

- 4 Support for the idea of assimilation also came from the hard sciences, in particular medical scholars and physical anthropologists, who actively sought to validate the theory of Japanese and Korean common ancestry (*nissen dōso-ron* 日鮮同祖論). Japanese anthropology—whose roots can be traced back to Tokugawa-period ethnography—developed in the 1880s through the founding of the Anthropological Society of Tokyo (*Tōkyō jinrui gakkai* 東京人類學會, now a national society) in 1884. As for physical anthropology (*keishitsu jinruigaku* 形質人類學), it emerged in parallel, at the end of the nineteenth century, following the work of Koganei Yoshikiyo 小金井良精 (1858–1944) and the creation of university chairs in medicine. Koganei was a professor at Tokyo Imperial University’s Faculty of Medicine in 1886 and a former student of Rudolf Virchow (1832–1893). Functioning as the discipline’s hub were the Japanese Anatomical Society (*Kaibō gakkai* 解剖學會, founded in 1893) and the medical faculties of three imperial universities: Tokyo, Keijō (i.e. colonial Seoul) and Kyoto, which possessed three anatomy chairs created between 1899 and 1906.
- 5 Keijō Imperial University (*Keijō teikoku daigaku* 京城帝國大學) opened its doors in 1924, followed by a faculty of medicine in 1926. This was in addition to Keijō Medical College (*Keijō igaku senmon gakkō* 京城醫學專門學校), set up in 1916 by the Government-General of Korea (*Chōsen sōtoku-fu* 朝鮮總督府). The university’s anatomy division, headed by Ueda Tsunekichi 上田常吉 (1887–1966) and Imamura Yutaka 今村豊 (1896–1971), worked alongside the forensic medicine division, headed by Satō Takeo 佐藤武雄 (1895–1958), to build a colonial body of research designed to support the official ideology and dominant theses of imperial Japan. This remained the case until around 1940. The two teams nonetheless faced criticism from eugenicist circles in the 1930s. Whereas colonial scientists defended Japan’s annexation of Korea on the grounds of “racial” proximity, advocates of a “nationalist” or even “nativist” position harnessed eugenic ideology to argue against intermixing between the metropole and the colonies. This school of thought, whose proponents opposed assimilation and preached Japan’s superiority over its possessions, gained ground in 1940 thanks to the war.

2. The science of race: large-scale surveys and defence of annexation

- 6 Japanese physical anthropology saw a boom in biometrical studies during the interwar period due to their perceived ability to lend the field an aura of scientific objectiveness. This context saw the anatomy scholars at Keijō Imperial University initiate a vast programme of research on the Korean people. Conducted between June 1930 and August 1931, these studies aimed to determine the physical characteristics of Koreans,

their regional variations, and situate the Koreans biologically in relation to the Japanese. To ensure a representative sample, researchers selected one county (*gun* 郡) for each of the thirteen provinces (*do* 道) of colonial Korea. Once on site, the two teams, accompanied by interpreters and Koreans familiar with the area, sought to force “locals” to submit to measurement with the systematic help of police and the Japanese health services. In total, 1,532 men and 684 women over the age of 20 were measured, with women proving less accessible than men. The survey focused on body measurements (height, limbs, face, skull) and blood types. This fieldwork was supplemented with research back at the university, where some two hundred skeletons were measured. The results were summarised in two reports entitled “A Physical Anthropological Study of Koreans”, published in the *Korean Medical Association Journal* (*Chōsen igakkai zasshi* 朝鮮醫學會雜誌) and the *Journal of Anatomy* (*Kaibōgaku zasshi* 解剖學雜誌) in 1934.

