

# The University and East Asian Cities: The Variegated Origins of Urban Universities in Colonial Seoul and Singapore

Journal of Urban History

1–25

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DOI: 10.1177/0096144220941199

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## Abstract

This article explores and compares the development of colonial urban universities in Seoul and Singapore for the purpose of examining the multifaceted and scaled socio-political relationships in colonial cities. The colonial universities were a contested space where different interests crossed. The pattern of these intersections was different because Seoul and Singapore experienced different colonial powers—Japan and Britain, respectively. In this regard, this article focuses on how different colonial experiences affected universities as well as urban environments in Seoul and Singapore. The findings show that the university campus development trends of colonial universities in Seoul and Singapore are important to understand the urbanization processes of both cities. The varied colonial interests, global and local, shaped universities and their surrounding urban environments in different ways. Understanding these differences helps us understand the development trajectory of East Asian urbanization.

## Keywords

East Asia, comparative urbanism, colonialism, universities, urbanization

The university historically has engaged with its surrounding environment. Medieval universities such as Bologna and Paris were city institutions, and even universities in Oxford and Cambridge have maintained ambivalent relationships with their respective towns.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, early universities in the United States such as Princeton University and the University of Virginia were established in more remote locations to avoid this “town and gown” relationship, given the traditional anti-urban bias in Anglo-American society.<sup>2</sup> However, it was eventually inevitable for these universities to become part of urban communities as a result of the rapid industrialization and urbanization processes that began in the late-nineteenth century, meaning that it was demanded of them that they play some role in their host cities.

Such a diverse relationship between the university and the urban environment can enrich our understanding of cities. Urban sociologist Harvey Molotch recognized the auxiliary roles of the university in an urban growth machine.<sup>3</sup> Clarence Stone, who developed urban regime theory, later considered the university as one of the major institutions for neighborhood revitalization in

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post-industrial cities.<sup>4</sup> Perspectives such as these of the relationship between the university and the city imply that the university campus is not a static entity. Based on Sharon Harr's historical research on the University of Illinois at Chicago, the campus and urban space are argued to be in "constant negotiation" whereby the relationship evolves over time.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, this relationship has rarely been discussed in the urban history literature, as recently noted by urban and architecture historians such as William Whyte and LaDale C. Winling.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the limited discussions in the existing literature are based primarily on U.S. and U.K. contexts. In this regard, several questions remain unanswered outside the Anglophone world. For example, how, why, and where were universities outside the West established? What was the relationship between these universities and other actors in their hosting cities? Finally, how do the spatial strategies of these universities differ, given their different historical and geographical contexts?

While there is no theoretical framework that analyzes the university–urban relationship exclusively, David Harvey's theory of capital-switching and the urban process provides useful but cautious insights into the relationship between the university, city, and society from a macroscopic perspective. Harvey characterizes the production and reproduction of social infrastructures and institutions, including the university, as a means of ideological control and societal repression,<sup>7</sup> with the implication that investments in universities have been a form of compensation to absorb the inevitable struggles and paradoxes in the capital accumulation process.<sup>8</sup> Colonial cities were not just sites of primitive accumulation but "nerve centers" of colonial exploitation where various institutions were concentrated to expand the capitalist system.<sup>9</sup> While various means of control were mobilized in colonial cities, a colonial higher learning institution was a means to assimilate a handful of the colonized. By gaining an opportunity to become part of the colonial apparatus, local elites were effectively taken into the colonial system while the institutions furthermore promoted aspirations among the masses to climb the social ladder within the colony. Harvey's theory offers one explanation for the motivation by imperial powers to establish higher learning institutions not only in metropolises but also in their colonies.

Harvey's conceptualization of the urban process is a valuable starting point for understanding the university–urban relationship outside of the West, yet it falls short in addressing the questions raised above. Swati Chattopadhyay criticizes Harvey's theory by arguing that it assumes urbanism outside of the West as peripheral and consequently ignores the complex interactive relationship between cities in the West and the third world.<sup>10</sup> In his investigation of colonial cities, Anthony King also found Harvey's theory useful, though insufficient, for understanding urban processes in those cities where various processes such as colonialism, capitalism, industrialization, and Westernization were interacting.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is necessary to conceptualize the university–urban relationship outside the West not only as a "product of a capitalist logic" but also as an "area of conflict between social groups which have differing vested interests in the city" as proposed by Brenda S. A. Yeoh.<sup>12</sup> Such an understanding also coincides with Todd Henry's finding that both the colonizer and the colonized were not homogeneous groups in colonial Seoul.<sup>13</sup> Based on such theoretical accounts, the following section will explain how and why colonial universities in Singapore and Korea have been chosen for this article to answer the proposed questions above.

## **The Emergence of the Colonial Universities in East Asia**

While the concept of the modern university began to appear in non-Western contexts at the beginning of the twentieth century, research on these contexts has been scarce.<sup>14</sup> Specifically in East Asia, where the university has a long history extending back to the colonial era, there are a few studies of East Asian colonial universities within the field of history, but none in the field of urban studies, so the impact of different colonial universities on the contemporary urbanization process in East Asia has seldom been addressed. In particular, colonial legacies in

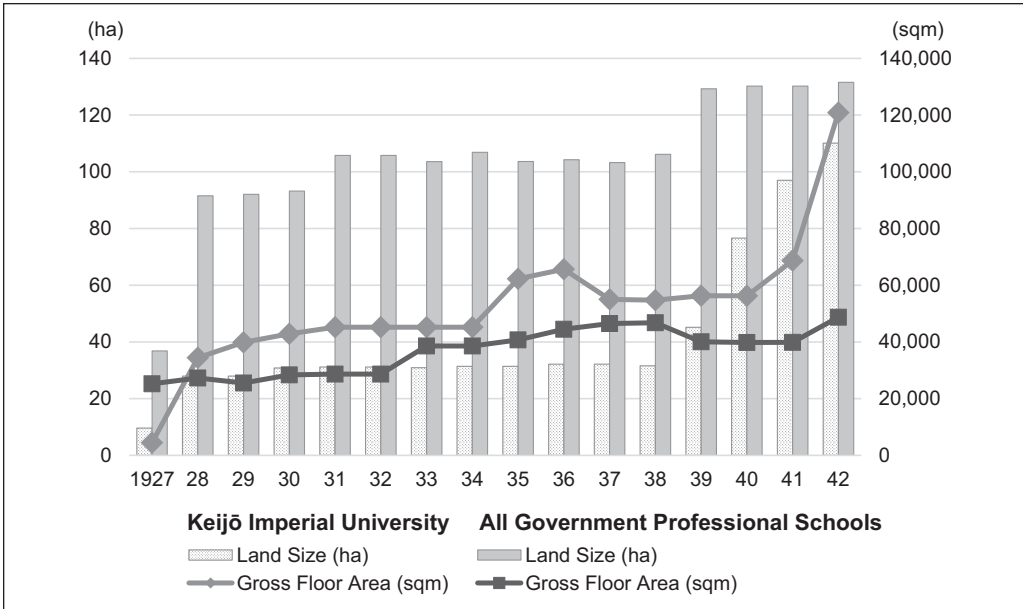
East Asia vary, and their historical urbanization processes also vary, but how these differing colonial legacies have affected the contemporary urbanization process in East Asia has barely been investigated.

