

The Trends and Problems in the Study of Modern Korean History in Japan

朝鮮開化思想とナショナリズム [Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism]

Tsukiashi, Tatsuhiko [月脚達彦]

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Until the 1980s, the study of Korean history tended to be similar in both Korea and Japan. Scholars in both countries used locally-bred (Korean) development theories to criticize and counter a colonial view of history and focused on constructing new Korean ideologies. Against this backdrop, popular topics of research included Silhak of the late Joseon period and Korean/Joseon enlightenment [*gaehwa*, 개화] thought and movement of the early modern period. Over time, however, this tendency waned and there developed an ever-widening gap between the issues of scholarly interest to Korea and to Japan.

In Japan, with the critical assessment of the so-called post-colonial historical studies in full swing, the Japanese academia set out to replace the post-colonial paradigm. Japanese scholars examined the various problems posed by post-colonial historical studies. They were especially critical of the single-nation-based approach to history, which is founded on a fundamental yet unquestioned assumption in the study of world history that all nations and regions go through the same general path of historical development. Japanese academia criticized the lack of awareness that this approach was a mechanism by which the modern

study of history has been constructing the “nation-state.” The study of Korean history in Japan was no exception to this trend. The pitfalls of the development theory that had been unquestioningly prescribed became the focus of research. The pitfalls, of course, had to do with the single-nation-based approach and modernist proclivities i.e., the lack of a critical evaluation of modernity.

Accordingly, interest started wane in Korean enlightenment thought, once highly regarded as a pro-modernist ideology. In the meantime, people s history came to the fore in the 1980s and 1990s in Korea. This was accompanied by criticisms highlighting the anti-populist characteristics of the Korean enlightenment thought and movement.

Thus, the study of Korean enlightenment grew stagnant in both Japan and Korea. However, the cause of the stagnation was completely different, and the two countries’ areas of scholarly interest diverged.

Against this backdrop, Tsukiashi Tatsuhiko’s *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism* is noteworthy because it goes against the flow and undertakes a thorough study of Korean enlightenment thought. The work is also significant in that it clearly presents the current status of the study of Korean history in Japan. The review of this book will incorporate a survey of the recent research trends in Japan, and in so doing, point to the implications and problems of Korean historical studies in Japan.

I

A brief overview of the book is as follows:

The larger theme explored in the book is presented in the foreword entitled “The History and Themes of the Study of Joseon Enlightenment Thought.” It is pointed out that Gang Jae-eon’s research, which led the study of the Korean enlightenment faction and thought until the 1980s, had Western modernity as its standard and ideal, and thus, lacked a critical eye toward it. It is then argued that the most important task at

hand is the critical evaluation of modernity. Tsukiashi is also critical of the people's history approach of Korean academia, which considers the enlightenment faction a force that espoused "reform from above." The implied call for "reform from below," he maintains, is not only unrealistic but unnecessary in building a modern nation-state. Based on such an understanding of the history of the study of Joseon enlightenment thought, Tsukiashi proposes the adoption of the nation-state methodology of Nishikawa Nagao [西川長夫].

Nishikawa's nation-state thesis emphasizes the following as the defining traits of a nation-state: 1) The existence of national and state sovereignty; 2) The existence of a national unification mechanism and ideology; 3) The world system or the interstate system makes the nation-state, not the other way around; 4) The nation-state is an intrinsically paradoxical entity, and its paradoxical nature is what drives growth; and 5) The nation-state is modular (the diverse elements that comprise a nation-state can be imitated and adopted). Nishikawa's nation-state thesis has had the greatest influence on the study of Japanese modern history after the post-colonial approach began losing vigor. Tsukiashi's *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism* is the result of a thorough review of the Korean enlightenment thought and Korean nationalism (the term "nationalism" in Korean and Japanese can be rendered a number of translations. That may be why Tsukiashi chose to use the English term "nationalism," and I have done the same in the original Korean version of this review) that reflects the key issues with which Japanese historians are presently concerned.

The body of the book is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 "The Formation of Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Yu Gil-jun" focuses on Yu Gil-jun and examines the process by which Joseon enlightenment thought emerged. What appears to be especially important in Tsukiashi's discussion is that he claims the development of Joseon nationalism comprised two steps. The first was the founding of the Joseon nation-state upon Joseon's breakaway from the Sinocentric world

order. This was followed by the formation of nationalism, which arose because of and as a reaction against “the unforgettable Other”—i.e., Japan of the protectorate period. The first chapter looks mainly at the first step by tracing the development process of Yu Gil-jun’s Joseon enlightenment thought.

Chapter 2 “The Formation of Joseon Enlightenment Thought and the Daehan Empire” considers the product of the first phase of Joseon’s process of constructing its nationalism to be “Daehan Empire nationalism.” Based on this understanding, Chapter 2 looks at Joseon’s diplomatic protocol and efforts to create a Joseon nation. In Chapter 3 “Development of Joseon Nationalism and Political Culture,” Tsukiashi discusses the development process and characteristic traits of the nationalism of the second phase. He also reviews Joseon’s conception of civilization and perception of Japan during the patriotic enlightenment movement. Tsukiashi shows that two groups—the constitutional reform faction and the Confucian renewal faction—were shaping the evolution of Joseon nationalism during this period. To overcome the factional divide, there emerged anti-Japanese [抗日型] nationalism of Sin Chae-ho.

