

**Korean Understandings of the Occupation Through Drama:**

**Gaksital**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I analyze the how the Korean media portray the nation's experience during the Japanese Occupation from 1910 to 1945 in order to better understand modern Korean collective memory of the occupation. The following paper was originally part of a digital history project in which I analyzed multiple pieces of Korean media including manwha, film, and television. In this work, I dive deep into a single example of a wildly popular Korean television series called *Bridal Mask* to demonstrate how the Occupation is portrayed and how this impacts modern Korean's views on the period. I approach this paper with a strong focus on the social implications of historical memory, and I specifically look for the intentional deviations from historical reality which are present throughout the series. Using a mixture of literary, social, and historical analysis, I attempt to parse how these deviations from reality contribute to the creator's message. My goal is to illuminate modern political and economic tensions between Korea and Japan as part of a deeper social and historical rift and how nationalist media, such as *Bridal Mask*, contribute to the ongoing animosity.

### **Korean Understandings of the Occupation Through Drama: Gaksital**

The occupation of Korea by Japan from 1910 to 1945 still weighs heavily on the minds of the Korean population. The occupation represents one of the darkest points in Korean history: a time when they lost their independence and were subjugated to the will of a nation long considered Korea's bitter enemy since the first Imjin Wars in the 1500s. For Korea, the occupation was arguably the birthplace of modern Korean identity, when the Joseon and Goryeo became more than just dominant kingdoms in their history, but the core of what it

meant to be Korean. A perfect representation of this can be seen in the smash-hit television drama *각시탈*, translating as *Bridal Mask*. *Bridal Mask* premiered in 2012, peaked at astounding ratings of over 27 percent nationwide, and held considerable acclaim overseas in other former Japanese occupied territories.<sup>1</sup> While the issue of the occupation has loomed large over Korea-Japan relations for decades, it is important to contextualize the popular Korean sentiment in which *Bridal Mask* emerged. For the last few decades, the nature of Japan's 'comfort' system has been arguably the most impactful dispute between the two nations.<sup>2</sup> To contextualize this issue, in 2007 the controversial Asian Women's Fund (AWF), a Japanese government funded project designed to atone for Japan's wartime atrocities, was dissolved and the surviving Korean comfort women were protesting for a full-throated apology from Japan.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, *Bridal Mask's* debut specifically coincided closely with the Korean government formally asking Emperor Akihito for an apology for the occupation.<sup>4</sup> In the same year, Japan and Korea renewed their conflict over the Liancourt Rocks, a practically insignificant but prominent nationalist symbol for both nations.<sup>5</sup> Understood as

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Acknowledgements: Before going any further I would like to thank Professor Maestrejuan for her support, encouragement, and the class which inspired this paper. I would also like to thank Professor Balik for her constant advice with this paper and everything else as well as Professor Schaeffer-Fry and the anonymous editors for their advice during this process. Finally, I would like to thank my mother who had to read this paper probably three dozen times and still never complained.

<sup>1</sup> TNS Media Korea. [www.tnms.tv](http://www.tnms.tv). (Seoul, Korea: 2020) Quoted in Asian Wiki.

[https://asianwiki.com/Bridal\\_Mask\\_-\\_Korean\\_Drama](https://asianwiki.com/Bridal_Mask_-_Korean_Drama). Accessed October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Chunghee Sarah Soh. *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 240.

<sup>3</sup> Many of the Korean survivors refused to take any of the compensation offered by the AWF and had instead lobbied for an apology from the inception of the AWF in 1994. Soh. *The Comfort Women*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> For reference on how closely this series coincided with the wider debate, the Korean government formally asked for an apology from Japan on August 13, 2012, and episode 20 of *Bridal Mask* aired on the 9<sup>th</sup> while episode 21 aired on the 15<sup>th</sup>. The series effectively bookended the government's request for apology and contributed to the nationalist mood of the year. Kyoda. *Japanese Emperor Must Apologize for Colonial Rule: S. Korean President*. The Japan Times, 15 Aug. 2012, [www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/08/15/national/japanese-emperor-must-apologize-for-colonial-rule-s-korean-president](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/08/15/national/japanese-emperor-must-apologize-for-colonial-rule-s-korean-president).