In this regard, this article attempts to provide a comparison between colonial universities in Seoul and Singapore. While several studies have compared Singapore and Hong Kong, only a limited number of studies have compared East Asian countries with different languages, cultures, and colonial legacies.<sup>15</sup> In particular, postcolonial cities previously under Japanese rule have been underrepresented in urban studies. Even Anthony King once displayed the Eurocentric over-simplification of colonialism by stating that “virtually all peripheral regions in the world economy were at one time controlled by European core powers.”<sup>16</sup> When considering the complexity of cities in Korea, China, and Taiwan, along with their differing status and roles, such a statement is problematic. Accordingly, this study has selected Singapore and Seoul in an effort to form a basis for further comparative investigations of other Asian cities by analyzing the nexus between universities and cities with distinct colonial legacies.

Furthermore, colonial universities in Singapore and Seoul can provide an alternative perspective for understanding the changing socio-economic and political conditions of East Asia, considering the universities’ various origins and transient natures. Colonial universities in Singapore and Seoul were established not only by imperial powers but also by ethnic clans and missionaries, and thereafter became elite institutions to support the nation’s growth under the East Asian developmental state model. Such diverse backgrounds can illustrate how East Asian universities have existed and operated continuously since colonial times by serving the changing political and economic needs of various groups, by comparison with their Western counterparts. Universities themselves also consisted of different groups such as faculty members and students representing different interests and motivations, and they were not static in responding to changing socio-political conditions. In this regard, when compared with other elements of the urban built environment in colonies, such as monuments and government buildings, investigating colonial universities can provide a more diverse understanding of the multi-layered dynamics of colonial cities.

To conduct a comparative analysis of two colonial cities, this article utilizes an analytical framework proposed by Anthony King.<sup>17</sup> Based on the findings from Robert Ross and Gerard J. Telkamp’s edited volume,<sup>18</sup> King has proposed three key themes for studying colonial cities: function, organization and space. Applying these three themes, this article adopts a relational comparative approach to analyze the findings. The relational comparative approach understands cities and their socio-economic structures as “open and constituted in and through relations that stretch across space and that are territorialized in place” rather than “bounded and given, self-identifiable” as suggested by Kevin Ward.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, this study conceptualizes the university as a process which is spatially grounded but widely interconnected with its host city, country, and the rest of the world. By comparing how universities have been established in colonial cities, this study intends to illustrate diverse characteristics of colonial urbanity at various levels as well as complex political and social relationships within colonial cities, which also resonates with Jane M. Jacobs’s conceptualization of colonial cities.<sup>20</sup> In analyzing two colonial cities, this study also considers the limitations of these theories and themes since they were derived from urban experiences under Western colonialism. Such a comparison can be an opportunity both to identify differences and to generalize their contexts among East Asian cities to construct narratives that have wider meaning, as Paul Waley has argued.<sup>21</sup>

To achieve this, from the proceeding section, this article investigates five institutions—namely, Chosen Christian College and Keijō Imperial University in colonial Seoul, and Raffles College, Singapore Polytechnic, and Nanyang University in colonial Singapore—to reveal diverse interests and power relations in colonial cities. Three themes for studying colonial cities—function, organization, and space—are employed to present the findings.



**Figure 1.** The physical growth of campuses of government higher education institutions (1927-1943). Source: Japanese Government-General of Korea (multiple years, retrieved from <http://kosis.kr/>)

## Functions of Colonial Universities

With respect to the functions of colonial universities in cities, they can be understood as nodes to interact globally with multiple stakeholders and scales. The primary stakeholders were the metropolises. The colonial powers created institutions of higher learning as centers of colonial knowledge production, in large part to justify their colonial rule. Other groups including American missionaries as well as Chinese ethnic clans were also able to expand their presence through negotiation and conflict with the colonial government.

In Seoul, the Japanese Government-General of Korea provided massive support for Keijō Imperial University<sup>22</sup> to expand rapidly more than any other schools in Korea, which became a symbolic colonial institution that enjoyed privileged status since its opening in 1924. In 1937, the operating expenditure of Keijō Imperial University by the colonial government was 47.8 percent of the total expenditure for all manner of government schools in Korea.<sup>23</sup> Keijō Imperial University had only 516 students as of 1937, fewer than half of all students in government professional schools, but its expenditure per student was 5.6 times higher than government professional school students.<sup>24</sup> This relatively generous support from the colonial government enabled Keijō Imperial University to expand its campus rapidly, while the expansion of the five government professional schools remained stagnant (see Figure 1). Such a tendency became more noticeable after 1941 when the colonial government opened the new Science and Engineering department of the university.

Government schools including Keijō Imperial University received more Japanese students than Koreans, by restricting the entrance of Korean students to serve the educational needs of Japanese settlers in Korea. In this regard, competition among Koreans to enter the imperial university was intense since entry all but guaranteed an opportunity to become part of the colonial elite. While Seoul was the political and economic center of the Korean peninsula under colonial rule, it was also important for institutions to be located there since Seoul was also the population center. In 1937, of the total eighteen higher education institutions, twelve were located in Seoul;



**Figure 2.** Aerial view of Singapore Polytechnic in the 1950s.

Source: Singapore Polytechnic, *Opening Minds Shaping Lives: The Journey of Singapore's First Polytechnic* (Singapore: Singapore Polytechnic, 2005), 151.

81.7 percent of total students in Korea attended these twelve schools in 1937.<sup>25</sup> The other schools were also located in urban areas. This degree of concentration was significant, considering that only 11 percent of the total Korean population was living in Gyeonggi Province, where Seoul is located.<sup>26</sup> The Japanese population was more concentrated in Seoul; 25.3 percent of the total population of Japanese in Korea was living in Gyeonggi Province in 1937.<sup>27</sup>

In Singapore, to serve the demands of British Malaya, a small number of higher education institutions such as King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College were established and operated by the Government of the Straits Settlements. The medical school was established in 1905 due to there being a clear need to supply qualified medical assistants for expatriate doctors from Europe.<sup>28</sup> Raffles College opened in 1929, focusing on arts and science education. Similar to Keijō Imperial University, Raffles College educated the colonized for the purpose of nurturing pro-colonial local elites who would support the colonial power by providing opportunities for graduates to work in the administration toward the end of colonial rule. Before the 1920s, the colonial powers held negative views about providing higher education to the colonized, but demand emerged primarily from local elites, particularly after the First World War. This demand could not continue to be ignored whether in Korea and Singapore, because colonial governments inevitably held weak legitimacy.