A summary of the entire book is offered in the conclusion. Tsukiashi stresses that Joseon nationalism must be critically evaluated within the framework of the nation-state thesis and the recent discourse on colonial modernity. Tsukiashi argues that a new theoretical paradigm can be devised by homing in on an aspect of the Korean enlightenment movement and thought that has not received much attention i.e., the intrinsically oppressive nature of the nation-state. This paradigm will be able to delineate a critical theory of the modern period that is comparable to the colonial modernity discourse, a critical theory of the colonial period.

II

Tsukiashi's work is particularly noteworthy in two respects. The first is Tsukiashi's approach of dividing the formative process of Joseon nationalism into two phases and analyzing the characteristics of each phase. In the first phase, Joseon needed Japan's help to break free from the Sinocentric world order because it was not powerful enough on its own. Joseon scholars were, thus, confronted with the difficult task of making sense of the relationship between modern civilization and the nation. Tsukiashi has his finger on a very important issue. This issue had been raised by Andre Schmid in the context of the "decentering" of China in *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919* published in the United States in 2002. Nevertheless, the issue remains largely unexplored and requires extensive discussion.

The second point of interest is Tsukiashi's identification of two strands of nationalism during the patriotic enlightenment movement period: the counter-Japanese (or more literally, nationalism to overcome Japan; 克日型) nationalism of the constitutional reform faction and the moral nationalism [道義的] of the Confucian renewal faction. He notes neither faction could avoid falling into the trap of modernity because they acknowledged the existence of universal values in Western and Japanese civilizations. This clearly and succinctly delineates the author's critical outlook on modernity. It is also worth noting that the study highlights the present-day implications of the three strands of nationalism (including Sin Chae-ho's anti-Japanese nationalism) formed during the protectorate period, tracing their path to contemporary South Korean and North Korean nationalism.

In sum, *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism* is a study on Joseon enlightenment thought and nationalism that reflects the recent trend in Japanese academia, which views modernity as an obstacle that needs to be overcome, not as a goal to which to aspire. In this sense, there is a common thread between Tsukiashi's work and the debate on the

postmodern position and the critique of nationalism that have been going on for the past few years in Korean academia.

III

The book has several noteworthy points as discussed above. However, it also leaves many questions unanswered. Among them, I would like to concentrate on the question concerning the significance of works such as Tsukiashi's. As a Japanese studying Korean history just like the author, I would like to offer my views as points of contrast.

As mentioned at the beginning of the review, the study of Korean history in Japan and that in Korea are drifting farther apart. This phenomenon in and of itself may be desirable. However, what is problematic is the focus of the Japanese academia in the study of modern and contemporary history namely, the critique of nationalism. There is also a similar tendency in the US academic circle engaged in the study of modern and contemporary Korean history. The question we must pose is, what is the significance of a critique of Joseon nationalism carried out by a Japanese scholar (or specifically, someone who publishes his/her findings in Japanese) or an American scholar? Tsukiashi applies to the analysis of Joseon nationalism the nation-state thesis, which had been proposed by a Japanese Western studies scholar (Nishikawa is originally a scholar of French literature) and by scholars of Japanese history. Accordingly, the same problems detected in Japanese and Western nationalism are discovered in Joseon nationalism. What I would like to ask Tsukiashi is, what then is the significance of studying modern Korean history as a Japanese scholar?

As a Japanese researcher, I have always considered seeing Japan and the world in a new light the significance of studying Korean history. Therefore, in studying Korean nationalism, I deem of the utmost importance discovering distinguishing characteristics that set Korean nationalism apart from Japanese nationalism, which can serve as

counterpoints in the critique of Japanese nationalism. The following are what I find as points of interest in Korean nationalism.

In *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism*, Japanese nationalism is presumed to have already taken shape by the time Korean nationalism was coming into being. Yet was this truly the case? For Japan, the first task in constructing nationalism appears to have been dissociating itself from China and Korea and establishing Japan's distinctiveness. Japanese nationalism rose from Japan's designation and separation of China as the "unforgettable Other." In the process, Korea was done away with as an extension of China. This process is evidenced by the fact that in formulating the discourse on Korean history, Motoori Norinaga [本居宣長] was required to disprove the deep ties between Japan and the Korean peninsula and the Korean cultural influence on Japan during the ancient period.¹ This trend, which had its beginnings in the Edo period, yielded research findings that have come to be claimed as evidence proving Japan's rule over the Korean peninsula since the modern period. Using this so-called "evidence," a scientific study of the stele of King Gwanggaeto was undertaken and in a separate study, Fukuda Tokujo [福田徳三] argued that unlike Japan, Korea did not have a feudal system. If the construction of Japanese nationalism is thought to have begun in earnest after the Sino-Japanese War, the formation of nationalism occurred almost concurrently in Japan and Joseon. However, Tsukiashi does not demonstrate any understanding of this in *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism*.

