

Seizing Opportunities in the Empire: Taiwanese Medical Students in Colonial Korea

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ABSTRACT

Imperialism loomed over the entire East Asia in the first half of the 20th century, with Japan being the major colonial empire in Asia Pacific. Soaking up all networks of its colonies, Imperial Japan established its predominant status and imposed stringent regulations on interflow among its colonies in the region, with Taiwan and Korea being no exception. In other words, strict colonial rule of the Japanese had severed mutual interaction and free flow of population between Taiwan and Korea. The seemingly active interchange of people within the Japanese empire was mainly “the flow of administrators under colonial bureaucracy”. There was no direct transportation route between Taiwan and Korea. Apart from the few openings for overseas studies or industrial colonization offered by the imperial empire, there was no interflow of people among the colonies. Hence, one could hardly find Taiwanese in Colonial Korea or Koreans in Colonial Taiwan; and this situation persisted till the end of Japanese colonial rule.

Nevertheless, beginning from the 1930s, a small number of Taiwanese were found pursuing medical studies at the Keijo Medical College, Heijo Medical College, Daikyu Medical College and Keijo Imperial University in Colonial Korea. Though these Taiwanese medical students were few, never more than a hundred, they were indeed rare and exceptional cases in the medical education system under the Japanese Colonial Government of Korea. These Taiwanese medical students were also the only group who had first-hand experience of life in Colonial Korea in that era.

This research aims to explore why and how these Taiwanese chose to pursue medical studies in Colonial Korea. Depicting their life and experience in this foreign land also shed light on the encounter of Taiwanese in another East Asian colony during that time. In addition, by examining how these Taiwanese medical students got involved with Korea in the postwar era, we can catch a glimpse of how imperialism and colonialism penetrated and assumed control over and beyond the colonial era.