The metropolises sought to maintain their presence even at the end of colonial rule. The British founded an institution named Singapore Polytechnic to provide technical education, offering diplomas and certificates as well as degree-level courses. The polytechnic's first campus was constructed and officially opened in 1959 by Prince Philip on 4.1 hectare of land along Prince Edward Road (see Figure 2). The construction cost was funded by the colonial government, which was S\$5.5 million at that time.<sup>29</sup> The colonial government established the polytechnic to protect its interests in the region during the decolonization process in post-war Singapore, modeled after British and African technical colleges.<sup>30</sup> British advisers, including Ernest Henry George Dobby from the University of Malaya and Arnold William Gibson from Dudley and



Staffordshire Technical College in the United Kingdom, played a significant role in determining how the polytechnic would be operated, what departments needed to be established, and where the school needed to be located.<sup>31</sup> Historian Loh Kah Seng<sup>32</sup> concluded that despite initial resistance from nationalist groups, British technical experts were able to defend the political interests of the metropole.<sup>33</sup>

Colonial higher educational institutions were not only established by colonial governments but also by other actors. In Korea for instance, Christian mission schools constituted an important pillar of higher education. The first private schools recognized by the government in 1917 were Chosen Christian College (which was called Yonhi Professional School among Koreans)<sup>34</sup> and Severance Union Medical College, both established and operated by missionaries. Severance Union Medical College is known as the first higher education institution in Korea built by missionaries. It began teaching Western medicine to a cohort of sixteen students in 1886 at Jejoongwon hospital.<sup>35</sup> Chosen Christian College was founded in 1915 through cooperation between different Christian missionaries including Presbyterian and Methodist churches from North America. There were several other schools, with Ewha Hakdang in Seoul and Union Christian College in Pyongyang being two of the earliest higher education institutions in Korea. Educational and medical missions were central strategies of the Western missionaries in Korea, who were mostly from the United States due to Korea having opened its port to this Western power.

Missionaries were allowed to operate their schools under the colonial government thanks to their prominent positions in Korea. Prior to the annexation of Korea by Japan, missionaries were permitted to open schools following treaties between Korea and Western countries, such as the United States–Korea Treaty of 1882. The rapid growth of Christian schools was made possible not only due to the overwhelming demand for education but also owing to shared beliefs between the Korean nationalist reform movement and Christian missionaries against the threat from Japan.<sup>36</sup> Even after Japanese colonial rule began in 1910, missionaries could continue to operate because their missionary activities were granted a certain level of protection. Two conventions between the United States and Japan in 1905, the Treaty of Portsmouth and the Taft-Katsura Memorandum, constitute examples of this relationship. By adopting a neutral stance against the oppressive colonial rule of Japan, most missionaries were allowed to operate their schools until the United States–Japan relationship worsened in the period leading up to the Second World War. The colonial government also believed that Koreans would be eventually assimilated into Japanese culture by accepting Western culture as like the Japanese one accepted the Western model.<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, for Koreans under colonial rule, mission schools were examples of the few places where Japanese education could be resisted while enlightened nationalism could be promoted.<sup>38</sup> Such diverse relationships signal the duality of missionaries in Korea.

Similarly, in Singapore, American missionary groups in British Malaya also accelerated the establishment of Raffles College.<sup>39</sup> The government rejected a proposal by the Malayan Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which was based in the United States, to establish a college in Singapore. The government was concerned that if the Americans founded the first college in Singapore, it might be a “distinctive threat to British prestige.”<sup>40</sup> After rejecting the proposal, the government was pressured further to establish a higher education institution in Singapore for its own legitimacy. Local elite groups played an important role in founding these institutions along with the colonial government. While the colonial government donated S\$1 million to construct the campus of Raffles College, Chinese industrialists Oei Tiong Ham and Tan Soo Guan donated S\$150,000 and S\$120,000, respectively.<sup>41</sup> In total, the Chinese benefactors donated S\$540,723 while Europeans donated S\$426,563 to fund the cost of construction and initial operations.<sup>42</sup> In this regard, higher educational institutions in Singapore under colonial rule were highly political, reflecting various interests from different parts of the world.

One of the more interesting features of Raffles College’s campus is that the site was part of the Botanic Gardens. The Singapore Botanic Gardens were established in 1859 by a

colonial society and from 1875 became a colonial government center for plant research in Southeast Asia, particularly in relation to rubber plantations.<sup>43</sup> In providing a site for Raffles College, most of the Economic Gardens—a site for economic and experimental crops—was removed. The decision to close down the Economic Gardens was seemingly irrational. In the early twentieth century, Singapore was considered the “rubber capital of the world” under British control.<sup>44</sup> Rubber was one of the two engines of Singapore’s economic growth at the time, with the other being petroleum.<sup>45</sup> The Economic Gardens played a specific role at the time: for example, in 1917, seven million rubber seeds from the garden were supplied or sold.<sup>46</sup> Considering that Singapore was more like a trade center as a small colony, and that the manufacturing industry was growing at the time, the Economic Gardens themselves may have played a rather insignificant role in the economic growth of the country. Nevertheless, the closing down of Economic Gardens illustrates the political importance of the university in Singapore at the time.

As local Korean elites established Bosung College for modernizing the country and enlightening Koreans, local Chinese elite groups in Singapore also attempted to acquire their own institutions.<sup>47</sup> Nanyang University, founded in 1953 by a Chinese rubber magnate and community leader to educate students in Chinese, was an exception to the colonial norm. The university was more like an institution promoting Chinese culture and identity using the Chinese medium.<sup>48</sup> Such a university in Singapore could be regarded as a threat to society because the government promoted a multi-ethnic, Singapore-centered identity by harmonizing different races—namely, Chinese, Malay, and Indian—even though 75 percent of the total population in Singapore at that time was Chinese. Thus, the establishment of Nanyang University was not welcomed by outside the Chinese population in Singapore. Nevertheless, the colonial government could not declare outright objection because of the overwhelming support from the Chinese population.<sup>49</sup> The colonial government was also influenced by the decision of the U.S. government to support the university. The Americans’ intention was to nurture the university as an anti-communist institution against the emerging communist threat from mainland China.<sup>50</sup> In the end, the colonial government decided to join the support to establish the first Chinese-speaking university outside of China.

Since the colonial government did not actively support the establishment of the university, the role of the Chinese community was crucial, in contrast to Raffles College and Singapore Polytechnic. The Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan,<sup>51</sup> then led by rubber magnate and community leader Tan Lark Sye, played a significant role in making it happen. Along with the donation of land by the organization and Tan himself, the money for the new campus, several millions of Singapore dollars at that time, came from selling urban land the organization used to possess as well as from Tan’s personal donations.<sup>52</sup> Accompanying this, the strong support of Chinese communities enabled Nanyang University to open its campus officially in March 1958.

From a broader perspective, this study also shows that the circulation of capital was already underway in various contexts on a global scale in East Asia in the early twentieth century. To build the Raffles College campus, there were donations from trading companies in Europe and East Asia, as well as from magnates based in Southeast Asia such as those mentioned above. Christian universities in Seoul were similarly supported. Chosen Christian College began teaching students in the YMCA building in downtown Seoul in 1915 before moving to its current location in 1918. Most of the funds for the new campus were donated from Christian magnates in the United States, such as John Thomas Underwood, the founder of the Underwood Typewriter Company, who donated \$50,000, and Charles M. Stimson, a property developer in Los Angeles, who gifted a major donation for the construction of the first stone-built building of Chosen Christian College by donating \$25,000.<sup>53</sup> Louis Henry Severance, the major donor of Severance Union Medical College, was the first treasurer of Standard Oil, at that time the largest oil refinery in the world, founded by John D. Rockefeller.<sup>54</sup>

This illustrates how investments for higher learning institutions originated from various sectors, including industrial production, trade, and property development, and that they must therefore be understood as related to an effort to maintain and strengthen the presence of imperialism in colonies at the same time as other social groups pursued competing objectives, such as raising the capacity for independence or nurturing ethnic cultures.