The contemporaneity of Japanese nationalism and Joseon nationalism is important because a comparative analysis between them must take into account the mutual influence they exerted on one another in their formative process. Only then can there be a proper assessment of

¹ The first work to point out this problem was Study on Ueda Akinari: The World of Akinari's Japanese Literature concerning Joseon [上田秋成の研究: 朝鮮をめぐる秋成國學の世界] by Kang Seok-won [姜錫元] published in 2003 by Chaek Sarang [책사랑].

their similarities and differences. *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism*, however, does not even take into consideration such a view. It only highlights Japan's influence on Joseon nationalism and gives the impression that Joseon nationalism was somewhat inadequate because Joseon had not formed a nation-state. The assessment that Joseon nationalism was inadequate is inevitable if the nation-state thesis is applied to a given area comprising a modern nation-state. However, it is the same as applying Western standards in the study of Korean enlightenment thought and concluding that Korean enlightenment thought was fraught with limitations.

In order to overcome this problem and shed light on the positive significance of Joseon nationalism, studies should focus on the challenges that had surrounded the formation of Joseon nationalism as well as the new possibilities the findings of such studies may offer. The nation-state thesis only emphasizes the universal inevitability of the formation nation-states. It not only neglects aspects of resistance or opposition to nation-state building but also attempts to find pro-nation-state elements in them. This seems to be why the nation-state thesis, while claiming to be a critique of modernism, can be regarded as a new form of Western-centrism and is structurally incapable of breaking free from the nation-state paradigm.

So, why were there so many hurdles to Korea's efforts at building a nation-state? In my view, Korea's Confucian tradition had a lot to do with the challenges. Confucianism and Sung Confucianism, which Korea began to adopt in earnest during the Joseon dynasty, are thought systems that call for universal principles that transcend the nation and the state. This historical experience with the all-out adoption of Confucian ideology complicated Joseon's transition into modernity. To some extent, Confucianism's universal principles facilitated Korea's adoption of Western civilization as Koreans discovered that Western civilization also possessed universal principles. However, they also induced resistance to nationalism. Also, Confucianism's universal principles probably served

as the basis of Korea's critical stance against Western civilization.

Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism appears to present somewhat conflicting understandings of the issue. In Chapter 1, which deals with Yi Gil-jun's thought system, the presence of Confucian tradition is positively evaluated. In Chapter 3's analysis of the patriotic enlightenment movement, however, Korea's Confucian tradition is negatively portrayed as having weakened a critical outlook on Western and Japanese civilizations. In Chapter 2, Tsukiashi compares Yu Gil-jun's *Observations on a Journey to the West* [서유견문] and Fukuzawa Yukichi's [福澤諭吉] *Things Western* [서양사정]. It is pointed out that what Fukuzawa had translated as "civilization," Yu had translated as "Confucian" (pp. 68, pp. 77). Tsukiashi discusses the differences between Japan and Korea's respective process of adopting Western civilization and points to Confucianism's role in creating these differences. This is a very important point, but it is nowhere to be found in Chapter 3. Is it because the ideas and principles of Confucian intellectuals transformed and became corrupted over time? I think not.

Joseon's Confucian tradition continued to serve as the grounds for criticizing Western and Japanese civilizations. Without such an understanding, it is not possible to properly fathom An Jung-geun's (for unknown reasons, there is not a single mention of An Jung-geun in *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism*) Treatise on Peace in East Asia or the National Declaration of Independence of the March First Movement, for instance. The role that Confucianism and other distinctively Korean traits played in the formation of Joseon nationalism should be positively examined against Japan's case.

In discussing the issues of Korea's Confucian tradition vis-à-vis Japan, one must not forget to mention the issue of socialist ideology. Socialist thought had not, of course, surfaced as a veritable issue in the time period dealt with in *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism*. Nevertheless, it is an important issue in the discussion of Joseon nationalism given that many Confucian intellectuals later adopted

socialism. That is, the adoption of socialism should not be understood simply as an aftermath of colonialism.

In short, *Joseon Enlightenment Thought and Nationalism* applies the nation-state thesis as an analytical methodology in examining the process of the construction of Joseon nationalism. In so doing, the work highlights the negative aspects of nationalism. Tsukiashi's approach and arguments hold a certain amount of significance in that they are reflective of contemporary scholarly trends. However, I do question the purpose of the author's endeavor given that the author, as a Japanese scholar, concentrates solely on the problems of Joseon nationalism without tackling the issues pertaining to Japanese nationalism. The question I raise here is related to colonial modernity, a central issue of scholarly discussions in the United States. Furthermore, it is related to the issue of the significance of the study of Korea carried out in Japan, United States, and the West at large.