# *The Great Enterprise: Sovereignty and Historiography in Modern Korea*

by Henry H. Em
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## 1. The Korean Nation and Nationalism

In the modern era the nation and its state play a significant role in the construction of the modern world to the extent that the modern period is commonly said to be the age of the nation. The nation-state and its global significances bring forth, and are brought forth by, the birth and prosperity of nationalism. This history of the modern period confirms the necessity for the study of nation and nationalism, producing much writing on the nation and its ideology, around the world and also in South Korea.

For a long time, more than a few post-colonial works from South Korea, embracing nationalism as a kind of *Zeitgeist*, took a historical approach toward the modern construct of the nation. The billowy era at the turn of the twenty-first century, however, urged some Koreanists to reflect upon their established understanding of the nation and nationalism, and to instead historicize the issues. This historicization made it possible for them to remain open-minded to possibilities for constant (re)construction of a nation and constant change in nationality. On top of this, their subsequent research influenced by post-modernist

and post-colonialist theories, and employing a variety of methodologies, illustrate that the Korean nation was and is a discursive formation, a relational entity, and a spatial and temporal construct. Pioneering works suggest that the construction of the Korean nation is also a "clear instance of historical contingency," as in the parlance of Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, and that the Korean nation has been constructed and reconstructed as a historical contingency throughout the modern times of Korea.[1] Now, it is being established that the Korean nation is just a historical construct, and, to be specific, a modern construct.

Nevertheless, numerous topics pertinent to the nation and its doctrine remain uncharted. Among them is the issue of sovereignty. Sovereignty constitutes the cardinal concerns of modern imaginations at the level of the human collective or the individual person. That is, a "sovereign subject" (K. *juche*) who thinks and acts on his/her own will or independently from others exists as the ultimate goal that an individual should attain throughout one's life. Likewise, national sovereignty is first and foremost in nationalist agendas to the extent that nationalism is said to be ultimately aimed at building a nationally sovereign state. This necessitates researchers to examine the issue of modern sovereignty in earnest. Despite such a necessity, the literature has not yet paid due attention to the primary nationalist agenda of national sovereignty. This constitutes one of the problems with existing research, which brings Henry H. Em's *The Great Enterprise: Sovereignty and Historiography in Modern Korea* to our attention.

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[1] Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National*: *A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9.

## 2. The Great Enterprise: Sovereignty and Historiography in Modern Korea

*The Great Enterprise*, problematizing "the relationship between imperialism and nationalism," takes the issue "sovereignty and historiography in modern Korea" as the subtitle of the book and into its table of contents. Based on its focus, the book consists of two parts which respectively examine sovereignty and historical writing. While examining the two topics and modern Koreans' *dae-eop* or *daemyeong* ("great enterprise" in English) of "establishing equality with the nations of the earth" the book employs a variety of methodologies pertinent to the issues it covers, such as the analysis of text and language, and political anthropology regarding royal rituals and ceremonies. It then shows research results very suggestive for our understanding of our own conundrums, for example, the relationship between imperialism/colonialism and nationalism as well as sovereignty and historical writing. For lack of space, however, this review focuses on examining what the book explains regarding sovereignty. As Em points out, sovereignty is "a legal concept that structures the modern nation-state and relations between empires and nation-states." The legal concept has existed as "the paramount signifier," producing nationalist desire for national subjectivity throughout the modern era of Korea. This historical significance of sovereignty persuades this review to examine the crux of Em's argument.

In *The Great Enterprise* Em scrutinizes the historicity of sovereignty (K. *jukwon*), but from a viewpoint different from the usual. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) resulted in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which launched the state with "absolute sovereignty" over its territory in Europe. About 150 years later, the French Revolution introduced the concept of national sovereignty to the European world, leading to the emergence of nation-states on the continent. These historical events, transforming the continent into "a community of sovereign nation-states," established the concepts and practices of sovereignty and

national sovereignty. Sovereignty came to constitute the cardinal concerns of modern imaginations at the level of the human collective or the individual person. That is, a "sovereign subject" (K.*juche*) who thinks and acts on his/her own will or independently from others came to exist as the ultimate goal that an individual should attain during one's life. Likewise, national sovereignty became first and foremost on nationalist agendas to the extent that nationalism is said to be ultimately aimed at the building of a nationally sovereign state.