## **Organizations of Colonial Universities**

Regarding organization, this study shows that institutions of higher learning were advanced institutions reflecting various political, cultural, and social models derived from metropolises and colonies. The Japanese colonial government suppressed the growth of the sector. Education policies, in general, had been vocational, discriminatory, anti-liberalized, and moreover comprised anti-Korean culture trends, even though they partly contributed to introducing modern knowledge into mass society.<sup>55</sup> The colonial government issued the first Educational Ordinance in Korea in August 1911. The ordinance introduced different education streams for Japanese and Korean populations and discriminated against Koreans by offering them only elementary education.<sup>56</sup> There was no definition of “the university” in the ordinance, which meant that it was not possible to establish and operate a university under colonial rule. The most advanced school was categorized as a “professional school (Senmon Gakkō in Japanese),” but the government did not set up rules for professional schools, resulting in schools operating at the time not being formally recognized as professional schools by the government. Four years later, in 1915, the Regulations for Professional Schools were enacted, followed by the approval of four schools. These were all operated by the colonial government and focused on practical and technical education, including subjects such as law, medicine, industry, agriculture, and forestry.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, the colonial government was not the only player in the higher education sector in Korea. American Christian missionaries established numerous educational institutions to promote Christianity as well as American ideology, and these provided further opportunities for Koreans. In all, 64.7 percent of Korean professional school students were studying in private schools in 1928.<sup>58</sup> Even though their operating bodies diversified during the late colonial years, mission schools continued to play an important role in higher education. 41.5 percent of Korean students were concentrated in four schools: Chosen Christian College, Severance Union Medical College, Ewha College for Women, and Union Christian College in 1937.

Missionaries of course should not be seen as a homogeneous group. The establishment of Chosen Christian College was affected by geographic divisions between different missionaries. In the early days of the Western mission to Korea, the peninsula was divided by six different Christian denominations from North America and Australia. They formally agreed not to intervene in each other’s territory, but large towns were excluded from this agreement.<sup>59</sup> The Christian mission in Korea was most successful in the northwest region, where the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA)<sup>60</sup> was in charge. More than 60 percent of all Korean Christians were living in the Pyongyang region where the urban-based middle class began to form.<sup>61</sup> PCUSA missionaries were known for their fundamentalist approach.<sup>62</sup> For example, the Union Christian College in Pyongyang was opened in 1906 by the PCUSA, and only accepted Christians and focused on Christian education rather than modern liberal education.<sup>63</sup> Other missionaries were more flexible in their mission, pursuing mutual recognition rather than competition with the colonial government.<sup>64</sup> When the colonial government first attempted to control mission schools in 1915 by banning religious activities within them, the PCUSA group in Pyongyang resisted most heavily, while others sought a compromise solution.<sup>65</sup> Such a tendency also continued until the end of colonial rule. The PCUSA’s college in Pyongyang was the first school shut down by itself, against the enforcement of shrine worship in 1938.



For Western missionaries in Korea, the debate about where to establish a Christian university was related to the power struggle among them. An attempt to establish a new university in Seoul was initiated by Horace Grant Underwood from the late 1880s.<sup>66</sup> He led a minority group of the PCUSA mission in Seoul and the Methodist Episcopal Church (Northern Methodists) to establish a liberal arts college in Seoul as a joint mission from 1906.<sup>67</sup> The majority of PCUSA missionaries in Korea rejected the idea since they were already operating one college in Pyongyang and resources for an additional school were limited.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the concept of a university for them was pastoral and secluded from a crowded city.<sup>69</sup> Thus, Seoul was not considered an appropriate site for a university for Korea by missionaries based in Pyongyang. Missionaries in Seoul justified the establishment of the college in Seoul by arguing that it had good accessibility for both students and missionaries from different regions by rail, and was moreover the center of religion, culture, commercial, industry, and education as the capital of Korea.<sup>70</sup> This issue was hotly debated until 1914, at which point the Executive Committee of the Board of Foreign Missions of the PCUSA decided to establish a university in Seoul, while Union Christian College was permitted to continue operating in Pyongyang.<sup>71</sup>

Eventually, there were attempts to merge Christian colleges in Seoul into a single university, but the schools' differing denominations and interests presented difficulties in achieving this goal.<sup>72</sup> The discussion on unifying Chosen Christian College, Severance Union Medical College, and Ewha College for Women had existed since their establishment and was fostered by O. R. Avison, who was the president of both Chosen Christian College and Severance Union Medical College.<sup>73</sup> There had certainly been some progress in this effort. Ewha College for Women, the higher educational institution for women established by missionaries, had already moved its campus next to Chosen Christian College in 1935, and the Medical College also decided to follow suit around 1940.<sup>74</sup> However, progress was slow, and efforts by Christian missionaries were constrained by the intensifying militarism of Japan during the war period. Such debates surrounding Christian institutions demonstrate that even missionaries themselves were not a homogeneous group, given different interests depending on their origins, funders, and faculty members.

Christian missionaries in Seoul were able to operate their educational institutions by pursuing mutual recognition with the colonial government. For example, Chosen Christian College acquired a large site near Seoul thanks to crucial support from the colonial government. According to letters exchanged between Horace Grant Underwood and the Headquarters of the PCUSA in New York, the colonial government proposed one site with favorable conditions initially, but while the debate surrounding the establishment of a university in Seoul was continuing, the government decided to use the site for public recreation.<sup>75</sup> Instead, the government proposed other three sites comprising around 120 to 200 hectares to Underwood, but Underwood initiated negotiations to purchase the originally proposed site from the government with Komatsu Midori, who was then the Director of Foreign Affairs of the Japanese Government-General of Korea.<sup>76</sup> Before joining the Japanese government, Komatsu studied at Yale University and Princeton University, which may suggest his favorable attitude to people from the United States.<sup>77</sup> According to documentation published by the Forest Management Department, the government eventually sold the land of the initially proposed site to the college in 1917.<sup>78</sup> The existence of this negotiation process provides evidence that the colonial government did not always suppress the missionaries, at least during this early period.

The colonial and post-colonial government attempted to intervene in private higher learning institutions in multiple ways when it was deemed necessary. In the case of Nanyang University, support from the British colonial government was marginal, which ultimately made the university vulnerable. The university had to be established initially as a private company instead of a university per se, because of this initial opposition from the colonial government.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the government did not recognize the degrees of most of the graduates of Nanyang University. Degrees were recognized only after May 1968 following several conflicts between the government and the

university committee.<sup>80</sup> Nanyang University was conceived as an “unwanted child of the colonial era” as argued by historian Edwin Lee.<sup>81</sup> The government continued trying to intervene in university affairs to make them align with government ideology. In the end, Nanyang University merged with the University of Singapore, resulting in the establishment of the National University of Singapore in 1980. Establishing and operating a university in Singapore was a complicated issue dominated not solely by the state but also orchestrated by other stakeholders, reflecting the changing socio-political environment of the country.

