

Pseudo-history and Historical Fascism

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“Pseudo-history” refers to irrational historical research obsessed with the power and dimensions of ancient Korean territories. It emerged along with government-issued history textbooks under the Park Chung Hee regime in 1974. Led by former Minister of Education Ahn Ho-sang, pseudo-historians advanced unsubstantiated slander against mainstream historians and filed administrative litigation urging the government to edit history textbooks in their favor. Although pseudo-history appears opposed to Japanese colonialist historical perspectives, it is in fact nothing more than chauvinism internalizing the Japanese colonialist theory of “peninsular attributes.” Generally based on “evidence” extracted from the forged *Hwandan gogi*, moreover, it fails to meet the standards of legitimate academic research. It seems obvious that the pseudo-history promoted in 1970s Korea fundamentally originated in a fascistic approach to the understanding of history. Despite such fascistic intentions, however, both conservatives and liberals tend to uncritically accept these claims, indicating the vulnerability of Korean society to chauvinism.

Keywords: pseudo-history; fascism; Ahn Ho-sang; *Hwandan gogi* (forged historical text); history textbooks

Pseudo-history and Historical Fascism

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I. Standardization of Korean History Textbooks and Historical Fascism

On October 12, 2015, the Park Geun-hye government formally announced its plan for the national standardization of Korean history textbooks. While many considered this a sudden, shocking measure, the administration had planned this since its inception in early 2013. The year 2013 was marked by commotion over the publication of history textbooks reflecting the historical views of the New Right. These history textbooks published by Kyohaksa with full government support had achieved an adoption rate of zero percent at the time; they were all but ignored in classrooms. The reason for this was the low quality and excessive “right-leaning tendency” of the content. Coming to realize the hopelessness of propagating textbooks blatantly based on its own views under the competitive official textbook approval system, the government

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changed tack, playing the “national standardization” card.

While outlining the revised 2015 curriculum, Minister of Education Seo Nam-su stated the possibility of turning the Korean history book national standardization issue over to the public sphere, deliberately stoking the public outcry regarding controversial claims by Prime Minister Jeong Hong-weon and members of the ruling party over “national history book regression.”... He stated, “*We are already working on a general plan to revise the curriculum to be announced in 2015.*”¹

The government justified the move toward standardization citing the intolerable “left-leaning tendency” of existing history textbooks, asserting that “self-rectification” of this problem was unlikely since historians composing the textbooks themselves were generally “left-leaning.” The majority of Korean historians, however, disagree with the claim that the textbook approval system tends to produce left-leaning textbooks, maintaining that left-leaning historians compose an extremely small minority in Korea. Nonetheless, the government has proceeded to mobilize state power in unilateral support for a minority opinion.

The government and ruling party politicians, as well as scholars aligned with them, advance intensely aggressive and exclusionary rhetoric in advocating national standardization of Korean textbooks.² Regarding mainstream historians as “absolutely evil” and “enemies,” they demonstrate excessive self-conviction and partisanship disallowing the slightest possibility of a difference of opinion. The actions of this minority group, mobilizing state power and indiscriminately condemning academia as “abnormal” and “leftist” in order to monopolize historical

¹ *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, December 12, 2013, 1. Emphasis added by the author.

² “Gim museong saenuri dang daepyo ui ‘hanguk sa gyogwaseo’ baleon” [Comments of Saenrui Party representative Kim Mu-seong regarding ‘Korean history textbooks’], *Hangyeore Sinmun*, October 18, 2015.

interpretation, clearly qualify as “historical fascism.” However, it is not merely “historical fascism” threatening historical scholarship in Korea; antagonism toward the discipline of history in Korea is, in fact, varied and deep-rooted.

This paper explores another form of Korean “historical fascism,” namely, that distinguished by the concern with early ancient history (*sanggo sa*) and the irrational obsession with national power and territory. This form of history, often called “fringe history” (*jaeya sahak*),³ may also be referred to as “pseudo-history.” One might plausibly take issue with the use of the label “pseudo,” considering the possibility for diverse interpretation inherent to historical writing. But having taken account of the manner in which the historiography investigated in this paper eschews accepted academic standards, its use will likely appear justified.