<sup>5</sup> Yan, G., & Watanabe, N. M. "The Liancourt Rocks: Media Dynamics and National Identities at the 2012 Summer Olympic Games." *International Journal of Sport Communication*.7 (2014): 495–515. DOI: 10.1123/IJSC.2014-0047

both a contributor and symptom of this year of heightened tensions between the two nations, *Bridal Mask* is more than just another historical drama. *Bridal Mask* is a window into the emotionally charged cultural memory of the occupation which fuels the ongoing conflict between two of Asia's most powerful states.

*Bridal Mask* is set during the occupation around the 1930s, during the most oppressive period of the Japanese occupation.<sup>6</sup> Into this culturally significant period, the series inserts a superhero of mythic proportions called the Bridal Mask, who fends off dozens of men at a time.

The show's plot cannot be taken as an accurate portrayal of history, especially not in its portrayal of a Korean-nationalistic hero in the titular Bridal Mask. Worth noting, however, is the striking resemblance between the eponymous hero and other modern Robin Hood figures like Zorro or Iljimae in the competing Korean series *The Return of Iljimae*. What is striking about *Bridal Mask* is its fiercely nationalistic bent, which sets it distinctly apart from other dramas. Acting as a medium for Korea to vent its frustration with the occupation period, *Bridal Mask* serves as a valuable lens into the popular conscience of Koreans today.

In the last few decades, there has been significant scholarship on the growing nationalist divide between Japan and Korea. With documentaries in the 80s and 90s and public accounts bringing the issue of women's sexual abuse by the Japanese to the forefront, this specific occupation abuse has become one of the central obstacles in Korea-Japan relations.<sup>7</sup> More recently, the way nationalist movements have co-opted the debate around women's abuse during

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<sup>6</sup> Seth J. Michael *A Brief History of Korea*. (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing), 2019. 98

<sup>7</sup> The issue had actually not been one of the major points of tension between the two nations immediately after the war. In fact, the majority of scholarship on the issue was actually done by the Japanese during the period before women's abuse came to the forefront in Korea. However, by the 90's there was a growing popular movement with documentaries such as *Silence Broken* (1998) and *the Murmuring* (1995). C. Soh. *The Comfort Women*, 49.

the occupation has come under scrutiny.<sup>8</sup> There has not been a thorough enough analysis of how these nationalist sentiments bleed into popular culture more broadly. Historical dramas like *Bridal Mask* are an expression of Korea's collective memory, which serve to perpetuate the conflict. Dramas and movies such as *Bridal Mask* have a powerful role in shaping how most people understand their history. These portrayals also unveil something profound about how people today conceptualize their own history and the latent emotions that a culture holds around its past. *Bridal Mask* does not have to be accurate to the actual events of the war, as the inaccuracies and themes demonstrate how the war still exists in modern Korean consciousness. These exaggerations reveal a Korea still deeply hurt by the First World War and the unredressed crimes committed by the Japanese during the occupation. This lingering resentment is best exemplified by the historical distortions and portrayals of different cultures throughout the series, which make it clear that there is still significant anger over the occupation in Korea today.

### *Historical Context*

Unlike most colonized nations, Korea had an extensive history of close engagement with its colonial conqueror.<sup>9</sup> There was a certain shared history, familiarity, and animosity that did not exist between Spain and South America or France and Indochina at the time of their respective conquests where a far-off power came and subjugated an unfamiliar region. The Japanese government was directly involved in the Korean affairs leading to an incredible tension between the Korean population and their Japanese rulers. The Japanese military and police presence in Korea was overwhelming, which led to inevitable, constant interaction between the Japanese

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<sup>8</sup> This critical analysis goes back over a decade and earned notoriety with Dr. Sara Soh's 2008 book: *the Comfort Women*. However, it has recently earned more popular attention with the 2018 Japanese documentary *Shusenjo: The Main Battleground Of Comfort Women Issue*.

<sup>9</sup> Hwang Kyōng-moon, *A History of Korea: an Episodic Narrative* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 68.

colonizers and Korean natives.<sup>10</sup> In a more standard European-style colony, a citizen might spend their entire life without seeing a colonial official. By contrast, in colonial Korea, the Japanese were omnipresent. This made the scars of a relatively short occupation far more personal than they might have been otherwise. The relationship was further complicated by the historical conflict and tension between Korea and Japan. The Imjin War of 1592 left deep, traumatic wounds in the Korean conscience.<sup>11</sup> With thousands of Koreans kidnapped to Japan and enormous devastation, the ramifications of the Imjin War, only about 300 years before the occupation, and the memories weighed heavily in Korea's views toward Japan. The Japanese islands had been the source of pirates, invasions, and violence for much of Korea's history, which made their role as the colonizer all the more brutal for Korea at the time and now in popular memory.