While limiting higher education opportunities emerging from elsewhere, the colonial powers created institutions of higher learning as a means to promote their legitimacy, which was the most significant concern for them. The first colonial university was established in Seoul by the colonial government in 1924. After the massive, national-scale independence movement in 1919, the colonial government decided to relax its discriminatory education policies, under the so-called “Cultural Rule,” and issued an amended educational ordinance in 1922 which enabled the establishment of a university. Thereafter, there emerged a nationwide movement among Korean elites, named “the People’s University Campaign,” to create a public university. This effort ultimately failed due to suppression by the colonial government, but the campaign became a catalyst for subsequent nationalist movements and forced the colonial government to set up Keijō Imperial University.<sup>82</sup> This was the sixth imperial university for Japan and the first established outside Japan. Because the university was founded as a colonial institution, it was inevitable that the university needed to serve the needs of empire. Beyond the purpose of providing higher education to Japanese people living in Korea, its two primary objectives were to hinder the growth of Korean nationalism and to nurture pro-imperialist Korean elites.<sup>83</sup>

The British government toward the end of its colonial rule also attempted to establish a full-fledged university for its own future benefit. The merger of Raffles College and King Edward VII College of Medicine is one such case. In 1949, both schools merged into a single university, the University of Malaya, by the colonial government as a reaction to emerging aspirations for self-rule and independence following the Second World War. The Carr-Saunders Commission, led by Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, then Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science, proposed the merger, which aimed to transform them to resemble a British civic university, focusing on nurturing professional skills.<sup>84</sup> In this regard, the new university presented a pro-British inclination and focused on educating students to serve the colonial government of Malaya.<sup>85</sup> However, this plan was swiftly amended due to the evolving political climate in the Malayan Peninsula. After the independence of the Federation of Malaya in 1957, the colonial government tried to move the center of the university to Kuala Lumpur, then the emerging center of Malaya, while Singaporeans wanted their own university.<sup>86</sup> In January 1962, after thirteen years of operation, the university split into two: the University of Singapore and the University of Malaya. The merger and division of universities in Singapore can be seen as a result of a changing political circumstances, and the university has always subordinated to these changes.

Overall, the colonial government was not the only player in the higher education sectors of Korea and Singapore. While the intention of the colonial government can be seen as closely related to the function of the tertiary circuit of capital—the ideological control and repression of society—there were other groups pursuing different ideologies. American Christian missionaries established Chosen Christian College to promote Christianity as well as American ideology. Chinese ethnic clans opened Nanyang University to promote Chinese culture and identity. While these institutions could not be established without the colonial government’s consent, they often collaborated with the colonial powers. However, clashes between colonial powers and other forces were inevitable. American missionaries were forced to leave Korea due to the deteriorating relationship between the United States and Japan as the Second World War approached. The Singaporean government continued to attempt to close down Nanyang University because of its communist influence from China, which eventually led to its merger with the University of

Singapore in 1980. The colonial university was a field of struggle between different powers to establish their future influence.

## Spaces of Colonial Universities

In relation to space, socio-political elements of the university suggest that different powers and interests were manifested in colonial urban university spaces. In this regard, the university space cannot be understood without considering such conditions. Colonial higher learning institutions were highly symbolic, having been established by various groups to promote their ideologies, as argued above. Their architecture and campus space also needed to be symbolic in reflecting such ideologies; for instance, buildings were designed in the Western or Chinese style to reflect their respective identities. To borrow terms from Lefebvre's space trilogy, the campus space was a "representation of space" conceptualized by the powers reflecting their knowledge and ideology.<sup>87</sup> In this regard, Keijō Imperial University and Raffles College were spaces where colonial ideology was being reproduced and reinforced. Nanyang University, on the contrary, symbolized Chinese ethnic identity. Chosen Christian College by contrast was designed by architects from the United States to foster Christian ideology.

Building a university campus was a complex task for the colonial government, however. While they needed sufficient space to create a symbolic space, resources to build a campus for an overly burdensome institution were limited. The area where Keijō Imperial University was built, thus, was relatively less developed and less populated even though it was still within the city boundaries of Seoul at the time. The availability of a large plot of land to acquire was crucial for the colonial government.<sup>88</sup> The government was able to purchase the land, but investment in campus buildings had to be minimized at the time because the colonial government was suffering from post-war economic hardship.<sup>89</sup> While several symbolic colonial government buildings were designed by influential architects, such as the Keijō Station designed by Tokyo Imperial University professor Tsukamoto Yasushi, and the Government-General building designed by German architect Georg de Lalande, the architecture unit of the Japanese Government-General of Korea including Iwatsuki Yoshiyuki designed the campus and buildings of the university.<sup>90</sup> The university buildings were designed focusing primarily on their functions, while their symbolic and aesthetic characteristics were less of a concern.<sup>91</sup> Still, the university campus was enough to become a symbolic space to display Japanese modernity when considering the fact that the route of the only sightseeing bus tour of Seoul in the late 1930s included the campus itself.<sup>92</sup>

In colonial Singapore, colonial bureaucrats were not keen on establishing a college. In the beginning, the government decided to offer 16.6 hectare of land at Mount Rosie for the school in 1919 and purchased plots.<sup>93</sup> However, Laurence Nunns Guillemard, the governor who was appointed later, was not supportive enough to actively pursue the idea to open a college in Singapore.<sup>94</sup> He thought that the building on the Mount Rosie site was "much too valuable a structure to be used for such a purpose."<sup>95</sup> He then decided to allocate the building and the site to be the official residence of the new General Officer Commanding the Troops. Based on a newspaper article from the *Straits Times*, the government did not even consult the committee of Raffles College when making this decision.<sup>96</sup> This incident demonstrates how the colonial government at the time perceived the notion of a higher learning institution in Singapore as low priority for the colony. The location of the campus was also deemed a minor issue which could be altered on a whim; given the fact that the house on the site was only used by the officers for around fifteen years, this argument certainly seems persuasive.<sup>97</sup>

The government later justified its decision not to locate the college at the Mount Rosie site by arguing that W. H. Firmstone, the Director of Education, rejected the site because he thought it was too hilly and secluded and thus not symbolic enough to commemorate the centennial of the birth of colonial Singapore.<sup>98</sup> Richard Olaf Winstedt, acting principal of the college, justified the



