

Transcending the Boundaries, Embracing the Others: International Contexts of Korea's Modern and Contemporary Nationalisms

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1. Nationalist internationalism in modern Korea

If we are to take a bird's view on Korea's twentieth century and define it in a word, "the century of nationalism" would be the most plausible definition. As modernity's onslaught, in the form of imperialist invasions or almost uncontrolled influx of foreign goods, cultural forms and ideas seemed to endanger the very foundations of "Koreanness", nationalism came to be seen as an essential condition of the survival for any collective "Korean" identity – basically, as an existential necessity, as a fate. Every socio-political, cultural or religious trend which was to enter Korea and develop there had to "nationalise" in order to exert any societal influence. In a way, both Communists and bourgeois right-wing cultural nationalists, who sometimes collaborated but mostly sharply clashed in 1920-30s' colonial Korea, were to a certain degree nationalists. They just adhered to different visions of nation, the Communist one closely linking the issue of national liberation with the prospects for socio-economic liberation for the majority of population. In the same way, in the stormy late 1980s – early 1990s, when Seoul streets were thickly filled with tear gas smell and expert knowledge of the technology of Molotov cocktail production and use was *de rigour* for any self-respecting activist college student, what clashed was in fact two versions of the nationalist creed – establishmentarian, of a conservative developmentalist sort, and anti-establishmentarian, underpinned by anti-imperialist zeal, passion towards building a pan-peninsular nation state ("Unification") and social concerns. Both versions, interestingly enough, were sharing some similarities – militaristic view of model masculinity, for example, or predominantly ethnic, "bloodline"-based concept of nation. These and many other points were also the common denominators for South and North Korean versions of developmentalist nationalism, which crystallized by the early 1970s. Both were militantly anti-individualistic and essentially culturally conservative, underpinned by the modernized version of the Neo-Confucian ethical codes.

What, however, seriously differed was – aside from more autarkic economic ideals in Pyongyang and Seoul's firm intention to integrate itself into USA and Japan-centred international and regional capitalist orders – the international orientations of both nationalisms, that is, the pictures of foreign Others through which they tended to define themselves. South Korea's President Park Chong Hee (1961-1979) tended to acknowledge Meiji Japan, post-war Western Germany and, interestingly, Israel, as the sources for his developmentalist aspirations. Less acknowledged, but no less important was Park's Manchurian connection from the early 1940s – Manchuguo, with its five-year development plans, state-controlled large-scale construction projects, all-out war mobilization, modernized Confucian rituals and state-promoted "physical culture" and sports ("nationalization of the bodies"), was perhaps the most important prototype of Park Chong Hee's own version of developmental barrack state. Another main protagonist of authoritarian industrialization drama, Samsung's founder Yi Pyöngch'öl (1910-1987), famed for his annual New Year visits to Tokyo, largely

copied the way pre-war Mitsui organized its *keiretsu* (daughter companies) in a vertical order when he built his own business empire.

While for 1960-80s South Korea it was mainly Japan that concomitantly played the roles of a competitor to outrival and a model to follow, North Korea's relations with its foreign Others were much more complex. In fact, by late 1960s both China and USSR, North Korea's main foreign patrons, became simultaneously both positive and negative models for Pyongyang leadership. Both Cultural Revolution and de-Stalinization *a la* Khrushchev were to be prevented at all costs, since they could threaten the stability of the indigenous power hierarchy. In fact, the foreign peoples mentioned in the most positive way in the official *Explanations* to Kim Il Sung's report to the 5th Congress of the ruling Korean Workers' Party (1971), were the "struggling" Vietnamese, Laotians and Kampuchians – the fellow victims of the US aggression. Their struggle was understood to be waged in the name of the world peace and for the protection of the whole socialist camp – thus, one of the most important tasks of the "South Korean revolutionaries" was to stop the "puppet clique" of Park Chong Hee sending the "cannon fodder" (South Korean soldiers) to South Vietnam. When Park Chong Hee started at earnest to send South Korean military units to South Vietnam in the beginning of 1965, North Korea issued a lengthy memorandum (January 22, 1965), which accused "Park clique" of complicity with the "insidious American plot to make Asians to fight against other Asians in the course of expanding the US aggressive wars in Asia". Liberations of South Vietnam and South Korea were understood to be the mutually interconnected tasks of the same order. More attention to the diverse anti-imperialist revolutionaries in Asia (especially Indochina, although Palestine was also specially mentioned), Africa and Latin America helped Kim Il Sung to give the impression of lesser reliance upon China and USSR, with whom, however, North Korea in reality continued to enjoy close ties.