The Japanese occupation was also critically defined by identity, in that the Japanese government wanted to both assimilate and subjugate the Koreans into their great pan-Asian empire. The Japanese desired to control how Korean's thought of themselves and not just the mundane administration of the country. As part of this assimilation policy, the Korean population was forced to adopt Japanese names, the use of the Korean language was restricted, and the Shinto state religion was forced onto Korea.<sup>12</sup> The end result is an imperial policy that forced the issue of identity to the forefront. Emerging from this war for the soul of Korea, dramas like *Bridal Mask* can be seen as a modern extension of the conflict. *Bridal Mask* and other historical dramas are an attempt to recontextualize the occupation and its role in the modern Korean identity construct.

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<sup>10</sup> Seth J, Michael A *Brief History of Korea*. (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2019), 91

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Jay Hawley, *The Imjin War: Japan's Sixteenth-Century Invasion of Korea and Attempt to Conquer China*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: Conquistador Press, 2014), XIII.

<sup>12</sup> Seth J, Michael A *Brief History of Korea*, 100

### *National Identity, Symbols, and Fundamental Character in Bridal Mask*

Critical to the historical significance of *Bridal Mask* is how it presents members of the Japanese and Korean society as fundamentally shaped by their national origin. The core argument being made by the series is that each nation has a certain identity at its core to which members will always default. The entire story centers around the saga of two men. The first man, Lee Kang-to is a native Korean who at first is doing everything in his power to become Japanese and embrace their culture, to become his Japanese self, Sato Hiroshi. The other is Kang-to's best friend, Kimura Shunji, a Japanese native who grew up in a powerful samurai family with a life defined by privilege but instead chose to forsake his origin and grew to sympathize with the Korean population. The two characters are inextricably linked to one another and their nations of origin. In many ways the two are closer to one another than to their own blood-brothers. When their brothers die, they grieve together in one of the most emotionally intense sequences of the series. Yet, they are portrayed as polar opposites in terms of compassion and humanity. At the series start Kang-to is decidedly aggressive and sadistic while Shunji sympathizes heavily with the Korean population, going so far as to conceal a fugitive girl from the police. The issue that *Bridal Mask* presents is that one can never truly escape their national origin. In the end each of these characters is defined by their role as men from their respective country.

### *Nationalist Masculinity*

At the show's opening, Lee Kang-to, a police officer, is described as the "jap's dog" obsessed with capturing the unbeatable, ghost-like hero dubbed the Bridal Mask.<sup>13</sup> The titular hero derives their name from the traditional Hahoetal-style kaksi mask that acts as his costume.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> It is notable in the design that the mask worn by the main character is not a full mask, rather a half mask, which is slightly different from most Kaksi examples, as shown in the far right *Hahoe Tal sold at Hahoe Folk Village in*

These masks were worn in the traditional byeolsingut ritual play originating in the 1200s to represent a goddess, young woman, or bride and typically plays the role of the innocent.<sup>15</sup> The character's design, wearing a traditional Korean cultural symbol, represents Korean pride and resistance during the occupation. In the first act of the series, Lee Kang-to brutalizes innocent town-folk to try and force the mask to appear.<sup>16</sup> He tortures a woman he believes to be associated with the mask to near death and even viciously beats his own mentally disabled brother. Throughout, he insists upon being called by his Japanese name, Sato Hiroshi, and constantly strives to prove his Japanese-ness and maintain his place as not only a rising star but the only Korean on the imperial police force in this fictional reality. In such cruel insistence on rejecting his Korean name, Kang-to is also rejecting his ancestors, his heritage, and his connection to his family as understood within Korea's ancient Confucian tradition.<sup>17</sup> Under the occupation government in 1940, all Korean citizens were subjected to a "very much of a coercive and forced [program] for] Koreans to change their original names" as part of Japan's confused attempt to assimilate Korea, but few were willing to reject their ancestral name.<sup>18</sup> For Kang-to, there can be no relic of his Korean identity or his connection to Korea's past if he is to succeed as Sato

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*Andong, Gyeongsangbuk-do, 2007, jpg*, Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korea-Andong-Hahoe.Village-04.jpg>.