- 7 The only other comparable survey of the time was the “Biological and Medical Study of the Ainu”, led by eugenicists Nagai Hisomu 永井潜 (1876–1957) and Uchimura Yūshi 内村裕之 (1897–1980) at Tokyo Imperial University. It was financed in 1934–1935 by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS, *Nihon gakujutsu shinkōkai* 日本學術振興會) and sought to reaffirm the racial features that distinguished the Japanese from neighbouring populations, including the Koreans. The survey’s existence reflects the rise of a counter-discourse in 1930s Japan, at a time when the state believed the Ainu question to be closed. The eugenicists were determined to show that the Japanese “nation”, which included the Ainu and, at the time, Koreans, was composed of irreducible and biologically distinct “peoples” (*minzoku* 民族). Their research focused on the Japanese “people”, limited to native-born Japanese and attributed with racial characteristics.

3. The rise of eugenics in Japan and friction with the annexationists

- 8 During the 1930s, the eugenics movement positioned itself as a counterweight to the official discourse on annexation. In contrast to “traditional” nineteenth-century raciology and colonial anthropology, which were tightly bound up with the Japanese-Korean “common ancestry” thesis, eugenics developed independently, emerging around 1910 through the work of scientists like Ōzawa Kenji 大澤謙二 (1852–1927) at Tokyo Imperial University’s Faculty of Medicine. In 1924, Nagai Hisomu, who had inherited the physiology chair from Ōzawa in 1915 and was closely linked to Koganei, created a new movement drawing on the work of geneticists. This led to the founding in 1930 of the Japan Association of Racial Hygiene (*Nihon minzoku eisei gakkai* 日本民族衛生學會, in which eugenics, now known as *yūseigaku* 優生学 in Japanese, is translated literally from the German *Rassenhygiene* as *minzoku eisei*), followed in 1931 by the creation of the journal *Minzoku eisei* 民族衛生. Despite calling itself a “learned society” (*gakkai*), the Japan Association of Racial Hygiene was actually a lobby. Its members included several metropolitan scientists and renowned physical anthropologists from the “nativist” school of thought.
- 9 This openly pro-Nazi movement promoted an ethnocentric discourse calling for the “racial” purification of the nation, limited to “native-born” Japanese in the metropole. Such views incensed many scholars in Japan and the colonies, not to mention the

authorities. Although this brand of eugenics enjoyed strong support among medical scholars in the metropole, it was only in the second half of the 1930s that it came to pose a serious challenge to the colonialist discourse on “common ancestry”. It eventually came to dominate after the creation in 1938 of the Ministry of Health, tasked with strengthening state control of citizens’ bodies just as the National Mobilisation Law was promulgated in response to the Second Sino-Japanese War. The eugenicist camp sought to “purify the race” and prevent intermixing between metropolitan Japanese—seen as the only true “Japanese people”—and colonised populations like the Koreans. To achieve this, Nagai and his group repeatedly campaigned for a “law to eugenically protect the Japanese people” (*Nihon minzoku eisei hogohō* 日本民族衛生保護法) via a sterilisation policy, describing the many defects of which the Japanese needed to be cleansed.

- 10 The colonial authorities in Korea criticised the eugenicists, likening them to Nazis. In 1941, for example, Furukawa Kanehide 古川兼秀, head of the Security Section at the Police Bureau in Korea (*Hoan-ka chō* 保安課長), criticised the Ministry of Health’s actions and compared the eugenicists’ plans to Nazi anti-Semitic policies. He saw them as an obstacle to amicable relations between Korea and Japan, and contrary to the view of the Japanese as a “composite people” (*fukugō minzoku* 複合民族). The Government-General of Korea responded in 1937 by publishing critical pamphlets stressing the need for an “idea of ethnic harmony” (*minzoku kyōwa shisō* 民族共和思想) in the Far East. It defended the “common ancestry” thesis, which gathered strength in Korea in 1938–1940 with the introduction of harsh assimilation measures.