Up until the early 1970s, perhaps pseudo-history could have been understood in terms of the “excessive nationalism” and underdeveloped methodologies of amateur scholars. By the mid-1970s, however, pseudo-historians had initiated a public campaign indiscriminately engaging in baseless slander and criticism of academia. This movement culminated in the compilation and dissemination of the *Hwandan gogi*, a forged historical text. Scholars have repeatedly verified problems with the *Hwandan gogi*; the evidence of forgery is readily apparent.⁴ Being an

³ Yi Mun-yeong, *Mandeuwojin hanguk sa*, 17-18. “Fringe” (*jaeya*; 在野; literally means “in the wild”), a term traditionally used to refer to those relegated to the remote areas of the realm, now commonly denotes those pseudo-historians lacking in any proper credentials with respect to the discipline of history. However, such historians are not merely limited to the “fringe.” As with Yun Nae-hyeon, a specialist in ancient Korean history, and Sin yong-ha, a specialist in modern Korean history and society, as well as with the archaeologist Bok Gi-dae and scholar of modern Korean history Yi Deok-il, each of who have been particularly active as of late, there are indeed professional scholars endowed with credentials related to the field of history embracing pseudo-history. The term “fringe,” therefore, does not quite fully capture the scope of pseudo-history.

⁴ See Jo In-seong, “Hyeonjeon ‘gyuweon saha’ ui saryo jeok seonggyeog e daehan il geomto” [Investigation of the historical character of the Gyuweon saha], in *Dugye ibyeongdo baksa gusun ginyeom hanguk sahak nonchong* [Journal of Korean History Commemorating the Words

attempt at popular agitation through historical forgery, then, the movement may be deemed devoid of the slightest academic credibility.

II. The Emergence and Enterprises of Pseudo-history

Investigation of the conditions under which pseudo-history emerged in earnest must begin in the early 1970s. On May 5, 1972, in accordance with its campaign to “discover the nationality of education,” the Park Chung Hee government inaugurated the “Committee for the Strengthening of National History Education” (*Guksa gyoyuk ganghwa wiweonhoe*) under the purview of the Ministry of Education.⁵ The government thus declared its intent to implement historical education

of Dr. Dugye Yi Byeong-do (Korea: Jisik saneopsa, 1987); “‘Gyuweon sahwa’ wa ‘Hwandan gogi’” [The Gyuweon sahwa and the Hwandan gogi], *Hanguk sa simin gangjwa* [Civic lectures in Korean History] 2 (Iljogak, 1988); “Hanmal dangun gwangye saseo ui jaegeomto—‘sindan silgi’, ‘dangi gosa’, ‘Hwandan gogi’ reul jungsim euro” [Reexamination of historical texts of the late Daehan period related to Dangun: Case study on the Sindan silgi, Dangi gosa, and Hwandan gogi], *Guksagwan nonchong* [Journal of national history] 3 (Guksa pyeonchan wiweonhoe [National history compilation committee], 1989); Park Gwang-yong, “Daejonggyo gwallyeon munheon e wijak manta—‘gyuweon sahwa’ wa ‘the Hwandan gogi’ ui seonggyeog e daehan jaegeomto” [The many forgeries of Daejonggyo literature: Reexamination of the characters of the Gyuweon sahwa and Hwandan gogi], *Yeoksa bipyeong* [Critical review of history] 10 (Yeoksa munje yeonguso [The Institute for Korean Historical Studies], 1990); “Daejonggyo gwallyeon munheon e wijak manta 2—‘sindan silgi’ wa dangi gosa’ ui seonggyeog e daehan jaegeomto” [The many forgeries of Daejonggyo literature: Reexamination of the characters of the Sindan silgi and Dangi gosa], *Yeoksa bipyeong* 16 (Yeoksa munje yeonguso, 1992); Hanguk yeoksa yeongu hoe godaesa bungwa [Department of Ancient Korean History at the Korean History Society], ed., “‘Hwandan gogi’ mid eul su inna” [Is the Hwandan gogi believable?], in *Mundabeuro yeokkeun hanguk godaesa sanchaek* [A walk through ancient Korean history woven together by question and answer] (Korea: Yeoksa bipyeong sa [Critical review of history], 1994); Jo In-seong, “‘Jaeya saseo’ wiseo ron—dangi gosa.hwandan gogi.gyuweon sahwa reul jungsim euro” [Discussion of forged texts as so-called “fringe texts”: Case study of the Dangi gosa, Hwandan gogi, and Gyuweon sahwa], in *Dangun gwa gojoseon sa* [History of Dangun and Gojoseon] (Korea: Sagyejeol, 2000); “Hwandangogi ui dangun segi wa dangi gosa.gyuweon sahwa” [The Hwandan gogi’s Dangun world and the Dangi gosa and Gyuweon sahwa], *Dangun hak yeongu* [Dangun studies research] 2 (Dangun hakhoe [Dangun Scholarly Society], 2000); Yi Mun-yeong, *Mandureojin hanguk sa* [Made Korean history] (Korea: Paran midieo, 2010).