<sup>15</sup> The masks are now a registered cultural treasure and the village of their origin, Hahoe, still performs the ceremony. It is worthy of noting that the performance was effectively banned in 1928 as part of Japanese attempts to crack down on 'shamanic' or superstitious beliefs. Andong City "Tour Andong: Local Specialty." N.d. <http://en.tourandong.com/coding/sub1/sub6.asp> and Hahoe Mask Dance Drama society "Regular Performance for Hahoe Mask Dance." 2012. [http://www.hahoemask.co.kr/board/index.php?doc=program/board.php&bo\\_table=board\\_eng&wr\\_id=225](http://www.hahoemask.co.kr/board/index.php?doc=program/board.php&bo_table=board_eng&wr_id=225)

<sup>16</sup> This refers to approximately 6 episodes of the series.

<sup>17</sup> This reverence for the ancestors that Kang-to is neglecting can be seen as early as book 1 of the *Analects* in Confucian tradition. Confucius *The Analects*. Translated by Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Suzuki, Kazuko (2003). Working Paper 69. "The State and Racialization: The Case of Koreans in Japan." The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies. (San Diego: University of California), 20.



Hiroshi, and the internal struggle of rejecting his entire lineage drives much of his profound rage in the first act.

As the series progresses, the two characters take wholly opposite character arcs which exemplify in each case how their national identity defines them. Where Lee Kang-to begins as a depraved, violent, and sadistic man, he ends the series as a gentle, compassionate, and protective figure. Instead of pursuing the Bridal Mask, Lee Kang-to in fact takes up the mask after the death of his brother, the original Bridal Mask, and becomes a champion of Korean identity. Where Sato Hiroshi had brutalized the innocent, tortured women, and beaten his own brother, his Korean identity as Lee Kang-to protects the weak, stops Japanese cruelty, and punishes corruption. In effect, the series would have its audience believe that the sole reason for his earlier depravity was the corrupting nature of a Japanese identity construct. In contrast, after the transformative death of his brother, the kind, compassionate schoolteacher Shunji becomes a violent, sexually dangerous, and unhinged madman. He rapidly devolves from his adopted identity as an ethical Korean sympathizer to his origin as a deviant Japanese man. Where Kang-to, the Korean, is shown to become peaceful, the native-born Japanese man reverts to violence and rage. The more Shunji accepts his role as the son of a samurai family and embraces his Japanese identity, the more rancorous he becomes. This perfect mirroring makes it quite clear that within the world of *Bridal Mask*, one's national identity is the defining aspect of their character: in this world, to be Japanese is to be violent and to be Korean is to be compassionate.

### ***The Role of Women***

As the male protagonists struggle with their role as men within the system presented by the series, female leads are forced to find their role within the strictly gender and culturally

segregated world presented.<sup>19</sup> One of these female characters is a Korean-born woman named Ueno Rie. She, much like Kang-to, accepted Japanese identity as a means of acquiring power. Ueno Rie begins to question her own status as Japanese after meeting Kang-to. She met Kang-to years before the main story, just after he became a police officer but before he had morphed into Sato Hiroshi. As a young woman, she was forced into prostitution by World War I and the poverty it caused, which is again blamed on the Japanese. She refuses a powerful Japanese man her body on the day of her father's death as she wishes to mourn, and the cruel Japanese man orders his bodyguard to kill her. Where Ueno had only desired to demonstrate filial piety to her father, the Japanese found justification for violence against her, epitomizing their supposed lack of respect for tradition.<sup>20</sup>

Unwilling to be abused that way ever again, she reinvents herself as Ueno Rie, a distinctly Japanese name, and as the daughter of that same wealthy and cruel Japanese man. She demonstrates visceral hate for all Korean born citizens, except Kang-to. Gender roles are crucial for understanding her relationship with Kang-to and her own transformation. As a woman, she is supposedly unable to be a sadistic brute in the way of Sato Hiroshi, so she instead became a greedy, manipulative woman, which is more congruent with typical portrayals of gender in a drama.<sup>21</sup> At first, Kang-to seems to be exactly like her, a man driven by power to reject his own nationality and embrace Japan. Instead of reaffirming her decision to reject her Korean identity, her relationship with Kang-to eventually leads to her discovery that he is the mask. This forces

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<sup>19</sup> Gender and sexuality is especially interesting. In one of the other reference pieces I worked with *The Tiger: An Old Hunter's Tale*, there actually are no major female characters. The entire film and the world of the occupation it represents is distinctly populated by men; despite being produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a result, it is important to note that while gender and sexuality obviously played a role during the period, their presentation here is deeply colored by Korea's current struggles with gender roles.