2. *Learning the Others, solidarizing with the Others.*

While South Korea's official nationalism operated with the images of the foreign Others as models, North Korea's state discourse emphasized solidarity with fellow victims of imperialism – and fellow antagonists of imperialism. What is noteworthy here is that fact that both ways to treat the images of the foreign Others is deeply ingrained in the modern Korean nationalistic tradition. Big powers (especially Japan, USA or Germany) and small but independent states (Switzerland or Denmark) alike were treated as models already in the late nineteenth century by Korea's modernist intelligentsia – and at the same time the plights and struggles of Vietnam or Philippines were strongly sympathised with. The cases when the independence struggle seemed to have been long lost – typically Poland – were to serve as negative models. Korea, if it was to survive, was to struggle *not* to follow Poland's example. What has to be necessarily noted here is that "benchmarking" Japan did not automatically indicated politically pro-Japanese stance. *Bona fide* anti-Japanese patriots too had good reasons to turn to Japan in their search for the secrets of proverbial "wealth and power". Enemies or not, the Japanese visibly succeeded in fending off foreign adversaries, something the Korean patriots had all reasons to aspire to themselves. A renowned patriot, who was later to voluntarily exile himself to China and devote the rest of his life to the political struggle for Korea's liberation, Pak Ŭnsik (1859-

1925), contrasted in his famed article, “Literary Weakness Destroys a Country” (*Sōu*, Vol. 10, 1908), the Japanese *bushido* – which, he assumed, had its roots already in the Kamakura period – to Korea’s lamentable “literary weakness” (*munyak*). Armed with their *bushido* spirit, the Japanese managed to develop modern education, patriotic and collectivist spirit in less than thirty years, and then gloriously defeated China and Russia. That was the picture of Japan’s modern history with which many modernist intellectuals in Korea would have agreed in the early twentieth century, irrespectively of their political affiliations. Indeed, *bushido* enjoyed high popularity in Korea – ironically enough, exactly on the eve of the full-blown Japanese colonization. As Korea’s fledgling nationalists were searching for the ways to formulate what Korea’s *volkgeist* was to be about, *bushido* presented an attractive model of a “national spirit” fit to compete in the modern world’s Darwinian jungles (*Hwangsōng Sinmun*, February 6, 1907: “Spirit and Senses”). Every nation was supposed to possess a “spirit” of its own, but Japan’s *Yamato tamashii* and *bushido*, which enable Japan in less than 40 years to expand into a world-level power, were “peerless” in the world (*Hwangsōng Sinmun*, August 22, 1909: “On Cultivation of Nationality”). Japan’s expansionism was the major problem Korea’s patriotic intelligentsia was to deal with – but at the same time, Japan’s modern experiences were to provide a solution as well. Imperial Japan’s ideologies continued to inspire South Korea’s ruling elite until the early 1990s in its attempts to build an anti-individualistic, militaristic ethos – in a way, a modernized version of the Neo-Confucian ethical codes – for the post-colonial developmental state.

Being a model in itself, Japan played also the role of a mighty cultural intermediary, able to supply the knowledge-hungry Korean intellectuals with the global – in most cases Western – models of individual and national excellence from elsewhere. One good example is the channel through which Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) – one of the most popular role models of a statement in early twentieth-century Korea – became known to Koreans. After certain Pak Yonghŭi, most probably a Korean student in Japan, serialized his *Biography of Bismarck* (*Pisamaek Chōn*) in the monthly *T’aegŭk Hakpo* (March 1907 – May 1907) printed by the Korean students in Japan, and emphasized Bismarck’s implementation of “state socialism” (rudimentary forms of welfare system), Hwang Yundōk (1874-?), a minor central bureaucrat (in 1906-1907, sixth-seventh rank official at the Ministry of Court) published Bismarck’s biography as a separate volume (Posōngwan, 1907). Hwang’s biography, a bestseller in its days, made “Bismarck” a household name among Korea’s modernists and popularized the expression *ch’ōrhyōl chōngch’aek* (Steel and Blood Policy) – which Hwang defined as “seeking peace and prosperity by expanding state’s might” and thoroughly distinguished from what he saw as more “reckless” imperialism of Alexander the Great or Napoleon. Neither Pak nor Hwang, however, had to read German or even English to compose a biography of Bismarck. They both most likely translated, each in differently rearranged and abridged form, Sasakawa Kiyoshi’s (1872-1946) influential biography of Bismarck, *Bisumāku* (Tōkyō: Hakubunkan, 1899). The contexts in which Bismarck was represented in Japan and Korea were evidently different, the foremost interest of the Korean readers of Bismarck’s biographies being rather to save their country from the impending doom than to rebuild it into a Germany-like military power. Certain aspects of these representations, however, could not but overlap. For example, both Japanese and Koreans had the reasons to admire the centralized system of popular education in Bismarckian Germany, with its potential to instil statist patriotism into the people’s minds. Bismarck, with his image of the modern-