If the above summarizes the usual understanding of the initial history of the two concepts of sovereignty and national sovereignty, *The Great Enterprise* approaches the topic from a new viewpoint. More than anything else, Em draws attention to the link between the concept of sovereignty and European liberalism. The former, according to Em, epistemologically went abreast with the "Enlightenment notion of individual personhood, of the unique individual as a self-aware, self-creating subject beyond (or prior to) social status, roles, and obligations." That is, "equal sovereignty" was interlocked with "autonomous personhood." Next, the author reveals the contradictory features of liberal theory and practice by stating that liberal theory carried "inclusionary pretensions" while liberal practice had "exclusionary effects." Originally, according to Em, liberalism had "the exclusionary basis" which was "derived from its theoretical core: the legitimacy of political authority requires consent; consent, to be meaningful, requires the people's giving that consent to be possessed of reason; certain groups of people (children, madmen, and idiots) are incapable of exercising that kind of reason; such people can be excluded, governed without their consent." Thus, contrary to its inclusionary pretensions, liberalism practically functioned as an idea that supported the exclusion of "certain people," such as American Indians. This suggests that there lay "violence at the center of liberalism." Going a step further, in essence, exclusionary liberalism was linked to imperialism and colonialism. Thus, all kinds of imperialist/colonialist interests such as treaty ports and assorted

concessions secured in the non-Western world "went hand in hand with Western liberal claims about individual equality and equality between sovereign states." In this way, Em shows us "liberalism's essential link to imperialism and colonialism" and also that the ideologies shared the commonality of being based upon the concept of sovereignty, individual or collective, or that the concept of sovereignty, in turn, formed the basis not only of liberalism, but also of imperialism and colonialism.

The new perspective on sovereignty which Em articulates in *The Great Enterprise* can be found in his location of the constitution of sovereignty. As established literatures do, the book locates the origin of the concept of national sovereignty in modern European history. In no time, however, the author transfers the discussion from European countries to "Europe's periphery" by stating, "Sovereignty was not fully articulated by the Peace of Westphalia and then extended to Europe's periphery." He then relates the following: "Sovereignty and international laws were improvised out of the colonial encounter and given various articulations by European colonizers in conditions of hegemonic contestation with other colonial powers to declare who was sovereign and why." This shift of the locus for discussion signifies a change in the focal point from the inter-national relationship among European countries to "the colonial encounter" and "hegemonic contestation with other colonial powers." With this note, Em concludes that colonialism became "central to the constitution of sovereignty."

At the same time, according to *The Great Enterprise*, the Westphalian idea of sovereignty came to serve Western and Japanese imperialism in East Asia as elsewhere in the non-Western world. The author points out, "Treaties, institutions, and discourse on equality between sovereign states, and equality between men, served to open up both China and Japan to trade and diplomacy in the middle of the nineteenth century." In this sense, it can be said that sovereignty and "[s]overeignty-based international law facilitated Euro-American imperialism." Also, the interests such as extraterritoriality secured by

Western imperialism in East Asia gained ideational and practical support from "Western liberal claims about individual equality and equality between sovereign states." These accomplishments of Western imperialism suggest that the idea of sovereignty "could and did serve as a cognitive map for nineteenth-century Western imperialism in East Asia." Likewise, Japan, whose role as "the preeminent translator of the new semantics of sovereignty in East Asia," was confirmed by the result of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). Sovereignty functioned as "pedagogy for Japanese imperialism and colonialism."