⁵ “Guksa gyoyuk ganghwawi seolchi” [Establishment of committee for strengthening national history education], *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, May 11, 1972, 7.

centered on the “nation” (*minjok*). National history was accordingly established as an independent subject on the preliminary university entrance examination, and a concrete policy was announced to establish national history as a compulsory subject in universities.

Having established one-man authoritarian rule through the promulgation of the Yushin Constitution in October of the same year, Park Chung Hee announced yet another education-related policy on June 23, 1973: history textbooks, consistently under the jurisdiction of the official textbook authorization system since the founding of the Republic of Korea, were to undergo national standardization.⁶ This was justified as a measure allowing students to “establish a sense of agency and proper views regarding the state” and mitigate inconsistency in university entrance exams owing to diversity of textbooks. However, the most important objective was to propagandize and legitimize the newly founded Yushin regime.

Historians and educators generally opposed the national standardization of history textbooks, concerned with the “uniformity” of historical education that might result.⁷ Ignoring scholarly opposition, however, the government began the distribution of standardized textbooks to schools in 1974, an action that would have unforeseen repercussions.

On July 25, 1974, the Society for Ancient Korean History (*Hanguk godaesa hakhoe*), a fringe organization headed by Ahn Ho-sang, drafted a mission statement asserting that the standardized textbooks restricted the scope of Korean history and forcefully and uncritically perpetuated Japanese colonialist historiography in historical education by portraying Dangun as a mythical figure. On the following day, the organization held

⁶ “Guksa gyogwaseo gukjeong euro” [History textbooks to undergo national standardization], *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, June 23, 1973, 7.

⁷ “Guksa gyogwaeo gukjeong e daehan gakgye uigyeon” [Various opinions regarding the standardization of history textbooks], *Donga Ilbo*, June 25, 1973, 5.

a “National History Textbook Evaluation Conference,” providing a forum to disseminate its views.⁸

As South Korea’s first minister of education under Syngman Rhee, Ahn Sang-ho had advocated the “one nation principle” (*ilmin juui*) functioning as the regime’s theory of governance and had been central to the founding of the Student National Defense Corps (*Hakdo hoguk dan*) accused of being modeled on the Hitler Youth. He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy—not history—in Germany. Having been a devoted follower of Daejonggyo since his youth, he was deeply interested in Dangun and Gojoseon.⁹ In fact, he later ascended to the position of “supreme leader” (*chongjeongyo*) of Daejonggyo in 1992.

In the standardized textbooks, the section on Gojoseon stated: “‘Dangun’ means ‘high priest’ and ‘Wanggeom’ means ‘head of state’. ‘Dangun Wanggeom’ was thus ‘patriarch’ [*jokjang*] ruling over both ‘church and state’.¹⁰ Pseudo-historians, represented by Ahn Ho-sang, expressed grave concern with this depiction. For them, Dangun was to be worshipped as the progenitor of the Korean people and “great thought” (*widaehan sasang*); they could not abide description of him as but a “patriarch” that ruled over an “undeveloped society” (*mibaldal ui sahoe*).

