

# **The Increase of Educational Opportunity in Korea under the Japanese Occupation: For Whom the Bell Told?<sup>1)</sup>**

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On October 11th, 1995, the minister of governmental administration, Japan, Dakami Eto tried to justify the Japanese occupation of Korea by saying, "Japan did do some good things for Korea during the Japanese occupation, like building about 5000 schools". This is just one of the string of insurances that have been made frequently by the extreme-right Japanese politicians in Japan after the Independence of Korea in 1945 and is an example of the insistence that Japan's occupation had contributed to the modernization of Korea. And what makes his assertion distinct is the only fact that he used to support it was a specific reference to education, more specifically, the increase of educational opportunity.

This paper takes a close look at the reality and characteristics of the increase of educational opportunity in Korea under the Japanese occupation. To be more specific, we will ascertain the size and the agency that lead elementary school expansion under the Japanese occupation. Through this, we will reexamine the arguments for the justification of occupation, of which Eto's comment is but an example. We will also raise a few issues and questions related to the so-called "Colonial Modernization Theory".

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### I. The Size and Characteristics of Educational Growth

The consequences of Japanese colonial education can be summed up by the following educational statistics compiled by the Japanese themselves, a year before the Korean Independence.

Table 1 clearly shows that 86% of the whole Korean population never went to any school whatsoever. Among the 14 % of the schooled Koreans, hardly any went on to secondary schools. And Less than 1% went to secondary schools and over. The case of Korean women was worse than men. 95% of the female population never attended any schools. Severe restrictions on educational opportunities under Japanese occupation had brought about a vast majority of illiterates throughout Korea. Although deprived of educational opportunity by the colonial policy for 35 years, Korean people insistently counteracted obscurant policies throughout the colonial period. Also, we are going to address by whom and how the increase in the elementary school opportunities were made.

After taking over Korea by force in 1910, the Japanese promulgated "The Korean Education Ordinance" in 1911. An

**Table 1.** The Composition of Korean Population by Levels of Education  
(As of May 1944) Unit: person (Percentages)

Levels of Schools	Male	Female	Total (%)
University	7,272	102	7,374(0.03)
College	18,555	3,509	22,064 (0.1)
Secondary	162,111	37,531	199,642 (0.8)
Elementary*	40,702	9,240	49,942 (0.2)
Elementary**	1,281,490	355,552	1,637,043 (7.2)
Elementary Drop-outs	190,250	64,555	254,805 (1.1)
Convenient Schools	864,308	115,814	980,122 (4.3)
No Attendance	8,430,940	11,211,835	19,642,755(86.2)
Total	10,995,628	11,798,138	22,793,766(99.9)

Sources: 1944 Census Report

Table Note: \* Elementary Upper-Level; \*\*) Elementary-Lower Level

educational system was made consisting of school ladder from the elementary level to the higher level. But neither normal schools nor universities were established in Korea; what is worse: the term of each grade was much shorter than that of Japanese schools either in Japan or in Korea. After the March First Movement demanding independence manifested itself in 1919, the Japanese seemed to equalize the colonial education system of Korea with the Japanese public school system at home. Due to this shift of their policies, the two education systems became equal in appearance. In accordance with the amendment of the Korean Education Ordinance, the names of all the educational institutions at every level were homogenized with those in Japan and the number of Korean-Japanese integrated schools were increased. And from the 1920's, the Government-General launched some reforms to increase the number of elementary schools. Because of these reforms, the elementary education started to grow steadily. Following this growth, the number of middle and high schools slowly increased after the 1930's.

The trend of the increase at each level during the occupation is shown in Table 2.

During the occupation, a modern educational system composed of elementary, secondary, and higher education was established, and quite a few number of modern schools were opened. In 30 years from 1912 to 1942, the number of elementary schools increased from 300 to 3000, about ten times the earlier number; middle schools, from 64 to 400, six times the earlier number; high schools, from 2 to 20 ten times their earlier number. It might safe to say that if we take into account not only the elementary and secondary schools but the Simple Schools(簡易學校) which were 2 or 3 years elementary schools, the number of the education institutions under the Japanese rule was at most 5,000.