days “sage founder of a state”, became an important icon of the “model” modern statehood in early modern Korea.

Another famed Japanese biography of a “modern hero” that captured the imagination of Korea’s educated youth in early twentieth century, was Fukuyama Yoshiharu’s *Washōton* (*Washington*: Tōkyō: Hakubunkan, 1900), which appeared in Chinese translation in 1903 (by Ding Jin, Shanghai : Wenmingshuju) and was subsequently rendered by a famed “new novel” author, Yi Haejo (1869-1927), into Korean (*Hwasōngdon Chōn*, 1908). Both Chinese and Korean translators of the text – the Korean translator seemingly owed a good deal to his Chinese colleague’s earlier rendering – are assumed to have been interested in the more revolutionary version of political modernity George Washington’s (1732-1799) “righteous uprising against British king’s greed and oppression” was understood to represent. Another important reason, however, why this biography is worth reading, is the appearance – admittedly, passing – of a new, heterogeneous element which most biographies of “great” Europeans popular in early twentieth-century Korea did not display – namely, the “aborigines” (*t’oin*), against whom George Washington waged a brutal campaign in 1755-1758, and whose land he, as an official surveyor earlier, was trying hard to appropriate. In Yi’s rendering of Fukuyama’s book, the “aborigines” were “savage people whose main business was murder”. Battles against them seemed an essential part of the proverbial *mission civilisatrice*. However, could not Koreans, themselves under the impending threat of the Japanese colonization, find some touching similarities in the plights of the other colonized peoples across the globe? American Indians, seen by most modern Korean intellectuals who bothered to write on them as simply “savage” casualties of evolution, did not elicit much sympathy in the Korean modernist elite. Some other, presumably more “civilized” peoples of Asia, however, were seen through a different prism.

Vietnam was a typical example of the foreign Other to sympathise with. It was a part and parcel of what is often referred to as the Sinitic cultural sphere; and its plight described in elegant classic Chinese made it worthy lamenting for the educated Koreans. In early twentieth-century Korea, the main source of the information on the enslavement of Vietnam by the French was Phan B i Châu’s (1867-1940) masterpiece of nationalist polemics, *Vi t Nam Vong Qu c S* (*History of the Loss of Vietnam*, 1905). One chapter of the book (“The Future of Vietnam”) was a record of the dialogues between Phan B i Châu and his enthusiastic sponsor Liang Qichao (1873-1929), who actually recommended Phan to write and publish the book and helped Phan in preparing the additional chapters containing general information on Vietnam, the history of Vietnam-French relations etc. Liang Qichao was perhaps the most popular contemporaneous foreign writer in early twentieth-century Korea, and his involvement with the book undoubtedly increased its popularity and readership. The book was partly serialized in daily *Hwangōng Sinmun* (August 28 – September 5, 1906) and then translated, as *Wōllam Mangguk Sa*, into mixed Sino-Korean script by Hyōn Ch’ae (1856-1925), a professional Chinese interpreter who did not forget to add to the translated volume Liang Qichao’s 1904 essay, *Japan’s Korea*, in which Korea under the Japanese protectorate was aptly compared to Japan’s first-ever formal colony, Taiwan. It was fully evident that both for Hyōn Ch’ae and his readers the plight of colonized Vietnam was both an analogy and allegory for the sad fate awaiting their own country. One of the ways to prevent Korea from becoming a “second Vietnam” was exactly to spread the patriotic awareness through popularizing the narrative of Vietnam’s enslavement. This task was to be performed by two translations of the book into pure vernacular, by Chu Sigyōng (1876-1914) and Yi Sang’ik (both were published in 1907). Vietnam’s destruction