On October 8, 1975, Ahn Ho-sang and company formed the Korean Historical Discovery Council (*Guksa chatgi hyeobuihoe*), commencing an all-out attack on existing historical research. In the periodical *Jayu* (Freedom), the group published article after article criticizing historical academia, many of which amounted to personal attacks verging on the profane. Yet academics were perhaps most greatly taken aback when the group filed administrative litigation against the state over content in the

⁸ “‘Sinhwa’ nya ‘sasil’ inya” [‘Myth’ or ‘Fact?’], *Donga Ilbo*, July 27, 1974, 5.

⁹ Also translated as the “religion of Dangun,” this is a religion native to Korea proclaiming the divinity of Dangun, the putative father of the Korean race.

¹⁰ Mungyobu [Ministry of Education], (*Inmungye godeung hakgyo*) Guksa [National history (humanities high school)], (1974), 9.

standardized textbooks on September 29, 1978.¹¹

In the meantime, historians did not simply sit idly by. On November 23, 1978, ten representatives of academic historical organizations gathered together and signed a resolution demanding the Korean Historical Discovery Council cease its efforts to mislead the Korean people through unscientific arguments.¹²

They [the ten representatives] listed the following claims of the fringe organization Korean Historical Discovery Council: 1) Koreans created Chinese characters (*hanja*); 2) Confucius and Mencius are forebears of the Korean people; 3) the Baekje Kingdom ruled South-central China for 400 years; and 4) forged artifacts were planted in the Royal Tomb of King Muryeong in Gongju in order to distort Baekje history. These lamentable claims lacking in any common sense, they declared, are manifestations of the shameful backwardness of Korean culture.

Professor Kim Weon-yong, who excavated the Royal Tomb of King Muryeong, confessed the following: “Academia has been quiet so far because the provocations of these outsiders are simply groundless and absurd. But considering the extent to which *Jayu* has been misleading people all over the country, with financing provided by the Arts and Literature Promotion Fund, scholars can no longer just stand by silently; they have to lead.”¹³

At the time, the Ahn Ho-sang group was advancing a number of chauvinistic and nonsensical claims. Of particular note was the purported “fabrication” of the Royal Tomb of King Muryeong. Excavated in 1971,

¹¹ “Guksa gwangbok... isaeok haengjeong sosong” [National history and independence... unusual administrative litigation], *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, September 29, 1978, 7.

¹² “Sosong jegi e gyeonggo seongmyeong masseo” [Litigation against warning statement], *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, November 24, 1978, 5.

¹³ *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, November 24, 1978, 5.

this ancient Baekje burial mound was found in pristine condition, with a number of splendid artifacts such as gold coins and necklaces uncovered. In particular, the stone on which the name of the tomb's occupant was carved roused serious scholarly interest. But the size and scope of the tomb and the splendor of its artifacts were simply incommensurate to the "great empire" extending into contemporary China and Japan that Ahn Ho-sang and his associates imagined of Baekje. They thus adopted a nonsensical attitude, dismissing what was regarded as the greatest post-liberation Korean archaeological find as a fabrication.¹⁴

In addition to refuting ridiculous pseudo-historical arguments, historians also set out to present their positions and research findings to the general public. One example of this was a special series of articles published in *Gyeonghyang Sinmun* under the heading of "This is Ancient Korean History." This response alone, however, would be insufficient to resolve the issue.

On November 26-27, 1981, amid the early stages of the Fifth Republic under President Chun Doo-hwan, a public hearing regarding the standardized textbooks was held in the National Assembly Culture, Sports, and Information Committee (*Mungong wiweonhoe*). This was a hearing petitioned by Ahn Ho-sang and associates to debate the textbook content. The Pseudo-historical position was represented by the likes of Ahn Ho-sang (chairman of the Korean Historical Discovery Council), Park Si-in (professor of English Literature at Seoul National University), and Im Seung-guk (Society of Korean Political History [*Hanguk jeongsa hakhoe*]). Those representing the position of mainstream historians

¹⁴ "Jaeya saga reul ilso haryeo haji mara" [Do not try to eliminate fringe historians], *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, November 29, 1978, 5. The article's author, Mun Jeong-chan, was the current chairman of the Society for Ancient Korean History (*Hanguk godae sa hakhoe*), a representative pseudo-historical institution. He pointed out that the Gongju tomb was composed of a single stone chamber, whereas the tombs of a great empire such as Baekje should be composed of at least three or four. He thus deduced the tomb to be but a mischievous "prank" of Dang generals dressing up a prince's tomb.