On the basis of these numbers, however, we can not conclude that educational opportunities increased and the 'modernization' of the education system was achieved during the occupation. We must look closely at the next few points that are hidden behind the 'fact' that 5,000 schools existed. Was it the Japanese that first introduced the modern education system into Korea? But even before the domination, the Korean Empire government had already established a public education system. The Korean

**Table 2.** Schools by Level and Foundation: 1912-1942

year	primary education			secondary education			higher education			private school	sodang
	total	public	private	total	public	private	total	public	private		
1912	343	343	0	64	63	1	2	2	0	1,323	18,238
1913	368	368	0	92	91	1	2	2	0	1,285	20,268
1914	404	384	20	99	94	5	2	2	0	1,214	21,358
1915	429	412	17	107	102	5	2	2	0	1,090	23,441
1916	447	428	19	121	114	7	5	5	0	973	25,486
1917	461	437	24	127	118	9	7	5	2	827	24,294
1918	507	471	36	130	119	11	7	5	2	780	23,369
1919	570	537	33	131	119	12	7	5	2	698	24,030
1920	681	643	38	115	99	16	7	5	2	661	25,482
1921	794	758	36	110	93	17	7	5	2	625	24,193
1922	947	903	44	111	96	15	8	5	3	653	21,057
1923	1,099	1,043	56	134	118	16	8	5	3	637	19,613
1924	1,141	1,090	51	138	122	16	9	6	3	645	18,510
1925	1,254	1,189	65	145	127	18	10	6	4	615	16,873
1926	1,342	1,266	76	160	138	22	11	6	5	600	16,089
1927	1,425	1,345	80	182	159	23	11	6	5	566	15,069
1928	1,510	1,430	80	200	176	24	11	6	5	549	14,957
1929	1,589	1,507	82	205	181	24	12	6	6	528	11,469
1930	1,727	1,646	81	214	188	26	14	6	8	513	10,036
1931	1,861	1,781	80	221	193	28	14	6	8	497	9,208
1932	1,978	1,898	80	230	200	30	14	6	8	471	8,630
1933	2,105	2,022	83	234	203	31	16	8	8	457	7,529
1934	2,221	2,135	86	234	202	32	16	8	8	430	6,807
1935	2,363	2,276	87	251	217	34	16	8	8	412	6,209
1936	2,504	2,419	85	277	237	40	16	8	8	394	5,944
1937	2,601	2,509	92	297	255	42	16	8	8	393	5,681
1938	2,707	2,607	100	317	273	44	16	8	8	357	5,293
1939	2,853	2,736	117	339	298	41	19	9	10	335	4,686
1940	2,995	2,861	134	360	309	51	19	9	10	300	4,105
1941	3,129	2,984	145	378	322	56	20	10	10	284	3,504
1942	3,263	3,122	141	400	336	64	21	10	11	252	3,052

- Chōsen Sōtokufu, Tōkei nenpō (Keijō:1932.1933.1938.1942)

- primary education: ordinary school only for Koreans/secondary education: secondary academic school, normal school, vocational school,/higher education: university, specialized college

- private school: elementary or middle private school which was organized by Koreans or missionaries and out of colonial educational system/sodang : traditional elementary school for Koreans

Empire had built a Western-style modern education system by expanding educational opportunities, compiling history books and training teachers, forming education systems composed of elementary, middle, and high schools as its main structure and promoted the modern educational reforms through the "Kabo Education Reform" in 1894. Along with this education reform led by the central government, passions and efforts toward building modern education in every town were already blooming in Korea, led by reform-minded civilian leaders even before the coming of the Japanese invasion around 1905. In the early 1900's, beside the private schools founded by the Christian missionaries, there were more than 1,000 schools founded and run voluntarily by Koreans. The Korean experience is quite different from Taiwan which also underwent a colonial occupation by Japan. The colonial education system and growth of educational opportunities during the period of occupation have occurred based on the denial of the spontaneous efforts for modern education made by Koreans. We must thus deny the insistence that the modern education system was newly initiated into Korea by the Japanese empire.

