

# **THE JAPANESE IN KOREA**

**GRADE LEVEL:** High School

**SUBJECT:** Social Studies, History

**TIME REQUIRED:** Two-three class periods

## **OBJECTIVES:**

1. Understand why the Japanese were interested in controlling Korea
2. Understand how the Koreans sought to resist Japanese control
3. Understand how the Japanese ruled Korea and how this compares with other colonial powers previously studied

## **MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- Readings provided with lesson (attached)
- Copy of a possible photograph of Queen Min (attached)

## **PROCEDURES:**

1. Hand out the two selections on Queen Min. Have students consider what Queen Min was like as a ruler, what she was trying to accomplish in her foreign relations, and how she was trying to accomplish it.
2. Divide the class into groups of four, with half the groups writing an official Japanese account of Queen Min's death and half writing a report from an underground Korean newspaper.
3. Have groups read out their reports. Discuss the very different Japanese and Korean perspectives. Discuss how Queen Min was trying to counter the Japanese danger and whether another policy might have worked better.
4. Hand out Reading #3. Have a full class discussion on why the Japanese would be interested in Korea. Have students consider western (including Russian) imperialism in Asia as well as Japanese need for further resources including rice as they industrialized. Ask students: what were the Japanese like as colonial rulers? How did they govern Korea? How did the Koreans seek to oppose Japanese rule? How successful were they?
5. Have students compare Japanese colonialism and Korean resistance to one instance of western imperialism which they have already studied. (**NOTE:** See also the lesson on Korean History During Colonial Rule as well as additional portraits of Queen Min in the lessons on Women in Korean Culture and History.)

## **EVALUATION:**

Consider student contributions in group work and class discussion. Have students write an essay on the following: Consider the political, diplomatic and geographic features that made Korea vulnerable to Japanese imperialism and evaluate the attempts of Koreans to oppose Japanese control.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

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READING #1  
**QUEEN MIN**  
by David M. Hanna

Few figures in Korean History have had as much of an impact on their times as Queen Min. But just who was this controversial yet intrepid woman?

The future Queen Min was born in 1851. She was from a noble family that lacked powerful ties at court. In 1866, at the age of 14, she married the heir to the Chosŏn kingdom's throne, King Kojong. Kojong's father, known by the title of the "Taewon'gun," ruled in his name. He felt that the young queen would be a compliant wife to his son and pose no threat to his authority.

In 1873, Queen Min convinced her young husband to declare himself king in fact as well as in name. His father, at the height of his powers, was bitter at this turn of events. Queen Min made a powerful enemy for life. In fact, the bad blood between Queen Min and her father-in-law went back even further than this. The Queen had a difficult time giving birth to a son, who was necessary to continue the royal line. In Korea, a woman could not inherit the throne in her own right. Therefore, having a son was crucial to the success of any queen. The Taewon'gun grew impatient with her failure and arranged for his son to have a child by another woman. Needless to say, this greatly hurt the young queen.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was a time of great change for Korea. Occupying a strategic position at the intersection of Chinese, Russian and Japanese interests, it became a victim of imperialism. Queen Min recognized that her husband and his kingdom were in grave danger. She used her intelligence and guile to play one imperialist "suitor" off against the other so that Korea could gain time in order to make progressive reforms, build infrastructure and develop the modern technology necessary to hold its own in an increasingly hostile world. Queen Min was seen as both a resourceful and supportive wife by some and as a meddling, power hungry mystic by others.

In 1882, soldiers rioted, and she was one of their prime targets. The queen barely escaped with her life. Queen Min returned to the court and continued to develop a policy of balancing Chinese, Russian and Japanese interests in Korea while continuing to keep her father-in-law at bay. She did all of this while raising her young son to become the future king.

She was clearly an energetic and dynamic woman. In 1895, the Japanese reached the conclusion that they would never be able to dominate Korea as long as Queen Min lived. After defeating China in a war fought over Korea, Japan's sole rival in Korea was Russia. Queen Min cultivated close contacts with the Russians, which infuriated the Japanese and frustrated their efforts. On October 8th, a team of Japanese assassins and their Korean collaborators broke into the royal palace, stabbed Queen Min, and set her body on fire. Queen Min was 44 years old.