included Kim Weon-yong (professor of Archaeology and Art History at Seoul National University), Kim Cheol-gun (professor of Korean History at Seoul National University), and Yi Gi-baek (professor of History at Sogang University).¹⁵

The arguments of the Ahn Ho-sang group were as follow:

- The textbooks neither acknowledge nor recover the more than 1,000 years of Gojoseon history lost under the Japanese.
- Dangun and Gija are real historical figures, and the territory over which they presided extended to contemporary Beijing.
- The Gojoseon capital, Wanggeom seong, was located in what is now Liaoning Province, China, and the Lelang Commandery (*Nangnang gun*) was located near Beijing.
- From the third to seventh century, Baekje territory stretched out from Beijing to Shanghai and along the Yellow Sea coast.
- The territory of unified Silla once extended to Beijing.
- The kingdoms of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla gave rise to Japanese culture.
- The Jurchens were a Korean tribe.

The historians responded by insisting that much had been accomplished in overcoming colonialist historiography and that the textbook content was faithful to fact. They also called into question the credibility or interpretation of most of the historical materials submitted by the petitioning group. Above all, they asserted the danger of the opposing side's historical views, strongly urging them to consider the historical lesson offered by Japan, where imperial historiography glorifying the

¹⁵ “Ddeugeoun guksa toron 7 sigan 30 bun” [Heated seven-and-a-half-hour history debate], *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, November 27, 1981, 3.

empire ultimately brought about its downfall.

Who is to say who came out on top at the end of the two-day public hearing? journalist present at the debate tended to judge the historians' arguments as more persuasive.

The public hearing today, in terms of the arguments from both sides, those addressing the petition, rather than those defending it, appeared better organized and more reasonable. This is probably due to the fact that the petitioning side was not composed of professional historians. Those on the first day who watched the hearing tended to agree that the petitioner's arguments were rather weak.¹⁶

The response of National Assembly Members to the hearing, however, was decidedly different. While overwhelmingly supporting the arguments of the "fringe historians," they adopted a consistently aggressive and antagonistic stance toward the established historians.

Being unfamiliar with the procedures of the National Assembly, Yi Gi-baek apologized for not knowing the name of the questioning member, Gang Gi-pil, and offered his response. In reply, Member Gang Gi-pil stated the following: "This is the National Assembly Hall. My name is inscribed here on my nameplate. *Perhaps your eyes are too poor to make out which member is speaking, but surely there is some corresponding etiquette for such a situation in academia.* Considering your reputation as a renowned professor, I won't say any more than that, but I hope you'll reflect on this".... Echoing this sentiment, Member Im Jae-jeong took his turn to address professors Kim Weon-yong and Yi Gi-baek. Speaking at length and adopting a sanctimonious tone, *he berated the professors for their objectionable attitude toward the*

¹⁶ *Gyeonghyang Simmun*, November 27, 1981, 3.

*National Assembly, reasoning that if they adopted such an attitude with respect to historical research then that, as well, would surely be objectionable. He urged them to correct this attitude.*¹⁷

The high-handedness of the National Assembly members thus subjected the historians to the harshest humiliation of their lives.

On February 25-26, 1987, as the Chun Doo-hwan era came to a close, the Academy of Korean Studies held a large conference on “Issues in Early Ancient Korean History.”¹⁸ With attacks against mainstream historians by “fringe historians” remaining heated, the Academy of Korean Studies opened this forum of debate in hopes of resolving the issue academically. On February 26, the second day of the conference, a general debate was held.