Second, The question must be raised, "How many Koreans were really allowed to attend the modern schools?". To address this, we must examine closely some of the key educational statistics, like school enrollment rate by nationality, and take a look at the estimated number of students per 10,000 inhabitants each year rather than the absolute number of students. Table 3 and Figure 1, 2, & 3 will reveal the reality of colonial education.

To start with, the opportunity for Koreans to attend middle and high schools were severely restricted. In 1942, only 34 out of 10,000 Koreans were allowed to attend middle school but the number of Japanese was almost 520 out of 10,000. In the case of high school, the number of Koreans was only 2 out of 10,000 while the number of Japanese was 46 out of 10,000. Although the absolute number of students did in fact increase, in reality, the opportunity of higher education for Koreans was almost completely oppressed. In short, although the number of middle and high schools increased during the period of Japanese domination, opportunities to attend those schools were provided exclusively to the Japanese living in Korea. To sum up, part of

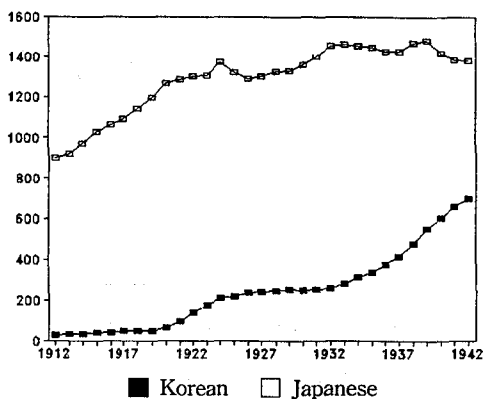
**Table 3.** Students by Level and Ethnicity: 1912-1942

Classification	primary education		secondary education		higher education	
	Korean	Japanese	Korean	Japanese	Korean	Japanese
1912	41,509(28.5)	21,882(897.8)	2,597(1.8)	1,572(64.5)	67(0.0)	15(0.6)
1913	47,451(31.3)	24,915(917.4)	3,136(2.1)	1,918(70.6)	113(0.1)	28(1.0)
1914	53,019(33.9)	28,173(967.4)	3,762(2.4)	2,195(75.4)	143(0.1)	35(1.2)
1915	60,690(38.0)	31,256(1029.3)	4,440(2.8)	2,678(88.2)	141(0.1)	13(0.4)
1916	67,628(41.5)	34,100(1062.5)	5,372(3.3)	3,270(101.9)	464(0.3)	74(2.3)
1917	75,688(45.5)	36,183(1088.4)	6,106(3.7)	3,833(115.3)	559(0.3)	125(3.8)
1918	80,113(48.0)	38,447(1141.3)	6,535(3.9)	4,290(127.3)	567(0.3)	187(5.6)
1919	80,632(48.0)	41,447(1195.8)	5,064(3.0)	4,920(141.9)	392(0.2)	256(7.4)
1920	107,365(63.5)	44,007(1265.1)	6,507(3.8)	5,862(168.5)	454(0.3)	250(7.2)
1921	159,361(93.4)	47,279(1286.1)	9,826(5.8)	6,790(184.7)	532(0.3)	362(9.8)
1922	238,058(138.3)	50,322(1302.0)	12,411(7.2)	8,394(217.2)	806(0.5)	468(12.1)
1923	306,358(175.6)	52,686(1307.3)	15,557(8.9)	10,189(252.8)	890(0.5)	566(14.0)
1924	374,347(212.5)	56,478(1372.2)	19,169(10.9)	12,650(307.3)	1,080(0.6)	785(19.1)
1925	407,541(219.8)	56,105(1320.9)	20,427(11.0)	13,949(328.4)	1,144(0.6)	921(21.7)
1926	441,872(237.4)	56,987(1288.3)	23,004(12.4)	15,354(347.1)	1,347(0.7)	1,024(23.2)
1927	453,943(243.6)	59,091(1299.0)	25,727(13.8)	16,402(360.6)	1,338(0.7)	1,144(25.1)
1928	465,314(249.3)	62,130(1324.6)	28,184(15.1)	16,998(362.4)	1,434(0.8)	1,276(27.2)
1929	474,117(252.4)	64,963(1329.9)	29,105(15.5)	17,662(361.6)	1,564(0.8)	1,553(31.8)
1930	492,613(250.2)	68,253(1360.0)	30,341(15.4)	18,708(372.8)	1,710(0.9)	1,767(35.2)
1931	502,107(254.7)	71,925(1397.5)	31,872(16.2)	19,416(377.3)	1,854(0.9)	1,823(35.4)
1932	517,091(258.1)	76,052(1452.9)	32,828(16.4)	20,215(386.2)	2,056(1.0)	1,954(37.3)
1933	564,901(279.6)	79,397(1461.9)	34,312(17.0)	21,414(394.3)	2,345(1.2)	2,365(43.5)
1934	640,140(312.1)	81,523(1452.2)	36,719(17.9)	22,172(395.0)	2,502(1.2)	2,410(42.9)
1935	720,757(339.2)	84,395(1446.5)	39,238(18.5)	23,300(399.4)	3,044(1.4)	2,441(41.8)
1936	802,976(375.7)	86,775(1424.9)	42,748(20.0)	24,864(408.3)	2,834(1.3)	2,406(39.5)
1937	901,182(415.6)	89,811(1426.7)	45,583(21.0)	27,202(432.1)	2,847(1.3)	2,382(37.8)
1938	1,050,371(478.5)	92,991(1468.3)	51,420(23.4)	29,353(463.5)	2,980(1.4)	2,408(38.0)
1939	1,215,340(550.0)	96,156(1479.1)	57,555(26.0)	31,564(485.5)	3,443(1.6)	2,572(39.6)
1940	1,385,944(603.8)	97,794(1417.7)	68,281(29.7)	33,075(479.5)	3,865(1.7)	2,766(40.1)
1941	1,571,990(657.4)	99,316(1385.1)	76,031(31.8)	35,328(492.7)	4,166(1.7)	3,124(43.6)
1942	1,779,661(697.2)	103,831(1379.2)	86,110(33.7)	39,147(520.0)	4,505(1.8)	3,502(46.5)