<sup>20</sup> Confucius *The Analects*. Translated by Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Female villains rarely take on the powerful, physical role that male characters do, an issue common in Western media as well. The key is that she is still distinctly manipulative and deceitful, which are commonly stereotyped traits for wicked women in media.

her to confront the conflict between her position as a Korean citizen in love with Kang-to and a Japanese operative.

Struggling with these questions of her role as a woman in the nationalist struggle, her loyalty to her newfound identity as Ueno Rie begins to unravel as a result and she protects Kang-to repeatedly when he would otherwise be captured or discovered. Within this internal turmoil, her national identity comes to the forefront. Despite her best efforts, Ueno is not truly Japanese and cannot forsake her love for a fellow Korean. In contrast, the heartless, native-Japanese Shunji resolves to murder his former best friend and even torture the girl he loves for the sake of his nation. This conflict culminates in *Bridal Mask's* finale, when she rejects her fake new Japanese identity and softens, returning to her birth name Chae Hong-Joo. Consistently, the rejection of Japanese identity and ideals leads Korean characters to a sense of inner peace, newfound compassion, and profound shifts toward a kinder gentler existence, along with the seeming evaporation of the cruel anger that characterized them while Japanese. These transformations reaffirm the fact that it is supposedly the construct of 'Japaneseness' which made them wicked in the first place.

The last individual worthy of analysis is Mok-dan, a poor Korean girl whose father is a famous Korean rebel. She is supposed to be symbolic of all the women of Korea under the occupation, constantly under threat of Japanese abuse and sexual violence but resilient in her purity. Mok-dan is resourceful, strong, free-willed, and at the same time intensely feminine. She falls madly in love with the Bridal Mask, and eventually the man behind it, Kang-to. She is defined by her Korean patriotism, fighting alongside her father to free Korea, and her unwillingness to yield to Japanese men. Repeatedly, imperial officers threaten her. They beat her, torture her, and if not for the Mask would likely have raped her, and yet she never breaks.

She is symbolic of the entirety of Korea's women who were under constant threat of violence by Japanese men and yet, in modern romanticized portrayals, never gave up hope. A major criticism of the series is in its stereotypical portrayal of Mok-dan as an object of desire for both male leads and overall powerlessness to defend herself from either. This is not surprising given modern Korea's struggles with gender, but it is important to remember the role that modern gender expectations play in the narrative.<sup>22</sup> The two male protagonists embody masculinity either as a powerful, protective and paternal force or as a violent, perverse, and destructive force. In both cases, it is their struggle to find their role as a man, either Korean or Japanese, that pushes them forward throughout the series.

Core to the series is the assertion that when a character rejects their status as a Japanese individual, they become kinder and more compassionate. Their Korean identity seemingly rebirths them as loving and gentle individuals. The Korean people are portrayed as loyal and devoted, resilient even while tragically poor and struggling to survive. They refuse to bow before the Japanese onslaught. In contrast, when one rejects a Korean identity and embraces a Japanese identity, they succumb to vice and their baser instincts, regardless of how kind they were before. Key to remember is that while there were atrocities committed by the Japanese, it is not fair to say that the entire identity construct of 'Japaneseness' was based on cruelty as it is portrayed here. In fact, the Japanese were struggling to find their own identity throughout the early modern period, and this makes the generalizations which the show presents extremely problematic historically.<sup>23</sup> What *Bridal Mask* truly portrays is the lingering pain and animosity that modern Korean writers feel when reflecting on that historical period.

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<sup>22</sup> Discussing South Korea's current conflicts over women's rights is far beyond the scope of this paper but the [World Report 2021: South Korea | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/south-korea) provides a good overview of the situation.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Harding, *History of Modern Japan: in Search of a Nation: 1850 to the Present* (Tokyo; Rutland, Vermont; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2020).