**Figure 3.** Aerial view of Raffles College in c. 1938.

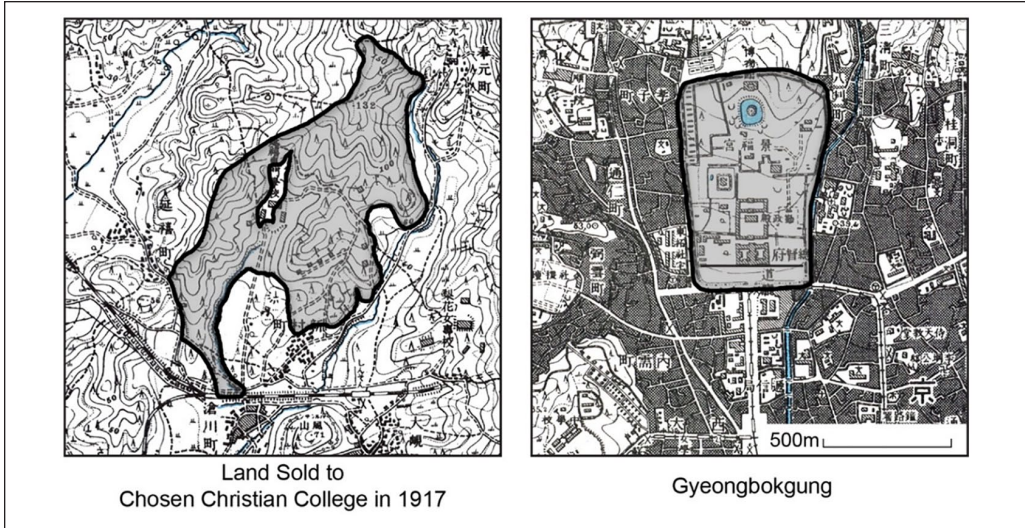
Source: Raffles College Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

decision to choose the Botanic Gardens site by comparing the accessibility, cost, physical, sociological, and architectural conditions of the two different sites.<sup>99</sup> Suitability to place a quadrangle campus, playing fields, and residences, like a traditional form of university campus, was one of the major considerations in deciding its location while the college at the time was still conveniently located in the middle of European enclaves.<sup>100</sup> The campus was eventually designed by British architects Cyril A. Farey and Graham R. Dawbarn, selected via an empire-wide architectural competition held in 1922, to promote its symbolic features (see Figure 3).<sup>101</sup>

By the end of colonial rule in Singapore, the symbolic aspect of campuses became relatively less important. According to Gibson's report, Singapore Polytechnic should be located in a central area, with the report proposing the Prince Edward Road site as the most suitable location.<sup>102</sup> The main reason for choosing the Prince Edward Road site was its accessibility to factories and commercial firms nearby for part-time students working there.<sup>103</sup> Such an idea resonates with the early notion of a technical institute in the United States in the same period. It was desirable that an institute be located in a large city close to various industries so that members of the institute can enjoy the benefit of interacting with them by applying new technologies and improving their practical skills.<sup>104</sup> The Gibson Report also suggested another 12.1 hectare site at Kallang Airfield for homes, student grounds, and student hostels.<sup>105</sup> However, this proposal was not realized in the end because the government considered them less important to most polytechnic students who were typically studying part-time.<sup>106</sup> Instead, some nearby private hostel rooms and Housing Development Board flats were used for student housing.<sup>107</sup>

Non-governmental institutions had relative freedom to choose their sites to realize their ideological objectives because, unlike governmental institutions, the proximity of the colonial government for control was not a factor under consideration. The area where Chosen Christian College settled was called Sinchon. It was mostly rural and not within the administrative district of Seoul at that time, but it was only three miles from downtown with good accessibility by rail. The size of the land for the new campus was around 80.9 hectares, quite substantial when compared with





**Figure 4.** Comparison of the land sold to Chosen Christian College and Gyeongbokgung.

Source: Author's own depiction based on the Forest Management Department in the Japanese Government-General of Korea's (1917) Land Sale Document, which was drawn on a 1942 Map of Seoul.

other landmarks in Seoul such as the royal palaces (see Figure 4).<sup>108</sup> The architectural firm Murphy & Dana from the United States, which designed several notable educational institutions in China, Japan, and the United States, was appointed as planner of the new campus, and the construction was led by a Chinese contractor.<sup>109</sup>

Missionaries intended to develop the area where the college was located as a Christian enclave by creating a campus town. The area was underdeveloped, and its campus site was largely rural surrounded by forest (see Figure 4). Thus, it was a favorable location to promote such a Christian enclave. This concept is consistent with that of several Protestant universities in the United States which were established around the same period. An urban setting was considered a threat to the morals of students because it was conceived as comprising distractions and corruption.<sup>110</sup> As mentioned above, it was also one of the main reasons that the PCUSA group in Pyongyang opposed the idea to establish a college in Seoul. In the case of Chosen Christian School, the founders aimed to keep its pastoral setting while taking advantage of its proximity to the socio-political center of Korea.

One of the programs reflecting the idea to create a Christian enclave was called the "model village program," which was designed for the wives and families of married students. By having a church, schools for wives and children, and other modern facilities, the college aimed to fulfill "the needs of married students who after several years of college life have often returned to ignorant wives with resultant misery to all concerned" because the missionaries thought that there would be potential conflict between educated husbands and uneducated wives.<sup>111</sup> The early master plan of the campus already indicates the location of the model village on campus (see Figure 5). The idea of such a model village shows how missionaries imagined the campus as a space to promote Christian beliefs.

For the founders of Nanyang University, the prerequisite for the university campus was also a large piece of land. They considered two other locations before acquiring the site in Jurong: Kampong Java and the 6th milestone area of Bukit Timah Road. However, they were ultimately considered too small to accommodate a university.<sup>112</sup> The site in Jurong, in the west of Singapore, was identified in 1951. The area was initially used by Lim Nee Soon as his rubber plantation in



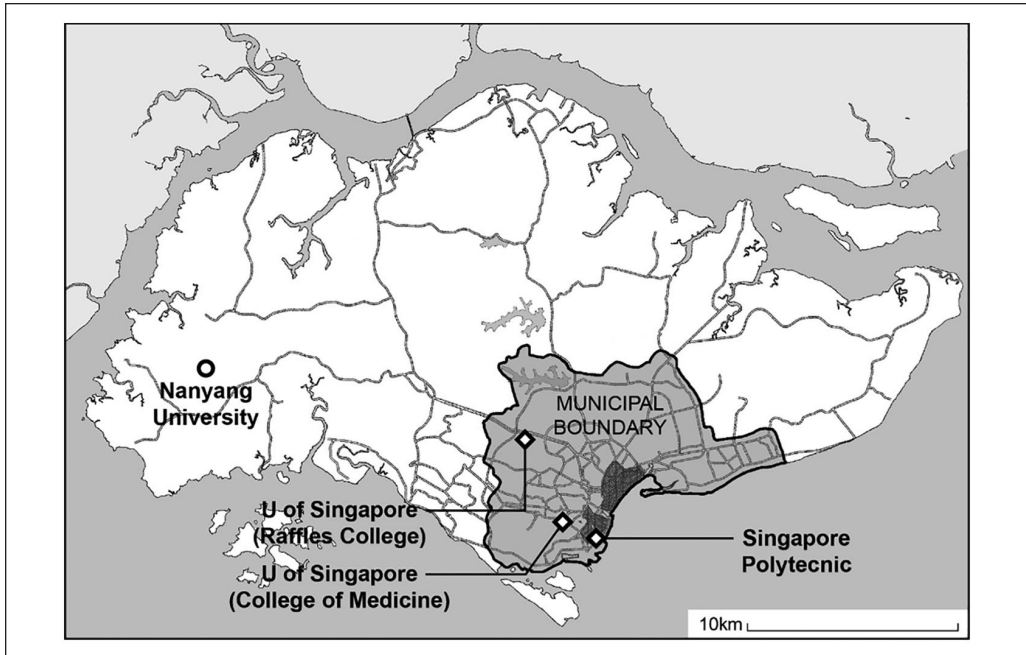


**Figure 5.** Chosen Christian College master plan, 1919.

Source: Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA (islandora:104628).