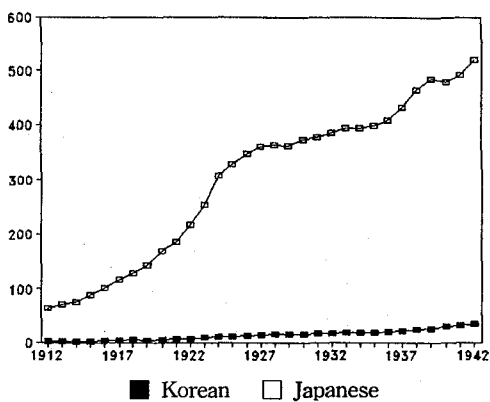
- Chōsen Sōtokufu, *Tōkei nenpō* (Keijō: 1932-1933-1938-1942)

- primary education: ordinary school only for Koreans/secondary education: secondary academic school, normal school, vocational school,/higher education: university, specialized college

- ( ) : number of students per 10,000 inhabitants



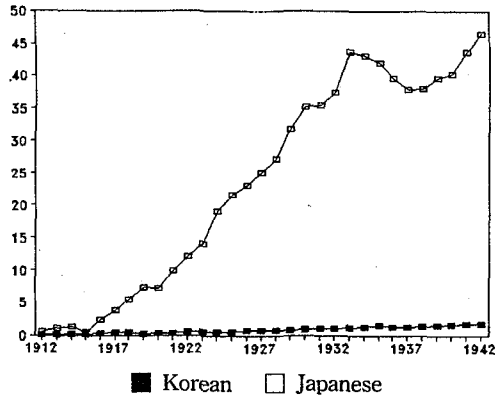
**Figure 1.** Number of Students in Primary Education Institutes per 10,000 Inhabitants : 1912-1942