### *The Historicity of Bridal Mask*

There was no Bridal Mask, a mythical symbol of hope, but some of the conflicts portrayed within the show are not unrealistic. The use of torture as a common interrogation method was not at all uncommon and it is one of the war crimes that most of Asia still holds firmly against Japan.<sup>24</sup> Another key historical event is the supposed recruitment of comfort women with fake job offers of being nurses for the Japanese soldiers. This is almost entirely accurate. Darkly, they would often end up as nurses and sex slaves at the same time. Many comfort women described being forced to act not just as sex slaves but as caregivers to injured soldiers. One victim, Kimiko Kaneda, even recounted soldiers crying out "Onesan, please give me another shot!" mistaking her for their sisters and mothers.<sup>25</sup> The number of comfort women conscripted is also tragically accurate as thousands of women were sent to the front each year. Estimates vary in the total number of women conscripted from 70,000 to as high as 200,000. In any case, it is an extraordinarily high number of women subjected to indescribable atrocities.<sup>26</sup> Even now, Japanese textbooks largely claim that the women known as comfort women were willing prostitutes, not victims of mass rape. For their part, some women were willing, according to Dr. C. Sarah Soh, and some were indeed paid wages, which supports the Japanese narrative and has earned her criticism from other scholars.<sup>27</sup> Even with the assumption that some did

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<sup>24</sup> Gi-Wook Shin, interview by Melissa De Witte, August 27, 2020. *War never really ended in Asia, says Stanford scholar*. <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/08/27/war-never-really-ended-asia/>. Accessed October 10, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Kimiko Kaneda. "Testimony I Kimiko Kaneda (South Korea)" in *Testimonies of the Victims, Asian Women's fund* ed. <https://awf.or.jp/e3/oralhistory-00.html>. Accessed October 10, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Soh, Chunghee Sarah. "The Korean 'Comfort Women': Movement for Redress." *Asian Survey*, vol. 36, no. 12, 1996, pp. 1226–1240.,

<sup>27</sup> Schneider, Claudia. "The Japanese History Textbook Controversy in East Asian Perspective." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Sage Publications, 2008, [journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716208314359](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002716208314359).

And Moon, Seungsook. "Review: *THE COMFORT WOMEN: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan. Worlds of Desire: The Chicago Series on Sexuality, Gender, and Culture*." *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2011, pp. 172–173

receive wages, that in no way minimizes the cruelty of what the Japanese did. The wage earners were not the majority, however, as many of the women were under-age, most were unpaid, and most were forced to have sex for ten hours or more a day according to survivor Kim Bok-dong.<sup>28</sup> These women were not the only victims of coercion in what was supposed to be a voluntary system. Japan forced soldiers and women to join the army in order to sustain its imperial ambitions.<sup>29</sup> The Japanese imperial administration had a "high level of prejudice against Koreans" which made them the largest victim of sexual slavery during the period.<sup>30</sup> This, however, does not feature in most popular Japanese narratives, which portray themselves as a powerful, modern empire, trying to bring culture to the politically backwards mainland.

Another key point comes from the repeated fear of Japanese officials that their actions would be discovered by the League of Nations, constantly trying to hide their atrocities from international oversight. This fear is greatly overstated considering that the Japanese acted with relative impunity, unconcerned with international repercussions until late in the war.<sup>31</sup> It was only after the Second World War was nearly over that they began to show concern with how their actions would be perceived internationally, but that was not until the mid-1940s and the abuses had been occurring since the occupation began.<sup>32</sup> It is true, though, that the Japanese imperial police were horrifically abusive and the kinds of brutality portrayed in the series are not entirely unrealistic. What is not described in the series is that the Japanese police were also

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<sup>28</sup> Kim, Bok-Dong, interview by Asian Boss, October 27, 2018. *Life as a "Comfort Woman": Story of Kim Bok-Dong*.

<sup>29</sup> Min, Pyong-gap M. "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class." *Gender and Society* 21 (2)2003. <https://www-jstor-org.auraralibrary.idm.oclc.org/stable/3594678>. 943-944

<sup>30</sup> Min, Pyong-gap M. "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class." 944

<sup>31</sup> Tanaka, Yuki. *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II*. 2nd ed., (Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Rowman Et Littlefield, 1996), 6.