the late 1910s, named Yunnan Estate.<sup>113</sup> It is believed that the estate was named Yunnan because Lim, as an active supporter of the anti-Yuan movement and Sun Yat-sen, wanted to commemorate the Yunnan Uprising of 1915.<sup>114</sup> The site was sold to another owner in 1925 due to financial difficulties in Lim's businesses, and the estate voluntarily became bankrupt in the late 1940s.<sup>115</sup> In September 1951, the Hokkien Huay Kuan purchased the 396-hectare site via auction and donated 212 hectares to the university in 1953 to establish its campus.<sup>116</sup>

The Jurong area, where the university was located, was not included in the 1952 Preliminary Island Plan published by the colonial government (see Figure 6).<sup>117</sup> It was incorporated in the government master plan in 1958 but was still planned as an agricultural area until 1960. The location



**Figure 6.** Map of the university campuses in Singapore in 1960.

Source: Author made.

was home to farms, rubber estates, and villages in the early twentieth century.<sup>118</sup> The Jurong area was known as a “lost region” with swamps and hilly areas until the Jurong Town Corporation began developing it in 1968.<sup>119</sup> However, the area was not unfamiliar to Tan and the Chinese communities in Singapore because Tan owned rubber estates in Jurong, and workers in the area were predominantly Chinese while several Chinese villages and schools were there as well.<sup>120</sup>

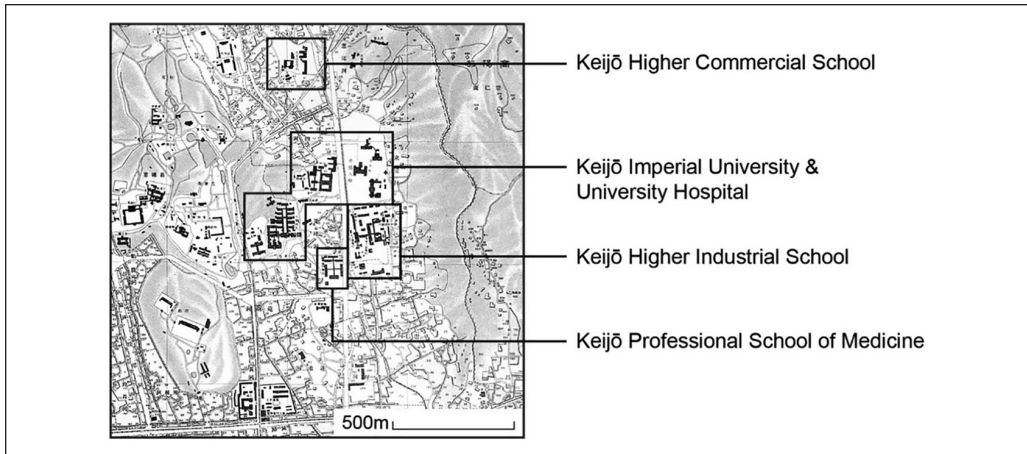
The main building of Nanyang University was designed by British-educated local architect Ng Keng Siang.<sup>121</sup> The design reflects Chinese heritage by modeling it according to the Forbidden City in Beijing as the first Chinese university established outside of China (see Figure 7).<sup>122</sup> Ng Keng Siang studied in London and became one of the first Singaporean architects accredited by the Royal Institute of British Architects.<sup>123</sup> His post-war architectural design was known as modern and progressive, and he designed several landmark buildings in Singapore including the eighteen-story Asia Insurance Building designed in Art Deco style.<sup>124</sup> In this regard, the design of the main building of Nanyang University constituted an exception, manifesting the symbolic mission of the university to promote Chinese culture.

The distant location of the university, along with its purpose of promoting Chinese culture and identity, became troublesome to both colonial and independent governments. The campus became a center of student activism during a time when communism was emerging in China.<sup>125</sup> Riot squads from Singapore and Malaysia frequently raided the university in the 1960s.<sup>126</sup> At its peak, fifty-one students were arrested in one crackdown involving more than 1,000 police officers in June 1964, as reported in the news.<sup>127</sup> The campus can thus also be understood as a space for struggle between political ideologies. Such an experience influenced the design of the new University of Singapore campus in the 1970s in such a way as to prevent student unrest. The university space was therefore understood as a “site of resistance and active struggle.”<sup>128</sup> This was especially notable in the case of Nanyang University; the campus was a “representational space” where “beliefs, attitudes and social mores, and a network of institutional support” were being reinforced.<sup>129</sup>



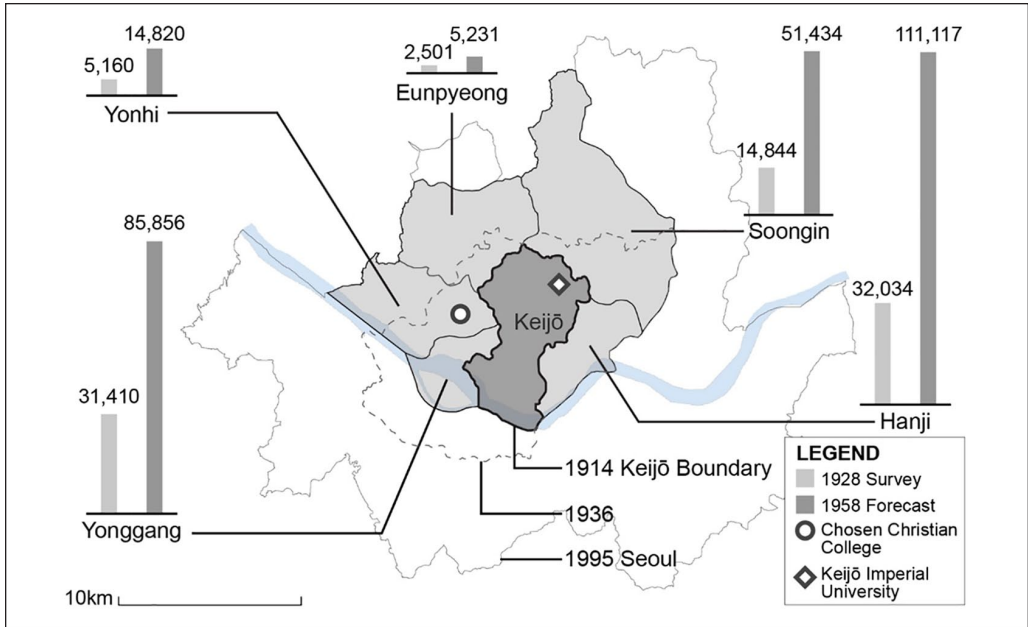


**Figure 7.** Nanyang University library and administration building, c. late 1950s.  
Source: Postcard image from author's personal collection.



**Figure 8.** Keijō Imperial University and other government schools complex in Seoul.  
Source: Author's depiction based on the Japanese Government-General of Korea's 1933 Map of Seoul.

Urbanization was not an objective of higher education institutions in colonial Seoul and Singapore, but their presence affected the urban fabric surrounding them in later days. In Seoul, the development of Keijō Imperial University campus, along with neighboring government professional schools, was an important factor in accelerating the development of the northeast area of Seoul at the time. While several educational institutions were built in the area extensively between the 1910s and 1920s by the colonial government, public infrastructure development was followed (see Figure 8). For example, the street improvement project for Route 12 that crosses the university from north to south was initiated in 1929 and completed in 1932.<sup>130</sup> Since the street



**Figure 9.** The 1928 population distribution and 1958 forecast of Keijō's surrounding vicinities.

Source: Author made based on the Colonial Government of Seoul (1928).