through the weakness and corruption of its rulers became a part of Korea's nationalist canon; it also prominently figured in religious polemics. While some Protestant missionaries used the book for encouraging their audiences' patriotic spirit and, implicitly, warning about the dangers the Catholic expansion could present for an Asian country (the connection between Catholic missionary enterprise and French colonization being one of the main themes in the book), a vernacular Catholic newspaper, *Kyŏnghyang Sinmun*, serialized in April-May 1908 a long article refuting the main points made by Phan. The radical anti-imperialist criticism deployed by Phan, with all its Social Darwinist and racist undertones, was an important contribution to the formation of Korea's nationalist mega-narrative – but was, understandably, disliked by such international actors as the Catholic church, who did not stand to gain anything from the development of radical nationalism in Korea.

In colonial Korea – where, by the way, the sales of “subversive” *Wŏllam Mangguk Sa* were strictly prohibited – solidarity with the Vietnamese independence struggle mainly developed in the context of the Communist movement. When in 1916 the pioneering revolutionary socialists of colonial Korea – then Waseda students Kim Ch'ŏlsu (1893-1986), Kim Myŏngsik (1890-1943) and others – together with their Chinese and Taiwanese comrades decided to build the New Asia League Party (*Sina Tongmaengdang*) as an internationalist anti-imperialist organization, they actively searched for any Vietnamese students or intellectuals in Tokyo (where their “Party” was based) willing to participate. Later, both Vietnamese and Korean Communists studied together at the Comintern-run Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV: 1921-1938) and, to a much lesser degree, the International Lenin School (MLSH: 1925-1938). It is known that the legendary leader of Korea's underground Communists, Pak Hŏnyŏng (1900-1956), for example, met Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) when living in the USSR as a Communist University student and a political refugee in 1927-1933. In South Korea the media coverage of the First Indochina War (1946-1954) was after 1948-49 rather inimical towards Ho, seen as Communist Chinese and Soviet “puppet”; however the Democratic Republic of Vietnam proclaimed in 1945, was from the very beginning seen as a close ally by the North Korean leadership. Aside from the intimate ties on the political level, a significant intellectual and cultural exchange had been also taking place. One good example is 1957 *Vietnam Diary (Wŏllam Ilgi)* by a veteran proletarian writer, Song Yŏng (1903-1977), the leader of the North Korean Union of Drama Writers (Pukchosŏn Yŏn'gŭk Tongmaeng). The diary, based on Song's lengthy 1956 Vietnam tour, features very detailed descriptions of the battles and tribulations of the First Indochina War, and plenty of interviews with all the main actors on the North Vietnamese literary and artistic scene. Vietnamese – all their names being given in Chinese characters – are presented as Koreans' closest comrades in struggle, their fight against French being seen as running parallel to North Korea's own battles against American imperialism.

While North Korean descriptions of “struggling Vietnam” did not explicitly exhibit exoticizing or patronizing tendencies, the South Korean descriptions of Vietnam and Vietnamese started to display tangibly “Orientalist” attitudes after 1965 when South Korea began dispatching battle troops to South Vietnam. South Vietnam, as a receiver of South Korea's large-scale “military aid”, was understood as standing below industrializing South Korea in the international pecking order. Thus, it could be safely described as eroticized exotic place much more remote from the “modern civilization” than Korea. Song Kŏnho (1927-2001), a well-known South Korean journalist who later became an anti-governmental dissident and one of the founders of the country's premier left-liberal daily, *Hangyoreh* (1988), described in 1965 the Vietnamese women as completely lacking in intellect,

having the facial features saliently different from those of Koreans (“high cheekbones, deep sunken eyes, thick lips”) and “exotically” dressed in the national female costume, *ao dai*. “Exotic” Vietnamese women were often seen by the Korean soldiers as their legitimate booty – they were “barbarians” who were not ashamed of providing commercial sex for money. The “enemy”, the Viet Cong, were typically shown in the news pictures as dwarfish people, who were supposedly easily “caught” by the better-built South Korean soldiers. The “superiority” of South Koreans was further buttressed by the way of graphically picturing the enemy either as helpless prisoners or dead bodies strewn around the roads and fields. In Vietnam, South Korea, itself still a relatively poor military protectorate of the USA, found its own “Orient” – a country which could be regarded as permanently inferior vis-à-vis Korea, a country to which the Orientalist stereotypes conventionally applied to Korea by the Japanese or Euro-Americans, could be re-applied by the Koreans themselves.