<sup>32</sup> Kim, Bok-Dong. *Life as a Comfort Woman*.

extremely abusive toward their own citizens back in Japan.<sup>33</sup> The imperial police often styled themselves as ‘the Emperor’s police’ and interpreted their role as enforcing imperial discipline instead of protecting the citizenry.<sup>34</sup> Obviously, the atrocities committed against occupied territories were more frequent, but it is important to contextualize the violence as part of the system and not purely fueled by racist aggression as *Bridal Mask* would have the audience believe. According to Yuki Tanaka, one of the preeminent scholars on Japan’s wartime atrocities, the Japanese system was fundamentally self-destructive; its soldiers were so brutalized by their officers that they turned to brutalizing the occupied territories as a defense mechanism.<sup>35</sup> The Japanese styled themselves as a separate race, termed the “Yamato race”, and viewed other ethnic Asians as fundamentally inferior, which made them easy victims for angry, repressed soldiers.<sup>36</sup> As a result, their behavior was both racially motivated and a kind of self-defense mechanism for the soldiers trapped in an abusive system. While this in no way absolves the imperial military and police, it helps to contextualize their behavior as part of the larger colonial system.

Secretly pulling the strings and enabling police violence throughout the series is a fictional group known as Kishokai, which supposedly acts as the emperor’s personal operatives in the colonies. This organization has no direct parallel in reality, but the idea of an ultranationalist secret society is not at all ahistorical. This period had numerous extremist secret societies operating in Japan such as the Gen’yosha (Dark Ocean Society) and the Kokuryukai (Black Dragon Society) and even the Kōdōha (Imperial Way Faction) within the Japanese

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<sup>33</sup> Christopher Harding, *History of Modern Japan: in Search of a Nation: 1850 to the Present* (Tokyo; Rutland, Vermont; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2020), 190

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Harding, *History of Modern Japan*, 176  
Tanaka, Yuki. *Hidden Horrors*, 80-81.

<sup>36</sup> Dower, John W. *War without Mercy: Race and Power in Pacific War*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.), 277.

military itself. Most notably, the Kōdōha faction was even responsible for terrorist attacks in Manchuria, which helped to prompt the Japanese invasion of China.<sup>37</sup> These ultranationalist groups were a very real threat during the occupation period. While their fictional goal of paving the way for the capital to be moved to Korea is obvious Korean nationalist revisionism, the idea of Kishokai is grounded in historical reality. The name Kishokai likely translates roughly to ‘the New Beginning’ which coincides with the idea that their goal was to pave the way for a new Japanese empire.<sup>38</sup> The trope of a shadowy cabal manipulating events is common within the world of Korean dramas, but it is important to recognize that there were very real Japanese nongovernmental actors changing the course of the occupation.

In no single event is the fictional role of Kishokai more pronounced than in the supposed use of Japanese assassins to kill the last Korean emperor and, more importantly, weaken the supposedly powerful Korean military. The fictional assassination plot is emphasized heavily as proof of the corrupt and cowardly nature of the Japanese. Supposedly, members of the Korean nobility gave the last Emperor’s location to the Japanese assassins and paid off some of his bodyguards. This fictitious plot implies that if not for underhanded tactics, Japan would have failed or at the least struggled to conquer Korea.

The truth of the matter is quite the contrary. Odds are good that the Japanese would have defeated the Korean empire one way or another. Korea had spent the last few hundred years in isolation, earning it the moniker the ‘Hermit Kingdom’ and the final monarchs Gojung and Sunjong were incredibly weak.<sup>39</sup> The last Joseon emperor, widely considered the last proper

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<sup>37</sup> Christopher Harding, *History of Modern Japan: in Search of a Nation: 1850 to the Present*

<sup>38</sup> I admit my Japanese skills are not strong enough to be absolutely confident in this translation. This translation is based on using the name of a modern medical group called Kishokai Medical Corporation and asking my Japanese tutor to translate its name, as *Bridal Mask* never shows the kanji which make up this name. The medical group specializes in Obstetric medicine which seems to fit this translation.