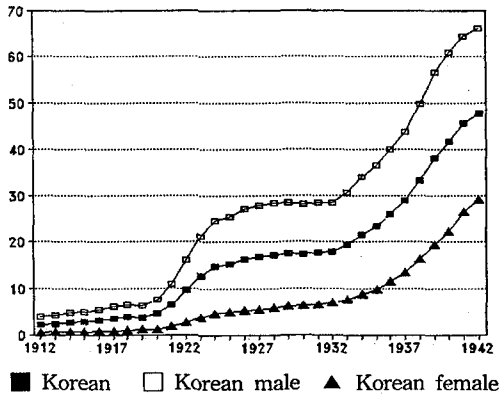
**Figure 2.** Number of Students in Secondary Education Institutes per 10,000 Inhabitants : 1912-1942

the secondary education (middle and high schools) of the so called modern education system, which was supposed to encompass the three levels of schools, was just a nominal entity of little benefits to Koreans.

What about elementary education? Of course there still was a positive difference between Korean and Japanese when it came to accessibility to elementary education. In the case of elementary education, however, there was indeed rapid



**Figure 3.** Number of Students in Higher Education Institutes per 10,000 Inhabitants :1912-1942



**Figure 4.** Primary School Enrollment Rate for Koreans: 1912-1942

expansion of educational opportunity during the period of Japanese occupation. The following Figure 4 shows the change of the estimated elementary enrollment rate of Koreans. In the 1910's it started below 10% but began to grow after the 1920's. Here we can clearly see that around 1920 was the diverging point of elementary education growth. Timing is crucial. This shows that the March First Movement in 1919 had a critical impact upon the sudden expansion in the elementary education, and that the Korean's attitudes and expectations toward modern



schools had dramatically changed around this time. The increase can be seen in the early 1920's but slowed down in the early 1930's. But after the mid 1930's, we can see another dramatic increase. In 1942, the enrollment rate was close to 50%. If we look at gender difference, we find out that the enrollment rate for male was much higher, reaching almost 70% in 1942.

Let us take up a third question at this moment. What course did the elementary education growth take? Was it really a so-called 'gift' from the Japanese imperialists?

## II. The Driving Forces for Elementary School Expansion

It is easy to think that the Japanese Imperialists led the growth of elementary education after the 1920's. But it isn't that simple. We must consider another important factor. And that is the Koreans' long cherished and strong enthusiasm for education.

In 1910, when the Japanese so-called 'military rule' began, most Koreans strongly resisted going to the elementary schools imposed by the Japanese. Instead Koreans enrolled in the traditional education institutions called 'Sodang(書堂)'. But after the March First Movement, Koreans' attitudes and aspirations toward modern education changed. After a while, the number of applicants exceeded the number of slots in elementary schools, and the problem of chronic lack of educational opportunities were brought about. The Japanese blockade policy of educational opportunity provoked Koreans' strong oppositions. After the 1920's Koreans made a public issue of the lack of elementary education and showed anti-social movement, like criticizing the Government-General and the Japanese Imperialists domination policy. Koreans rose, without respect to differences in class backgrounds, political beliefs, and ideological orientations, and took stand as one people, at least in criticizing the education policies. The issue of "discrimination in educational opportunities" is one of the most critical pieces of evidence that makes the so-called 'Ilsidongin(一視同仁)' policy, which was just a pretext to justify Japanese domination, and has made Koreans look at Japanese presence even more

suspiciously. Educational issues became one of the most frequent subjects for Korean political criticism against the Japanese rule. As a result, the Japanese had to make a concession one way or another to the Korean people who demanded an increase in educational opportunity. The string of educational growth policies after the 1920's, were in reality hesitant Japanese's political concessions to Koreans, coming from the political and economical contradictions of the Japanese occupation. That is, the Japanese partially accepted Koreans' demands for more educational opportunities but severely limited their concession to the level of elementary education.

Koreans went one more step and organized "the people's movements" to build elementary schools. They raised funds for school buildings and extended schooling ages. The introduction of the elementary education expansion policy of the Government-General was drawn by these aggressive education movements led by Koreans. The point is the growth policy was carried out "from below" as a Japanese response to a Korean grass-root's movement for educational opportunities rather than "from above" having the Government-General as the head. Moreover, the funds for building the schools were not all from the national treasure or district funds, but most were from the private funds raised by Koreans. And the monies were raised voluntarily through Korean collective movements.