In a word, from being a fellow victim of colonialism in the early twentieth-century perceptions, Vietnam eventually moved down to being South Korea’s own “sub-colony” of sorts in the post-1965 South Korean view. The case is by no means unique. India, seen by the modernist publications of the early twentieth century as the very symbol of colonial enslavement, came by the 1920s-1930s to be perceived as the epitome of the anti-colonial struggle. As such, it was a beacon of hope for the Koreans – to be celebrated in the poems like this piece by Kim Tongmyŏng (1900-1968):

O, how glorious!

Are you rising up at last?

Clenching the two fists

Prepared to play the part of the iron hammers in the bloody struggle.

The chains on your feet –

Thousands, tens of thousands of them.

But who can change your mind

Directed towards your lover, [independence]?

Marsh forward,

The brave fighter of the East

Won’t the Red Sea get divided

Everywhere you put your gallant steps?

How can you hesitate at the sight of high mountains

Or deep waters?

On that hill, under the colourful clouds.

The lover, [independence], is waiting.

Go there quickly to meet him! (Monthly *Sinsaeng*, Vol. 4, No. 4, April 1931)

Indian struggle was also Korea's. And, just as the issues of French behaviour in Vietnam were used in the early twentieth century in the inter-confessional polemics in Korea, the issues of the Indian independence movement were easily extrapolated upon the Korean situation. As more moderate "cultural" nationalists that coalesced around the influential daily *Tong'a Ilbo*, were increasingly interested in the perspective of achieving a form of home rule (local autonomy) from Japan instead of "unrealistic" full independence, *Tong'a Ilbo* came to run a lengthy article on the Imperial Legislative Council and the working of the elective Provincial Councils in India, summarizing further ambitions of more moderate Indian politicians as a "wish to be a self-governing dominion, like Canada" (July 21, 1925). More radical *Chosŏn Ilbo* was, by contrast, explicitly characterizing India's fight as the struggle for full independence and – justly – emphasized that dispatch of Simon Commission and all the other British attempts to placate the Indians by "improving" their governance in India were nothing more than concessions obtained through the Indian sacrifices in the independence fight (Editorial, February 7, 1928). While the moderately nationalist monthly *Tonggwang* printed in its volumes 18-26 an abridged translation of the autobiography of "sacred hero (*sŏngung*) Gandhi", a leftist intellectual, *Chosŏn Ilbo*'s Shanghai correspondent Hong Yangmyŏng (1896-1950), saw Gandhi as just a "representative of the Indian national bourgeoisie, who is afraid of violating the interests of his landlord allies and thus is being criticized not only by workers and peasants but also by petty bourgeois circles" ("Class Confrontation in Indian Movement", *Samch'ŏlli* Vol3, No. 9, September 1931). "Indian movement" – thought to be the archetypical anti-imperialist liberation struggle in the world-historical sense – was, in a way, a "mirror" through which all the possible collisions and clashes inside a nationalist movement could be researched on in details. By using the Indian analogy, the left-wing/right-wing and radicals/moderates conflicts in Korea were "globalized" – India, after all, figured much more prominently at that point on the world scene.