Taking a step further, sovereignty led the non-Western world to embrace Western-centered modernization. Em suggests that sovereignty "required recognition from the Western imperial powers." Thus "non-European polities had to demonstrate commitment to European civilization" in order to receive recognition of their sovereignty from Western powers, and thereby enter a "sovereignty-based nation-state system" while preventing themselves from being colonized. This means that non-European countries had to Westernize their "political, economic, and cultural institutions and practices" under the name of "reform" in order to meet the requirements Western imperial powers set upon non-Western polities. Insofar as the Western-oriented reform was geared to secure their equality of sovereignty with Western imperial powers, or to realize nationalist desire for their independence from Western imperialism, Westernization revealed in modern history that nationalist desire for equal sovereignty, promoting its Westernization, helped to establish Euro-American hegemony over non-Western areas. Given this, sovereignty forced nationalism to serve Western hegemony by making Western-oriented reform while transforming the West's domination over the non-Western world into a hegemonic rule. From this perspective, the author points out the violence inherent in sovereignty, "the unavoidable accommodation to Euro-American modernity," and the complicity of nationalism with imperialism/colonialism.

At the same time, however, *The Great Enterprise* pays due

attention to the creativity and productivity of sovereignty. While narrating a history of historical writing in modern Korea, in the second part of the book Em scrutinizes "sovereignty's creative, productive power, calling on Korean historians who would privilege and deploy for their own purpose, the concept of equal sovereignty as the condition for rewriting Korea's past." This part explains that Korean historians imagine the Korean ethnic (K. *minjok*) as "a self-same unity that evolved (or developed) through linear time," rendering "the ethnic nation as the sovereign subject (*juche*) of Korean history" while inviting "all Koreans -male and female, old and young, high-born and of low status- to become sovereign subjects of national history." Em then argues that "sovereignty made it possible for Korean historians to imagine the nation as such, and to help create a democratic logic while locating Korea in global time." This is true for language and other fields. In the field of language, "sovereignty as a form of command prompted Korean intellectuals, as writers, historians, and translators, to produce new meanings and new narratives through semantic innovations" and also constituted and identified "Korean and Koreans as distinct units." All these happenings confirm the creative potentials of sovereignty, indicating that *violent* sovereignty simultaneously had "creative, productive powers."

## 3. Searching for an Alternative

As briefly introduced thus far, Em examines "the historicity of sovereignty (*jukwon*), its complicity with power, and its creative, productive capacity." Also, this book scrutinizes "the conventions, rationalities, and subjectivities that sovereignty elicited," which are issues not introduced here due to lack of space. While dealing with those issues, Em shows that the post-Westphalian concept of sovereignty formed the basis of violence witnessed in liberalism and imperialism/ colonialism. And he illustrates that the concept of sovereignty was reified through the contact between European colonial powers and the non-

Western world. Moreover, the author reveals that "sovereignty functioned both as political power and police power in modern Korea as well as in elsewhere around the world." In these historical processes and workings, according to Em, sovereignty brought about not only its complicity with Japanese and Euro-American empires and colonial projects, but also the complicity of Korean nationalism with Western and Japanese imperialism and colonialism, which led to the establishment of the latter's hegemony over Korea. All these explanations presented in *The Great Enterprise* offer an excellent opportunity to understand sovereignty.

Further, the explanations in *The Great Enterprise* provide us with the opportunity to critically reflect upon nationalism. Insofar as nationalism ultimately aims to build and manage the state with national sovereignty over a certain territory and population, it goes without saying that sovereignty forms the first and foremost agenda of nationalism. On another note, if sovereignty shows its complicity with imperialism and colonialism throughout modern history, the nationalism of the non-Western world aspiring for absolute sovereignty could help Western and Japanese imperialism and colonialism to establish their hegemonic rule over non-Western areas and populations. This was a sheer denial of the original problematic possessed by nationalism. Given this, the book, though briefly reviewed here, urges us to critically reflect upon the potentiality of nationalism as an alternative to hegemonic ideologies of imperialism and colonialism, and to thereby look for an alternative to nationalism in order to render the existing world no longer under a hegemonic rule of powers. This constitutes one of the academic and political implications that Em's book carries, and also one of the major agendas *The Great Enterprise* raises for its readers