4. The great congress of 1934: anthropology versus eugenics

- 11 The eugenics movement in Japan clashed repeatedly with the dominant political view, in which colonial Korea and the metropole formed a single entity. One such occasion came on 1 and 2 April 1934, when the Anthropological Society of Tokyo held a congress to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary. The event brought together scholars from two opposing schools of thought within the discipline, as annexationists rubbed shoulders with scientists from the metropole’s new eugenics movement. The majority of the papers presented (25 out of 46) fell under the banner of racial anthropology, mostly written by physical anthropologists in Japan, as well as some by scholars in Korea. The latter echoed the imperialist rhetoric on the legitimacy of Japan’s presence on the continent, presenting comparatist studies stressing the racial proximity between neighbouring East Asian populations (notably Koreans and Japanese).
- 12 Imamura Yutaka delivered a paper on the “Differential relations between East Asian races”, which he classified into four groups. His group three linked Koreans, Eastern Chinese, Taiwanese and Japanese. In other words, the populations controlled by Japan in Northeast Asia, thereby legitimising the colonial order. Imamura already identified a strong proximity between these peoples and those of group four, which included the Philippines, Borneo, Java and Burma, regions occupied after 1940. The congress was also attended by Ueda, who sat on the Anthropological Society’s scientific council, as well as Shima Gorō 島五郎 and Tanabe Hidehisa 田邊秀久, researchers from Keijō Imperial University.

- 13 The congress laid bare the divisions between colonial researchers from the Anthropological Society of Tokyo and scholars affiliated with the Japan Association of Racial Hygiene, some of whom attended the congress but who maintained that metropolitan Japanese were ethnically distinct. One example is Koyama Eizō 小山榮三 (1899–1983), a hardline eugenicist scientist who discussed the “degeneration” of the Ainu and Taiwanese indigenous peoples and argued against intermixing with these populations. Yet during the interwar years, this idea of Japan as a multi-ethnic country was the official state discourse. In parallel to the anthropologists’ conference, the Japan Association of Racial Hygiene held its own symposium, where Kiyono Kenji 清野謙次 (1885–1955), a medical scholar from Kyoto University, upheld the theory that the Japanese descended in an unbroken line from protohistory.

5. The search for a racial continuum via surveys in Asia

- 14 In 1935 the Anthropological Society of Tokyo published a weighty tome entitled *Nihon Minzoku* 日本民族 (The Japanese People), which blended physical and cultural anthropology, past and present, and devoted a large section to the Korean peninsula. The society’s members—anthropologists working in Japan, Korea and at Taihoku Imperial University in Taipei—saw the “Japanese people” as having diverse, continental origins. As an emanation of the Anthropological Society of Tokyo, the book upheld the colonialist position on annexation. Eugenicists, who were critical of Japan’s assimilation policies and conflated “people” with “race”, took no part in its writing.
- 15 In his chapter on “Comparing the Korean and Japanese Constitutions”, Ueda criticised the idea that the “Japanese” formed a distinct biological unit (i.e. a separate race), arguing instead that they fell along a racial continuum with continental Asians, in particular the Koreans.
- Who are the Japanese? Many researchers have tried to answer this question using racial studies. Yet after numerous debates, [science] has so far been unsuccessful. This is only natural given the extent of the problem. Resolving it will necessarily involve [...] studying neighbouring peoples—Koreans, Chinese, Manchurians, Tungus, Ainu and the peoples of the Southern Seas.
- 16 The term “relationship”—a keyword in the writings of Ueda and Imamura—was used to claim a “natural” unity between Japan and South or Northeast Asia. The idea that the Japanese had “arrived” in the archipelago during protohistoric times was central to the discourse on Korean and Japanese “common ancestry”. This conclusion was “substantiated” by racial anthropology as a means of legitimising Japan’s presence on the continent. Ueda combined the nineteenth-century model of racial substitution (arrival of the Japanese from elsewhere) with the “common ancestry” thesis constructed just before Korea’s annexation. In his view, Japanese and Koreans were linked by physical similarities and thus constituted a single “people”. In this way, anthropology provided scientific proof of the “common ancestry” of Koreans and Japanese.