3. *Anti-imperialism and sub-imperialism.*

The centrality of India in colonial intellectuals' *weltanschauung* is, however, hard to believe for somebody looking at the representations of India in the contemporary South Korean media. As nowadays South Korea, a heavily industrialized world-level manufacturing centre with per capita GNP on the level of the peripheral EU countries, regards itself as standing higher than still predominantly (72%) rural and much poorer India in the international hierarchical order, India's image is defined by what presumably differs it from Korea rather than by any perceived similarities in two countries' historical trajectories. In the India travelogues that appeared in the South Korean printed media since the early 1990s, India emerges as a representative *oji* (hinterland) – mystically religious, exotically charming but also incomprehensible and dangerous. For example, in Prof. Yŏn Hot'aek's travel diary

published in *Tong'a Ilbo* (April 24, 1997), Southern India he travelled through is described as “backward and remote place” with “strange and outlandish customs”. The most “outlandish was a Murugan festival in Tamil Nadu which featured *vel kavadi* - a portable altar attached to the devotee’s body with the metal skewers piercing devotee’s skin. The travelling South Korean professor found this feat of self-sacrificing religious devotion “worth respect”, but concluded that Tamil villages were living “far away from the civilization”. Professor’s Eurocentricism sometimes bordered on racism: for his cultivated ear, “Tamil” sounded as *ttae mil* (“to scratch the dirt”), Tamils were having “specially blackish skins”. While the colonial-time periodicals tended to criticise the colonialist racism of the British in India, contemporaneous South Korean mainstream seems to have appropriated it instead. Exoticised and “downgraded”, India is simultaneously being described as a (supposedly grateful) receiver of “advanced” Korea’s largesse: a 1994 article in *Tong'a Ilbo* (“Small warm-heartedness of the Korean People Melted down the Cold of Himalayas”, April 21) featured, for example, Korea’s Won Buddhist parish in southern Seoul’s richest ward, Sŏch’o, sending warm clothes to a Himalayan village in India, the inhabitants of which supposedly spend eight months of the year “without any tolerably useful clothing”. In contrast to the colonial-time intellectuals who were seeking to embrace the lessons of India’s independence movement, today’s middle-class South Koreans seem to be more interested in showing their ability to clothe “poor and uncivilized” Indians who are presumably unable to solve this task themselves!

Did the political culture of anti-imperialist solidarity which inspired pre-colonial and colonial-period Korean intellectuals to look at the trials, tribulations and desperate struggles of faraway Indians, Poles, Vietnamese or Filipinos as continuation of or parallel to Korea’s own distressed attempts to stay afloat and sail further in the troubled seas of the modern world, died once and forever with the end of the colonial period? It does not appear to be the case to the degree the anti-imperialist struggle remained a pressing task for divided Korea, encircled by mightier and often troublesome powers. As is already mentioned above, some of the North Korea-produced descriptions of “comradely” Third World states seemed to be refreshingly free from both Eurocentric, uniform visions of “civilization” and ethnocentric stereotypes. Han Sŏrya’s (1900-1976) 1958 account of travel to Nasser’s Egypt, *On the Shores of Nile (Nail kangban esŏ)* features, for example, some stereotypic description of “camel-riding Egyptians”, but otherwise treats the anti-British struggles of the Egyptian revolutionary nationalists and North Korea’s confrontation with the US as two parts of the same worldwide process – “Asian and African people moving from being slaves to being the owners of their countries”. Egypt, the country with long pre-colonial history and proud traditions, mirrors Korea while both oppose USA where “existentialist philosophy denies the validity of traditions, absolutises the present day and absolves the imperialists from any responsibility for their crimes”. While Americans, “the harmful insects” who “can benefit humanity only by dying and disappearing from this planet”, are depicted as egoistic individualists, the “natural” collectivism of both Egyptians and Koreans is seen as almost anticipating the modern socialist spirit. The anonymity of the ancient Egyptian art would be, according to Han, further developed by the socialist experiments in collective writing. While visibly essentializing and vituperatively inimical portraits of the “imperialists” do pose a problem for the contemporary readers of this text, the discursive equality of the subject and objects of the description in the face of “imperialist threat” is noteworthy.

While North Korea of the 1950s is often described as an assiduous “pupil” eager to learn the Stalinist modernity from the USSR and its more “advanced” Eastern European satellites, it is “solidarity”