Within two decades of Queen Min's death the Chosŏn kingdom was officially ended by the Japanese. The Japanese had defeated the Russians on the battlefield, and in so doing, gained a free hand to do as they pleased in Korea. Their occupation of Korea left many scars. Queen Min has recently been immortalized in a musical called *The Last Empress*. This play portrays her as the embodiment of all that was best in Korea. It appears that she has achieved in death what was denied her in life.

READING #2  
**QUEEN MIN: A CONTEMPORARY VIEW**  
by David M. Hanna

History often presents us with flawed images of those we are studying. The essence of what a person was becomes lost in a haze of names, dates and larger historical forces. The essence of Queen Min, wife of King Kojong of Korea in the latter half of the nineteenth century, certainly falls into this category. The Japanese all but erased her name from the collective memory of the Korean people. Her story, fascinating though it was, had been marginalized by historians. The fact was that she was a woman living in a male-dominated world and that she had been on the losing side in a hopeless struggle.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, an English author named Isabella Bird became renowned as one of the world's foremost travelers. Her journeys took her to the four corners of the earth and off the beaten track. Korea, the "hermit kingdom," certainly fell into the latter category. Little was known about Korea outside of East Asia, and even less was known about its remarkable queen. It appears Ms. Bird's reputation preceded her and upon arriving in Seoul she was granted an audience at court. Her observations during these meetings with the Queen are an invaluable resource for those who want to gain a glimpse of what Queen Min was actually like. The following passages are from Ms. Bird's memoir *Korea and Her Neighbors*, which was published in 1897, two years after the Queen's death:

Her majesty, who was then past forty, was a very nice-looking slender woman, with glossy raven-black hair and a very pale skin, the pallor enhanced by the use of pearl powder. The eyes were cold and keen, and the general expression one of brilliant intelligence. She wore a very handsome, very full, and very long skirt of mazarine blue brocade, heavily pleated, with the waist under the arms, and a full sleeved bodice of crimson and blue brocade, clasped at the throat by a coral rosette, and girdled by six crimson and blue cords, each clasped with a coral rosette, with a crimson tassel hanging from it. Her head dress was a crownless black silk cap edged with fur, pointed over the brow, with a coral rose and full red tassel in front, and jeweled aigrettes on either side. Her shoes were of the same brocade as her dress. As soon as she began to speak, and especially when she became interested in conversation, her face lighted up into something very like beauty... ..I was impressed with the grace and charming manner of the Queen, her thoughtful kindness, her singular intelligence and force, and her remarkable conversational power even through the medium of an interpreter. I was not surprised at her singular political influence, or her sway over the king and many others.



Thought to be a photograph of Queen Min in 1895.

Handout  
**THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE AND THE BIRTH OF RIVAL REGIMES:  
JAPANESE COLONIAL RULE AND U.S.-SOVIET OCCUPATION (1910-48)**  
by Young-Ick Lew

In 1905, in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese government unilaterally declared that Korea would henceforth be a Japanese protectorate. In August 1910, this status was altered, and Korea became a formal colony of the Japanese empire. This event was the first time in Korea's long history that the entire country and its people were subjugated under alien rule. What made this situation even more galling was the fact that historically the Korean people had always considered themselves Japan's cultural mentors.

The untimely Japanese occupation stymied Korea's modernization process just as the country was taking steps to implement self-initiated reforms. Some historians who condone Japanese policy toward Korea claim that considerable progress was made in Korea's economic and educational systems during the colonial period. They argue that the Japanese occupation was in the long run beneficial to the modernization of Korea. Although it cannot be denied that there was some degree of economic progress between 1910 and 1945, the main beneficiaries were the Japanese and a handful of Korean collaborators. The majority of the Korean populace was reduced to a state of impoverishment and illiteracy.

Japan ruled Korea through the office of a governor-general, who was usually a military man from the Japanese army or navy. During the first stage of the occupation (1910-19), the Koreans were controlled by a draconian gendarmerie-police system, which deprived them of many basic civil freedoms. The stringent social controls finally produced a massive, nation-wide demonstration on March 1, 1919, referred to as the March First Movement. It compelled the Japanese to loosen their constricting grip on the Korean populace. During the second phase of colonial rule (1919-32), the governor-general permitted the Korean people a degree of freedom of expression and assembly. In the early 1920s, for example, three Korean newspapers were published in the vernacular, and in 1927, a Korean political party composed of both rightist and leftist nationalists, the Sin'ganhoe (New Korea Society), was established. Because of the relatively tolerant political climate, even the socialists were able to get away with forming a clandestine Korean Communist Party in Seoul in 1925. It was also during this period that some modern colleges, including the Japanese-sponsored Keijo [Seoul] Imperial University and two private Korean colleges were organized with public or private funding.