Today at the general debate there were fifteen scholars on stage and more than 800 people in the audience.... At this point, some among the audience approached the stage, yelling out, “Professor Yi plagiarizes Suematsu Yasukazu [末松保和] and Imanishi Ryu’s [今西龍] colonialist scholarship,” “If you cannot answer to this then get off the stage,” and, “Why have the organizers allowed this manner of scholar to speak?”... While the debate continued in the hope the impassioned audience members would calm down, some half the professors, including Professor Yi, had already left. Amid the disorder, some among the audience took hold of the microphone and continued their denunciations of the historians.¹⁹

¹⁷ Yun Jong-yeong, *Guksa gyogwaseo padong* [History textbook shockwaves] (Korea: Hyeon, 1999), 91. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ “Heomak haejin ‘yeoksa toron hyeonjang” [‘Historical debate forum’ turns ugly], *Donga Ilbo*, February 27, 1987, 6..

¹⁹ *Donga Ilbo*, February 27, 1987, 6. Emphasis added.

This was a disagreeable atmosphere hardly characteristic of an academic conference. Another testimony described the “chaos” as audience members “struggled to gain hold of the microphone, with those who could not standing up and screaming at the presenters, while another group forced its way onto the stage.”²⁰ In contrast with the intention to mediate between the historians and “fringe scholars,” the conference ultimately deteriorated into unbridled displays of rhetoric and force. This experience would become an important impetus precluding any further communication between the two sides thereafter.

III. Why did Pseudo-history Emerge?

How then did the historical consciousness and logic of these pseudo-historians claiming to articulate the truth of Korea’s glorious ancient history, which they themselves referred to as “nationalist history” and “fringe history,” emerge? Tracing the roots of this thinking, one comes to the colonialist historiography propagated under Japanese rule. The work of colonialist historians contributed to various theories legitimizing Japanese dominion over Korea, as exemplified in common ancestry theory (*ilseon dongjo ron*) asserting Japan and Korea’s shared ancestral ties, stagnation theory (*jeongcheseong non*) asserting Korean’s abortive historical development, and heteronomy theory (*tayulseong non*) asserting Korea’s subservient and outwardly oriented nature. The emergence of pseudo-history was closely related to this last theory, which proposed the geographically deterministic idea of “peninsular attributes” (*bando jeok seonggyeong non*).

The theory of heteronomy maintained that Korean history lacked subjectivity. The reasoning behind this supposition was the idea of “peninsular attributes,” which paid particular attention to the fact that

²⁰ Yun Jong-yeong, *Guksa gvogwaseo padong*, 159.

Korea was situated on a peninsula. Caught up in the confrontation between continental and maritime forces, it was argued, Korean history could not but unfold passively. Thus Japanese historians projected onto the distant past the experience of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, through which Japan gained control over Korea.

A cursory look at the histories of Rome or Spain, which each beget extensive empires from humble peninsular beginnings, easily refutes the argument that peninsular history is somehow inferior and heteronomous. While it is true that geographical elements are greatly influential on the course of history, they are by no means deterministic. The most effective way to argue against the theory of peninsular attributes, then, is to expose the irrationality of geographical determinism applied arbitrarily.²¹

In any case, the most prominent attempt to address this issue argues that Korean history is not that of a peninsula but a continent. In order to deny the “inferiority” of Korean history, in other words, some historians tirelessly labor to discover the continental, rather than peninsular, origins of “our history.” However, this argument fully accepts the mistaken Japanese colonialist assumption that “peninsular history” is somehow “inferior.”

Such attempts, then, internalize rather than overcome the theory of peninsular attributes, succumbing to the undeniable appeal of depicting a “great and powerful Fatherland” existing in early ancient history. This has ultimately resulted in a bizarre manner of chauvinism both shaped by and fiercely rejecting colonialist historical theory.

The characteristics of pseudo-history include the emphasis on the superiority of the Korean people, obsession with the vastness of ancient territory, and the inclination toward conspiracy theory. Despite the virtual absence of any documentary or archaeological evidence to support such

²¹ For a description of the response of Korean historians to the colonialist historiographical idea of peninsular attributes, see Yi Gi-baek, “Bando jeok seonggyeong non” [Theory of peninsular attributes], *Hanguk sa simin gangjwa* [Civic lectures in Korean history] 1 (1987).

historical views, pseudo-historians allege “concealment” or “removal” by the Japanese or “colonialist historians” ostensibly composing mainstream Korean historical academia. The same goes for any evidence refuting their claims; it has simply been “fabricated” by Japanese or “colonialist historians.” Under such conditions, there is simply no room for dialogue or academic verification.