rather than vertical master-pupil relationship that emerges as the explicit keyword in most descriptions of the USSR and Eastern Europeans by the North Korean authors or travellers in the 1950s. While almost all of these descriptions appear unambiguously propagandistic and were visibly written by the people who had no illusions about the real nature of the relationship between the USSR and its junior ally on the Korean Peninsula, it is also obvious that one of their tasks was exactly to represent the relations between the Soviets and Koreans as horizontal solidarity-based rather than hierarchically unequal and patronizing. Typically, a volume of short stories on the Soviet “friends of Korea”, *Unforgettable People (Ijül su ömnün saram tül*, Pyongyang, 1955), by Im Sundük (a well-known left-nationalist female writer from Wönsan, who chose to remain in North Korea after 1945), represents Soviet Russian liberators as plain, simple and kind-hearted people “just like us”, with the same set of good human treats – defined, in fact, rather in Confucian way. A Siberian native Andrei, for example, is a warm-hearted lad popular with the womenfolk in the Kangwön Province village where his platoon is stationed after the liberation of Northern Korea by the Soviet Army in August-September 1945. He is no superhuman, though, and remembered for more quotidian exploits – saving a child from drowning, or catching two trouble-making soldiers of the former Japanese Imperial Army (“Andori ho”). Army doctor Smirnov from Wönsan military hospital remembered for successfully treating a limping girl from a poor rural family is no superhuman either – he is represented rather as a people’s enlightener, an amateur author who was eager to popularize Russian and Soviet classics among the Koreans he happened to come into contact with. His brother Konstantin, a soldier stationed in Pyongyang, was able to contact locals quite easily since he managed to pick up usable Korean and always used the polite and respectful forms of speech (“Kiu”). Another young Soviet soldier, Ivan Semenovich Suslov, a “plain-hearted lad” stationed in a Kangwön Province village, did not demonstrate any special linguistic talents, but was good in repairing the village water mill and teaching the local children to play popular Soviet melodies, like *Katyusha*, with his accordion. He was also remembered for convincing a local elder that “in the new epoch of democracy”, shaking hands with the younger villages was more suitable than requiring the latter to present ritual deep bows on important occasions (“Sonp’unggüm”). While the images of “benevolent”, easy-going, enlightened and compassionate Soviet “brethren” are undeniably heavily idealized (although are not necessarily completely unrealistic), they do not appear alien in the North Korean settings of the mid-1950s, nor do they look overwhelming or awe-inspiring. A compassionate doctor, in fact, could well be a Korean Communist instead of the Soviet one – the ways of portrayal would still be roughly similar. The Soviets were to be pictured as “elder brothers” – but not overpowering “parents” or “masters”, to be blindly followed, loyal to and worshipped.

The horizontal “bonds of solidarity” implied that the “socialist countries” of Eastern Europe and East Asia, together with their sympathizers elsewhere, would take serious interests in what was seen in North Korea as the main plight of the Korean people – the forcible division of the Peninsula, with the American troops being permanently stationed in South Korea after the Korean War. The expressions of solidarity from abroad with the North Korean demands concerning the withdrawal of the American troops from South Korea were often published in North Korea in the 1950s – in the newspapers and journals, but also in the book form. One such book-length expression of “worldwide” solidarity with the Korean people was a poetry collection suitably entitled *The Anger of the World (Segye üi Punno*, Pyongyang, 1959) – aimed at putting together the “solidarity poems” written by Soviet, Eastern European, Chinese, Mongolian, and also “progressive” Japanese, Turkish

and even Indonesian writers for the sake of Korea during the whole 1950s. Some of the poems are interesting, as they seemingly were intended to give the impression that their authors – in most cases, the citizens of the countries much stronger and richer than both states on the war-torn Korean Peninsula – were eager to admire Koreans and learn from them, rather than to show condescending empathy with Korea’s predicament. The poem “To the fighters of Korea” (Russian: *Boitsam Korei*, Kor.: *Chosŏn Chŏnsa tŭl ege*) by a very popular Soviet poet, Lev Oshanin (1912-1996), emphasized, for example, that what he – and, presumably other Soviet citizens he claimed to represent – felt at the sight of bombed and ruined Pyongyang and the North Korean fighters, “the people who never would give up the freedom they once have won”, was “admiration rather than compassion”. The “unsubduable” North Korea was also an example to follow for certain Sakai Masao, presumably a Japanese Communist or Communist sympathiser, whose poem, with its telling title “Like the Koreans under the Japanese Colonial Rule” (Kor. translation: *Ilche ha e ittŏn Chosŏn saram tŭl ch’ŏrŏm*) described Koreans, “massacred” during the colonial rule but “as red and strong as pepper” and never subdued, as the vanguard of the worldwide revolutionary struggle. Solidarity as understood in Pyongyang – where all these poems were carefully selected for inclusion into the collection – meant Koreans establishing their revolutionary dignity in the eyes of the admiring world, rather than the “progressive world” simply helping Korea. It did not imply that the outside help was not needed – but nationalist self-assertion was needed as well.