In conclusion

- 17 Scientific inquiry into the culture and “race” of Koreans had been a priority for Japanese physical anthropologists and medical scholars since the 1880s, with fieldwork conducted in the peninsula around 1900. However, the purpose and scope of this anthropological research changed with the creation of colonial institutions such as Keijō Medical College, and Keijō Imperial University’s Faculty of Medicine in 1926. The theses formulated by the anatomy and forensic medicine teams at Keijō Imperial University are a perfect example of annexationist “continental imperialism”, with science harnessed for eminently political ends. Physical anthropologists at the university strove to link the “Japanese” and “Koreans” biologically, thereby fuelling the political illusion of “one single people” (*dōitsu minzoku* 同一民族), one sole and unique nation of subjects united around the emperor, as asserted in the official slogan *naisen ittai* 内鮮一體 (Korea and Japan, one body), introduced in 1931. Trapped in a circular discourse with predetermined conclusions, raciologists used skeletons and blood groups to demonstrate the racial proximity of Japanese and Koreans trumpeted by colonialists since 1910. This theory only grew in prominence after the uprising of 1 March 1919.
- 18 The annexationist movement, already dominant when Japan began building its empire, sought to justify the country’s overseas expansion during the interwar years, at a time when the colonial order worldwide was growing weak. At the same time, a counter-discourse was taking shape in Japan asserting the specificity of the “Japanese people”—those native-born—and, before long, their superiority over other Asian populations. While it may seem trite to evoke the aftermath of World War I and the Great Depression of 1929, this context weakened the nation-states, only fuelling their desire to affirm the national identity. In Japan, these tensions resulted in the creation, and subsequent consolidation, of a eugenicist discourse focused on the “Japanese race” and the need to purify it. The shift towards an “insularist” discourse, reinforced by the creation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in 1940, saw Japan ramp up its efforts to assimilate Koreans in 1938–1940 via so-called “imperialisation policies” (*kōminka seisaku* 皇民化政策), producing tensions and contradictions that Imperial Japan never managed to resolve. The post-war disappearance of the colonialist discourse portraying Korea and Japan as one body reveals the way Japan, newly inward-looking and stripped of its colonies, went on to reconstruct an “insular” identity devoid of links to the “Asian” continent after 1945 (in reality 1940).

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NOTES

1. NANTA 2019; NANTA 2021; for the post-colonial period, see NANTA 2008.
2. TANAKA, 1993.

ABSTRACTS

La Corée colonisée (1905-1945) vit se déployer sous l’égide du Japon des savoirs visant à la compréhension de la société de la « péninsule », dans un objectif à la fois académique mais aussi de légitimation du pouvoir japonais. Au sein de ce dispositif, la question de la saisie, de la compréhension et du classement des corps – qui avait d’abord constitué une obsession nationale au Japon comme en Europe – s’imposa comme l’une des grandes préoccupations des savants coloniaux. Ainsi les trois chaires d’anatomie de l’université impériale de Keijō (Seoul), fondée en 1924, incluaient-elles deux chaires d’anthropologie physique, une configuration inédite au sein des universités d’État japonaises. Ses responsables s’efforcèrent de démontrer la validité de la théorie des « origines communes entre Japonais et Coréens » au moyen de la biologie, théorie qui avait servi depuis 1910 à légitimer l’annexion par une « proximité de race » entre conquérants et conquis. Cependant, l’entre-deux-guerres allait voir la montée d’un discours ethniciste porté par le nouveau courant eugéniste, qui s’opposait à tout rapprochement entre le « peuple japonais » saisi comme pur et les populations colonisées. La seconde moitié des années 1930 et la période de guerre virent un affrontement entre deux visions opposées du Japon, entre empire ou peuple réethnalisé.

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Mots-clés: Japon, Corée coloniale, colonisation, anthropologie physique, université impériale de Keijō

Keywords: Japan, Colonial Korea, colonization, physical anthropology, Keijō Imperial University

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