If Koreans did contribute to the school funds, just how much of the funds for building schools did the peoples' funds have to burden? After the 1920's, Koreans' voluntary took up 40% of the building costs of provincial schools. The rest was from neither from financial aid from Japan nor the Government-General's treasure but from Korean taxes. The money to financially run the school was also from the Korean students' tuition and a tax-like "School Fee(校費)" burdened on Koreans. The so-called modern public school system was not a free school system nor a compulsory one. In short, as shown in Table 4, Koreans' financial burden is what made the elementary education expansion financially possible.

As we have just seen, after the 1920's Koreans have made great efforts to increase the opportunities of education, but the Japanese restricted the demands only to the elementary level of education. And the reason elementary education could in part

**Table 4.** Local Education Finance of Public Ordinary School Construction: 1924-1938

(unit=won)

year	expenditure for school construction	endowment of Koreans	percents of endowment(%)
1924	3,251,885	1,179,063	36.2
1926	2,427,976	928,198	38.2
1928	2,031,403	941,407	46.3
1929	1,949,350	754,873	38.7
1930	1,582,184	751,238	47.4
1931	1,441,766	574,807	39.8
1932	1,491,574	511,673	34.3
1933	1,262,408	503,672	39.8
1934	1,607,350	758,342	47.1
1935	2,137,496	927,160	43.3
1936	2,521,298	1,161,990	46.0
1937	4,697,902	2,170,684	46.2
1938	6,371,674	2,497,160	39.1
24-38	32,774,266	13,660,267	41.6

- Chōsen Sōtokufu Naimukyoku, *Chōsen chihō jaisei yōran*(Keijō: 1924-1938)

grow, even in the highly strict condition of colonial domination, was because there were persistent effort made by the Koreans. In short, elementary education opportunities which were the only (if not restricted) ones allowed to expand, and they were indeed an outcome of the progressive movement for the expansion of educational opportunity led by Koreans.

### III. For Whom the Bell Told?

It is clear that Koreans are the main drive of the growth of elementary education. It is a fact that the Japanese did not block the growth of elementary education entirely but partially accepted it. Anyway, the growth of elementary education was realized through the mediation of a string of growth policies carried out by the Japanese. Specifically speaking, although there were Koreans voluntary contributions in the school building costs, there were also aid given under the decision of

the Government-General. In short, two different kinds of "money with two different kinds of purpose" worked together and contributed to the building and growth of elementary schools in Korea. Metaphorically speaking, the elementary school was like "dreaming different dreams in the same bed for both Koreans and Japanese. To the Japanese, the elementary school was supposed to breed Koreans into "royal subjects of the Empire" and become the means for indoctrination to colonial ideologies that would make the domination permanent. But it was different for the Koreans. Elementary school was probably regarded as a feasible means for modern education where Koreans could get some modern skills and knowledge. It was not, of course, the best choice for Koreans, but it was the second best choice, for the purpose of obtaining some sort of modern education.

Then, whose intention was successful? How should the apparent expansion of elementary education during Japanese occupation be evaluated? Let us lay two extreme answers. First, through the growth of elementary education, the ideological reproduction of the Japanese domination became more stable. But then, were the Koreans only dolls being easily controlled by the Japanese? Rather than saying the Japanese successfully assimilated Koreans through colonial education, we could make a claim that educated Koreans grew to feel more fierce anti-Japanese nationalism. Then contrary to the first answer, did the growth of elementary education do any good for Koreans' either nationally or individually? For example, if Koreans hoped to catch any chance to move up in society or to acquire political and cultural advantages through elementary school, it is hard to say that they had succeeded. And it is possible that the elementary education during the domination period was not a place where one purpose was one-sidedly carried out but rather was a contested, contradictory terrain. We could say that the elementary education under the Japanese rule was a "double edged sword".

Then for whom did the bell toll? For now it is not easy to answer that question. We need to find out the answers to the following questions: What did elementary education during the Japanese occupation period mean to Koreans? What kind of education was going on at the black-box of the elementary school? What kind of personality was shaped through colonial

elementary schools? And what was the real social function of the elementary school during the colonial period?