The third phase of Japanese rule (1932-45) saw a return of draconian rule to Korea as the Japanese ruthlessly exploited Korean manpower and resources to support their war efforts in Manchuria (after 1932), mainland China (after 1937), and the Pacific (after 1941). The Korean people were forced to stop using their own language, to adopt Japanese names, and to worship at Shinto shrines. In the end, however, such ruthless measures served only to further incense the Korean population and to fuel nationalist fervor.

The Japanese occupation period was marked by Korea's refusal to accept its protectorate status and annexation. The massive March First Movement inspired people from all rungs of society to fight for independence; its leadership was heterogeneous and consisted of members from

Ch'ôndogyo (formerly Tonghak), Protestant, and Buddhist organizations. The size and intensity of the movement stunned the Japanese who had assumed that their brutal policies would eventually break the backbone of the Korean national spirit, not strengthen it. Although the movement subsided after 1919, Korean resistance at home continued in many forms: student demonstrations, labor strikes, tenancy disputes, and boycotts against Japanese goods. Despite renewed Japanese efforts to squelch political resistance, Korean nationalists and communists continued to agitate against the Japanese in scattered movements throughout the country. In August 1944, for example, a clandestine political coalition, the Korean Independence League, was formed under the leadership of Yô Un-hyông, a leftist nationalist. It was this league that later formed the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (CPKI), the interim government that was established in Seoul immediately after the Japanese surrender in August 1945.

Korean expatriates in Shanghai, China, organized the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) in the wake of the March First Movement with Dr. Syngman Rhee as president. The KPG was the center of nationalist rightist activity, and it received financial support from Chiang Kai-shek's (Jiang Jieshi's) Nationalist Government in China as well as from Korean emigrant communities in the United States and Russia. It functioned from the 1930s until Korea's liberation in 1945 under the leadership of Chairman Kim Ku. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, the KPG tried to gain formal Allied recognition of its legitimacy. Its representatives in Washington, D.C., including Syngman Rhee, lobbied the U.S. government. The KPG also enthusiastically supported the U.S. Army Office of Strategic Services in north China. Unfortunately, all this effort proved futile, and the government-in-exile was largely ignored by world powers until the end of World War II.

The communist Yen'an Faction was another expatriate Korean group in China, which had fought the Japanese with Mao Zedong's Red Army in northwestern China. This group shaped the Korean Independence League and the Korean Volunteer Army in 1941 under the leadership of Kim Tu-bong and Mu Chông. Like the KPG, it also held as its ultimate objective the restoration of Korean independence. There was also another group of Koreans in China, identified in history as the Kapsan Faction or the Partisan Faction. This group conducted guerrilla attacks against the Japanese Kwantung Army in southwestern Manchuria after 1932, and the group's activities were part of the Northeast Anti-Japanese Allied Forces organized by the Chinese Communist Party. One of its leaders was Kim Sông-ju, later known as Kim Il-sung. Kim's guerrilla unit, which numbered about 300 at most, was composed mainly of Korean residents of Jiando (Kando in Korean) in southeastern Manchuria. In the early spring of 1941, it sought refuge from the Kwantung Army attacks in Vladivostok in the Russian Maritime Province. There, Kim and his band were incorporated into the Eighty-Eighth Regiment, a special task force of the Far Eastern Command of the Soviet Army. They received special training at the Okeanskaya Field School in Vladivostok and later at other similar institutions in Khabarovsk while awaiting the end of World War II.

When the war ended with the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945, the Korean people received the news of their liberation with both jubilation and dismay: they were overjoyed that they were freed from the Japanese yoke but dismayed because their country was to be divided along the thirty-eighth parallel into two military occupation zones. The thirty-eighth parallel

decision was masterminded by U.S. policy makers in Washington, D.C., throughout the nights of August 10 and 11 as the best means of preventing the Russians from occupying the entire peninsula of Korea (a likelihood considering the fact that the Soviets had declared war on Japan on August 8, one day after the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima).