

War and the colonial legacy in recent South Korean scholarship

For much of post-1945 or post-liberation history, Koreans have religiously celebrated August 15, commemorating the spontaneous outburst of joy that greeted the Showa Emperor's declaration of surrender. And yet, remembrance of the liberation and its unfulfilled promise has engendered its own kind of selective amnesia, not unlike that among Japanese regarding their own war experience.

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In the mainstream Korean narrative of the wartime period (1941-1945, or more accurately 1937-1945, dated from the outbreak of the continental war against China), Koreans are relegated to the position of victims. It was during this period that Japanese exploitation of Korean socio-economic resources, both material and human, reached its height. It was also during this period, according to most Korean scholars, that the Japanese colonizers tried to eradicate Korean culture by forcing Koreans to worship at Shinto shrines, by banning the Korean language from official use and designating Japanese as the 'national language' (*kokugo*), and by adapting Korean family lineages into the Japanese household system, compelling the latter to choose Japanese-style names. Koreans have come to refer to this set of policies, promoted under the ideological campaign of *naisen ittai* 内鮮一体 (Japan and Korea as One) as 'ethnocidal policies' (*minjok malsal chŏngch'aek* 民族抹殺政策) through which the Japanese colonizers sought to eradicate Korean identity altogether, absorbing it into the ontological category of the Japanese imperial subject (*kōkoku shinmin*).

Era of darkness

The wartime period was characterized as a pitch-black vacuum (*amhŭggi* 暗黒期, the 'era of darkness') in which only certain elite members, the 'pro-Japanese' traitors (*ch'inilp'a* 親日派), were allowed to profit and flourish at the expense of the majority of Koreans. However, this characterization of the wartime period has also suppressed frank, open-minded investigation of the actual circumstances involving Japanese colonialism's infiltration into Korean culture and society. Studying the colonial-period 'collaboration' between Japanese and Koreans was anathema for many years, especially under the dictatorial regimes of Syngman Rhee (1946-1960) and Park Chung-hee (1961-1979). Indeed, President Park, who seized presidential power through a military *coup d'état*, was a direct progeny of Japanese wartime militarism, a graduate of the Manchurian Military Academy.

Democratization and rehabilitation of the South Korean public sphere in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following monumental protest and resistance against Park's junta successors, finally opened the space to examine the collaborationist activities of the Korean colonial elite. 'Progressive' scholars and critics, riding the surf of democratization and liberalization and embracing hitherto-forbidden Marxist and radical-populist perspectives, challenged the whitewashing and exposed the lacunae found in historiography, literary collections and the biographical data of 'collaborators'. Scholars excavated shrill pronouncements written by prominent writers, intellectuals, educators and government leaders of post-liberation South

Korea, inculcating Korean youth to throw away their lives for the glory of the Japanese empire, or fictional works enveloped in a sheen of patriotic fervor and serene acceptance of the Holy War, looking to a future when Japan would emerge triumphant in the titanic struggle against the venal white races.¹

By the mid-1990s, this newfound freedom in exposing the past sins of the fathers and the scholarship it engendered moved into a new phase. While the democratically elected regimes of Kim Dae-jung (1997-2002) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-present) have continued to struggle with 'the dark legacy' of the colonial period, South Korean scholars, now relatively unencumbered by the desire to subordinate such reflections to the political objective of overthrowing military dictatorship, have begun a long and arduous process of parsing through the legacy of the colonial period, engaging in long-overdue reflection on the possibility of post-colonial identity for Koreans.

The process, however, turned out to be anything but easy. It alerted many Korean scholars in a variety of fields including history, literature, political science and women's studies, to the complex and intertwined relationships between colonialism, nationalism and modernity. Some scholars have questioned, at the risk of disrupting one of the most deep-seated and unquestioned assumptions shared by both North and South Koreans, the ways in which the relentless focus on *ethnos/nation* (*minjok* 民族) has suppressed subaltern narratives and the identity formations of women, local-

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ities, ethnic and other minorities in modern Korean history, as well as the ways in which colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism – the teleological unfolding of which constitute the foundational narratives of both North and South Korea as they stand today – mirror each other in a disturbingly complementary relationship. Indeed, these scholars point out, the North and South Korean regimes have independently of one another employed war mobilization strategies, first imparted on Koreans by the Japanese colonial empire, to push forward their respective programs of state-led modernization.

Nationalism as treason

Im Chi-hyŏn, a former student of Eastern European history, was among the first Korean scholars to present far-reaching criticism of Korean nationalist historiography. In his groundbreaking and controversial book *Nationalism Is Treason* (1999), Im criticized what he saw as submission of historical perspectives and interpretations to the teleology of creating a single ethnic nation-

state. Scholarly interpretations of Silla's unification (668 A.D.) of the three ancient kingdoms (Koguryŏ, Paekche and Silla), for instance, have always assumed that unification was a desirable goal, opening the way for ethnic consolidation of the Korean peoples. Im asks whether any student of ancient Greece would adopt a similar logic and criticize the leaders of Athens, Sparta and Thebes for not creating a 'unified Greek empire.'² He finds similar ethnocentrism and teleological drive towards reifying a proto-nation-state in much of the academic discourse on early modern and modern Korean history. And yet, Im's book argued that nationalism in the Korean historical understanding could be rehabilitated as critical discourse. Korean nationalism could be reformulated as 'civic nationalism' (in his English usage), decoupled from its racist, chauvinistic and ethnocentric features, dynamic and constantly forward-looking towards active participation in democratic citizenship.³

In his more recent essays, however, Im has moved further in his critical reflection on the variegated features of Korean nationalism and has come to see significant problems and antinomies in the latter's legitimacy as an ideology of resistance, for instance, against the colonial regime. Im asks, 'Is it not possible that, even for the nationalism of resistance itself, the discourse of power had already been its component, camouflaged under the discourse of liberation?'⁴ Here Im turns toward the significance of the ideologies and discourses of mobilization employed by the North and South Kore-

an regimes, and how they in fact shared epistemological grounds in claiming themselves legitimate heirs of the Korean *ethnos/nation*, which has always been a historical fiction.

We can observe a similar engagement with the problematique of ethnic nationalism in the literary studies of Sin Hyŏng-gi, originally a specialist in North Korean literature. Sin points out that the master narrative of *ethnos/nation* in both North and South Korea has never been free from the influence of the 'grammar' of total war mobilization inscribed by the Japanese empire in the 1930s and 1940s. Despite the evocation of the supposedly inclusive language of 'unification', he argues, nationalist rhetoric constantly re-introduces and recreates internal 'enemies' to be discriminated against and censured from within. In the process, the Korean 'people' are rendered faceless and anonymous: the language of moral judgment becomes all-powerful, and creates the state of communal resonance that paradoxically compels Koreans toward unending

vigilance and neurosis about their own moral uprightness. Moreover, this dynamic of mass mobilization via moral vigilance and constant differentiation is, Sin suggests, in essence indistinguishable from Japanese wartime practices and discourses that Koreans have been educated and conditioned to negate and reject, at least on the surface, as alien and evil. In Sin's view, even the discovery of 'the people' (*minjung* 民衆) by progressive scholars and intellectuals did not fundamentally challenge the entrenched discursive system of total mobilization.⁵ Those who fell outside the master narrative of *ethnos/nation* were at best ignored, at worst oppressed and regarded as 'enemies', again parallel to the way the Japanese empire designated critics of the state as 'non-nationals' (*hikokumin* 非国民).

Nationalism as phantasm

Yun Hae-dong, a historian of modern Korea and author of the provocatively titled book *The Colonial Grey Zone* (2003), is even more skeptical than Im Chi-hyŏn on the possibility of rehabilitating Korean nationalism into a democratic, civic form. Yun implicitly rejects the premise of many progressive nationalist intellectuals that until the unification of North and South Korea is achieved, the objective of Korean nationalism remains unfulfilled. He suggests that in the post-liberation period Korean nationalism has fallen into a state of perpetual implosion (*naep'a* 内破), unable to overcome the tendencies toward hierarchy and exclusion inscribed on it during the colonial period. Korean nationalism has become a phantasm, a projection of the nationalism of resistance, which in turn has undermined possibilities for open-minded understandings of the colonial experience's complexities.⁶ Can Syngman Rhee's hypocritical use of virulent anti-Japanese sentiments among the Korean populace, while staffing his government with unreconstructed 'collaborators' from the Japanese colonial government, be swept under the category of 'false nationalism?' Has 'good' nationalism, rejecting practices and discourses of exclusion and differentiation based on bloodline, ethnic purity and *Volksgeist*, really existed in modern Korean history?

Yun also acknowledges the extent to which war mobilization penetrated Korean society in the late 1930s and 1940s. Many Koreans, he points out, sincerely believed in the cause of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War. Can Koreans, he asks, be truly free from the question of 'war responsibility' that the Allied Powers have thrown down on the Japanese? How many Koreans 'actively' participated in the Pacific War? Does the fact that Korea was colonized by the Japanese in 1910 automatically exempt Koreans from the responsibility of active participation?⁷

Im Chi-hyŏn, Sin Hyŏng-gi and Yun Hae-dong's works reflect a new type of scholarship in Korean studies, still in the

minority, but growing in importance, which tackle the difficulties and problems of accessing memory of the colonial period. Critical of the 'nationalist' perspective that, in its extreme but by no means atypical form, has cast the colonial-period experience as a shameful legacy to be discarded from the master narrative of Korean *ethnos/nation*, these scholars have found anti-colonial nationalism to be 'implicated' in post-1945 North and South Korea's war mobilization programs, which have ironically shared important features with those implemented by the wartime Japanese government. These works suggest that both unreflective rejection of the colonial legacy in its entirety and whitewashing of the collaboration and wartime mobilization among colonized Koreans are inadequate for initiating the process of exploring postcolonial Korean identity. Together with honest and thorough re-examination by Japanese, Chinese and other East Asian scholars of the colonial experiences and wartime legacies of their respective peoples – as colonizers and colonized, aggressors and victims, 'collaborators' and resisters - we can hope, in the very near future, to encounter many challenging and illuminating works of scholarship on Korea between 1937 and 1945. <

Notes

1. Cf. Koen De Ceunster. 'The Nation Exorcised: The Historiography of Collaboration in South Korea,' *Korean Studies*, Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii, 25-2, 2001; Kyu Hyun Kim. 'Reflections on the Problems of Colonial Modernity and 'Collaboration' in Modern Korean History,' *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University, 11-3, Winter 2004.
2. Im Chi-hyŏn. *Minjok chu'ui nŭn panyŏgida*. Seoul: Sonamu, 1999. pp. 60-66.
3. Im Chi-hyŏn. *Ibid.* pp. 7-8.
4. Im Chi-hyŏn. 'Hanbando minjok chu'ui wa kwŏllyŏk tamnon: pigyosajŏk munje chegi.' *Tangdae pip'yŏng*. Spring 2000. Reprinted in *Inyŏm ūi soksal*. Seoul: Sam'in. 2001. p. 112.
5. Sin Hyŏng-gi. *Minjok iyagi rŭl nŏmŏsŏ*. Seoul: Sam'in, 2003.
6. Yun Hae-dong. 'Naep'a hanŭn minjok chu'ui.' In *Singminji ūi hoesaek chidae: Hanguggŭi kŭndaesŏng kwa singminju'ui pip'an*. Seoul: Yŏksa Pip'yŏngsa, 2003.
7. Cf. Yun Hae-dong. 'Ch'inilp'a ch'ŏngsan kwa t'alsingmin ūi kwaje.' *Tangdae pip'yŏng*. 10. March 2000.

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