<sup>39</sup> Seth J, Michael *A Brief History of Korea*, 77



emperor, was forced to abdicate as far back as 1897, replaced by his son Sunjong who was largely a puppet of the Japanese.<sup>40</sup> Both were confined to the palace and were nearly entirely powerless because neither they nor their empire could resist Japan, who at the time was a major world power. Japan was a significantly more powerful, more industrialized, more militaristic state than the traditionalist Joseon. The fictional assassination draws on an old Korean sentiment that the emperor Gojong was poisoned to death by the Japanese, except it leaves out the fact that he had already abdicated and was under house arrest at the time of his death. It calls upon a sense of Korean nationalism, implying that the Korean empire would have been able to resist the Japanese in open, honorable combat, but the Japanese were too cowardly to face them properly. The only confirmed assassination by the Japanese was the Eulmi Incident of 1995, in which the last empress of Korea was assassinated, but this story seems to have merged with the death of Emperor Gojong, which has long been surrounded by speculation, portrayed in *Bridal Mask*.<sup>41</sup> At the time of his death in 1919, Japan already controlled Korea and thus his assassination could not have facilitated the invasion. This illustrates perfectly how the modern, highly militarized Korean population perceives the war: as a cowardly and evil state temporarily subjecting them. The history presented in *Bridal Mask* places the blame on shadow cabals, assassins, and trickery and in doing so reveals a powerful sense of Korean nationalism and denial of Japanese military strength.

### ***Conclusion: Nationalism and Reconciliation***

The most important theme that can be seen within *Bridal Mask*, and other Korean representations of the war, is that the Japanese are consistently portrayed as wealthy, sinful,

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<sup>40</sup> Terauchi, Masatake. *Treaty of Annexation*. UCLA International Institute, 4 Dec. 2004, international.ucla.edu/institute/article/18447.

<sup>41</sup> Paine, S. C. M. 2002. *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.) doi:10.1017/CBO9780511550188, 316.

violent, aggressive, and hopelessly corrupt. In contrast, the Korean population is only given positive attributes and is never assigned any fault for their failure to fight off the Japanese. The Korean people are not only always kind and forgiving, but also exceedingly gentle compared to the Japanese monsters, and their women are more loving with exceptional inner strength. It is heavily implied, despite historical truths, that Korea could have beaten Japan in open war. This, along with other romantic ideals that feature throughout, always portray Korea as the more powerful nation than Japan. There is a refusal to acknowledge any level of subjugation and instead paints a glorious nationalistic image of the collapsing Joseon Dynasty, which had been in deep decay long before Japan invaded due to severe internal corruption and weak leadership, as a powerful example to which Korea should return. The idea that the Korean population was universally virtuous ignores historic realities, especially around the collapse of Joseon, and makes it clear the meaning that the occupation has for the Korean nation.

The occupation is remembered as the dark age when a historically unified nation was subjugated by a foreign power and from which Korea never re-emerged fully unified. The occupation is still a painful scar in Korean popular conscience and those wounds remain all too fresh as Japan has consistently refused to take responsibility for its atrocities. The themes of *Bridal Mask* make it clear that Korea still harbors a powerful resentment for a number of crimes, most notably the treatment of women and the brutal nature of police occupation. More importantly, it reveals a lingering distrust of Japanese people and their culture on a fundamental level. The series consistently paints the Japanese as innately dangerous, as Shunji's fall from grace best demonstrates, and they are never redeemed or forgiven for their actions during the occupation. *Bridal Mask* represents the tribalism which Dr. Soh argues makes it impossible for Korea to reconcile with Japan. In its nationalist portrayal, Korea assigns blame for all of Korea's

woes upon Japan and paints them as a villain.<sup>42</sup> This inevitably causes polarization and contributes to continued tensions between the two countries. In this light, perhaps what Korea desires is best captured in *Bridal Mask's* theme song "Judgement Day" which presents an unmistakable call for a reckoning with Japan's atrocities in which Korea is finally able to hold Japan to account for the occupation. However, nationalist works such as *Bridal Mask* do not contribute meaningfully to the question of how this judgement should be carried out and therein lies the danger. The specifics as to how this judgement would be enacted remains nebulous, but the call for judgement grows louder. With each nationalist totem growing larger, anchoring each nation to its position deeper, the possibility of complete reconciliation becomes more distant.

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<sup>42</sup> . Soh. *The Comfort Women*, 238-239.

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