Note: Keijō's population in 1928 was 336,354 and expected to increase to 508,704 in 1958.

was originally planned in 1912, the opening of the university was an important factor for the colonial government to commence its construction work.<sup>131</sup> The area then eventually became the education complex of colonial Korea, known as “Campus Town” or “Cultural Street,” followed by residential development for both Korean and Japanese middle-class households.<sup>132</sup> The area is now called “University Street,” which is one of the cultural centers in Seoul. Seodaemun-gu, where Chosen Christian College (now Yonsei University) is located, now boasts eight universities, the largest number for any borough in Seoul. The difference between Keijō Imperial University and Christian universities as an urbanization impetus can be observed in the urban planning documents written by the colonial government to expand the urban area toward the north-eastern part of Seoul at the time, under the so-called “Great Keijō Plan.”<sup>133</sup> The report, written in 1928 by the colonial government of Seoul, surveyed the vicinities of Seoul for future expansion and forecasted future population growth of the areas.<sup>134</sup> When looking into the population growth forecast of Seoul and its vicinity over thirty years in 1928, while Soongin-myeon, adjacent to the imperial university, was expected to increase its population 3.5 times from 14,744 to 51,434 over thirty years from 1928, Yonhi-myeon, where Chosen Christian College was located, was only expected to grow 2.6 times from 5,670 to 14,820 (see Figure 9).<sup>135</sup> The government's plan to support the growth of the northeast of Seoul was not initially realized due to resistance from both Japanese and Korean elite groups living in Seoul.<sup>136</sup> Then, the colonial government mobilized government schools to support the urban development strategy of the colonial government by opening new schools or moving out existing ones in the city.<sup>137</sup> While Christian institutions were relatively less affected, this strategy was more evident for governmental institutions when looking into the new Science and Engineering department of Keijō Imperial University, opened in 1941 in the northeast of Seoul.

In Singapore, the area where Raffles College was established had already held a reputation as an elite European suburb at the time the university campus was built, and then the university was

moved to a new location in the 1970s.<sup>138</sup> Thus, the area remains today a residential area, but the area near Nanyang University is being promoted as an innovation district of Singapore. The area where Singapore Polytechnic was located has since become the financial center of Singapore, where several government institutions and private firms are based. The availability of large plots on reclaimed land along with the proximity to various industries were drivers to attract not only the polytechnic but also other institutions and private firms. The polytechnic's attempt to acquire a neighboring site for expansion was rejected by the government due to economic reasons, so the polytechnic gradually left the site from the early 1970s.<sup>139</sup> The government then planned and developed the area to become "the Wall Street of Singapore."<sup>140</sup>

## Conclusion

The birth and early growth of modern higher education in colonial Seoul and Singapore show that higher learning institutions were developed through constant conflicts and negotiations involving different strategies and counter-strategies, as suggested by Brenda Yeoh.<sup>141</sup> The growth of the higher education sector was led by both colonial governments and colonial society, but the particular power relations in the context of colonial universities constitute compelling evidence against the problematic attempt to understand the colonial space as divided into two groups: the colonizer and the colonized. Japanese and British colonial governments pursued higher education in their colonies to facilitate their colonial rules as the dominant force, but conflicting stances often existed even among themselves. Missionaries and colonial society also played an important role. Missionaries coexisted with the colonial government and pursued their Christian mission while the colonial society of Korea attempted to establish a university to achieve independence through the cultivation of skill. In Singapore, Chinese ethnic clans took on a major role by donating their capital to the colonial universities and established their own universities, resulting from their growing presence in the region. These "other" bodies interacted with each other to create the overall terrain of the higher education sector in Korea and Singapore. Such findings resonate with Yun Hae-Dong's idea of the colonial "gray zone," which indicates the sphere as having a wide spectrum between domination and resistance.<sup>142</sup>

The diverse socio-political issues surrounding the colonial universities were also reflected in the campus development trends and the relationship between the campus and the urbanization process. In Korea, higher educational institutions were predominantly located in Seoul because of their dependency on certain socio-political conditions; Seoul has been recognized as the center of Korea in terms of politics, economy, and society for hundreds of years. There were also practical incentives, such as schools needing to recruit staff and students easily, as in the case of Chosen Christian College. In the case of government schools, by keeping them close, the government was able to control them better. In this respect, universities should be considered to be subordinate to the city under colonial rule. In Singapore, the locations of Nanyang University and Raffles College show that their conceptualization was more in the form of an "ivory tower" with a suburban campus, secluded from the crowded city, while the medical school needed to be located next to the General Hospital. Singapore Polytechnic was an exception as an institution seeking to attract part-time workers, as discussed earlier. Overall, university campuses in both cities constituted spaces representing particular political and symbolic values.

From a broader theoretical perspective, this article seeks to promote more plural understandings of global urban history. While the urbanization of the Global South began receiving significant attention with the southern turn in urban theory, the integration of such varied urban experiences into broader theoretical perspectives has not yet been fully achieved.<sup>143</sup> To contribute to this agenda, this article examined the historical geography of East Asian cities during the colonial era using the university as a site of investigation. It is beneficial to utilize the university to produce not a parochial idea of East Asian cities but a more-than-regional concept



of urbanization processes, since the institution has been globally linked while being locally embedded. Furthermore, it provides a clue as to how the surplus capital produced from different parts of the world has been invested in the tertiary sector, as well as the built environment, in colonial cities in East Asia. To verify the process of capital circulation is doubtless an “extraordinarily difficult task,” as David Harvey points out.<sup>144</sup> What we can see, however, is the multifaceted and scaled flow of investment into colonial universities.

The study of colonial universities in East Asian cities also offers some empirical implications. While the history of the “urban university” has been much discussed, there have only been a handful of studies of those in a non-Western context, as highlighted at the beginning of this article. In this regard, this article underscores the need to enrich understandings of colonial cities and universities, as a pivotal link to other aspects of the colonies themselves and the rest of the world, which ultimately leads to fuller and more diverse understandings of colonialism.<sup>145</sup> In particular, the university was a contesting space not only between colonial powers and the oppressed people, but also between the different colonial powers themselves. As a minority institution, the study of colonial universities in East Asia represents only a fragment of colonial cities, but it allows us not only a more active dialogue with the colonial urban history of other parts of the world but also a deeper understanding of the “urban universities” in East Asia that grew rapidly during the second half of the twentieth century.

### Acknowledgments

This article is written based on the author’s doctoral thesis submitted to the London School of Economics and Political Science in September 2017. The author wishes to thank Hyun Bang Shin, Kris Olds, Jamie Doucette, Jung Won Sonn, Murray Low, and Tim Bunnell for their support on the author’s doctoral thesis. The author also thanks the editors and anonymous reviewers at the *Journal of Urban History*.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Fieldwork in Singapore for this research was partially supported by the LSE Partnership PhD Mobility Scheme and the Santander Travel Research Fund.

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