In the 1960s-1980s, however, with the strengthening and dogmatisation of noticeably Korea-centric *chuch’e* (self-reliance) ideology, the discursive position of the non-European Others in the North Korean political and literary rhetoric did suffer a downturn of sorts, the Asian and African peoples, especially those who benefitted from North Korea’s then considerable foreign aid, being often portrayed as “led” by the “light of *chuch’e* ideas”. A comparable process, albeit on a different scale and in different form – “export of revolution” of sorts, but not on the state level – could be observed in post-1990s South Korea too, where the left-wing labour activists has been busy trying to teach the (mostly South and South East Asian) migrant workers the history of South Korea’s labour and democratization movement as a “standard shortcut” to socio-political liberation in the Asian context. However, all the patronizing or self-centric treats in the relationship between post-1960s North Korean authorities or post-1990s South Korean leftists and their non-Western interlocutors notwithstanding, neither of them could ever outrival or even closely catch up with the South Korean mainstream in its incessant attempts to contrast South Korea’s developmental splendour with the “backwardness” of all the places the South Korean capital and its middle classes happened to use as suppliers of mineral or recreational resources or labour force. As the examples with the portrayals of Vietnam and India mentioned above do amply show, South Korea’s mainstream media exhibit a distinctive sub-imperialist consciousness in relation to the non- Euro-American world. Not really even being an independent imperialist actor itself, South Korea uses its semi-privileged position in the world economy and politics (a sub-imperialist US ally, middle-level military power and a major manufacturing centre) to project itself as a part of the global “core” and contrast its “advancement”, richness and power with the squalor of the most parts of the continent it happened to be a part of. The contrast with the solidarity feeling palpable in the pre-colonial description of Vietnam or colonial portrayals of India is conspicuous.

Or is it really a contrast? Structurally speaking, the vision of the world as a lineal hierarchy, or the hierarchy of the concentric circles, with the distinctive centre and the peripheries around it, seems

to have endured for the last one hundred years. Another enduring feature is the central placement of the Euro-American world – the world which gave Korea the Bismarcks and Washingtons, the “heroes” on which modern Koreans were supposed to model themselves. The place of Japan as the all-important cultural intermediary seems, however, to have changed in the affluent 1990s – with the boom in learning English and study in the USA, much of the centrifugal cultural flow from the world’s Euro-American core to its Korean sub-periphery goes now directly, without the “double translation” via Japanese. With South Korea after the 1997-1998 financial crisis being an overzealous adept of the neoliberal globalization, the significance of Japan’s erstwhile statist, collectivist models of “modernization with Asian characteristics” and its older neo-traditional ideologies seems to be greatly diminished. What changed even more is South Korea’s place inside this elaborate hierarchy. It is no longer a part of the exploited and oppressed colonial world – and inside the constellation of the “liberated colonies”, it enjoys the status which, from its own viewpoint, is incomparable with that of the likes of Vietnam or India. The Korean nationalism of early twentieth century was being discursively developed through the gruesome analogies between Korea’s impending plight and Vietnam’s suffering, and Korean nationalism of the colonial time, oppressed by the Japanese censorship, found a way to euphemistically express itself through lengthy reports on India’s heroic anti-British struggle. Today’s South Korean nationalism, however, affirms itself by denigrating Vietnamese and Indians into poor recipients of South Korean largess, eager students of Korea’s “model” industrialization and democratization history, or sexualized and exoticised objects of Korean desire or tourist curiosity. Ironically enough, South Korea, itself a former colony and still a USA military protectorate, is engaged now in a “discursive colonialism” of sorts, which, among others, is obviously supposed to boost the nationalist pride in the achievements of the country which still remains, for all means and purposes, a junior sub-imperialist ally in a very unequal relationship with the global American empire. Whether the “discursive colonialism” of this kind will be offset by more equalitarian worldview which would develop, on a new level, the colonial-period traditions of the anti-imperialist solidarity, and whether South Korea will see the emergence of truly internationalist left-wing movement able to redefine its relations with its non-Euro-American Others, is the question for the future.

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