The desire to confirm one’s identity as a member of a glorious, powerful nation—even one so remotely situated in early ancient history—permeates pseudo-history. In order to draw into relief the superiority of the Korean people, pseudo-historians demonstrate animosity and imperiousness toward foreign nations, dismiss the entirety of Korean historians as “colonialist,” and engage in popular agitation typically fascist in character.

Why did Ahn Ho-sang, who played a decisive role in the emergence of pseudo-history, initiate such activities in 1974? The answer to this question is related to the national standardization of history textbooks under the Park Chung Hee government. While Ahn Sang-ho was an outspoken critic of the standardized textbooks, he had no issue with “national standardization” itself. What he did take issue with was the particular “content” of these textbooks. The Park Chung Hee regime emphasized “education incorporating nationality,” producing textbooks focused on the “nation” and the “state.” But for one such as Ahn Sang-ho, who devoutly worshipped Dangun and embraced aspects of fascism, this was simply intolerable.

Furthermore, the national standardization of history textbooks allowed the state to monopolize the interpretation of history. The possibility for varied interpretations of history existing under the textbook authorization system thus ceased to exist, and a single government-approved “national history” became the formal interpretation. It appears that this homogenization of “national history” provided an impetus to those like Ahn Ho-sang possessing decidedly unique views of Korean history.

As history textbooks underwent national standardization, Ahn Ho-sang and his associates came to desire the history they believed in become “national history.” In order to fulfill this desire, Ahn mobilized the whole of his social capital and capabilities as former Minister of Education to attack and pressure historical academia. The emergence of pseudo-history was thus one reaction to, and side effect of, the national standardization of history textbooks in 1974.

IV. The Popularization and Perverse Acceptance of Pseudo-history

Following a decades-long large-scale propaganda campaign, pseudo-history achieved popular acceptance. Take the image of “King Chiyou” (*Chiu cheonwong*) used as the emblem of the “red devils,” official cheering squad for the national soccer team. This is not unrelated to the influence of the *Hwandan gogi*, the forged text produced by pseudo-historians. Indeed, with pseudo-historical content found in the likes of novels, manga (*manhwa*), and television dramas, and with certain astronomers introducing the astronomical records of forged texts as “fact” on television and in books, the shadow of pseudo-history is apparent in every corner of Korean society.²² Recently, pseudo-history has served to propagate certain new religions, some of which manage cable television stations broadcasting such content as if it were common sense.²³

²² Popular novels like Yi U-hyeok’s *Chiu cheonwang gi* (Flag of King Chiyou) and Kim Jin-myeong’s *Geulja jeonjaeng* (War of letters) as well as manga (*manhwa*) like Kim San-ho’s *Daejyusin jeguksa* (Imperial history of great Joseon) and Yi Hyeon-se’s *Cheongug ui sinhwa* (Myth of Heaven) are imbued with pseudo-historical content. Television dramas like *Yeon Gaesomun* (SBS 2006-07) and *Taewong sasingi* (The legend; MBC 2007) both directly and indirectly reflect the pseudo-historical worldview. In the field of astronomy, director of the Korean Astronomy and Space Science Institute Park Seok-jae repeatedly defended texts such as the *Hwandan gogi* and *Cheonbugyeong* on the 2012 EBS program *Yeoksa teukgang* (Special history lecture).

²³ Looking at the program listing for SBT, the *Jeungsando* religion cable channel, programs like

The seriousness of the problem is perhaps most clear when one considers the traces of pseudo-history now detectable even in presidential speeches. President Park Geun-hye caused quite a stir when she referenced content from the *Hwandan gogi* in her speech commemorating National Liberation Day (*Gwangbokjeol*) in 2013.²⁴ The quotation, “The nation is as body and history as spirit,” is a line in the *Hwandan gogi* (1979) attributed to late Goryeo Dynasty period scholar Yi Am. But these are actually words lifted from independence activist Park Eun-sik’s *Hanguk tongsa* (Painful history of Korea; 1915). President Park repeated the quotation at a closed meeting of top-level Bluehouse secretaries on October 13, 2015.²⁵

When considering the manner in which the public has embraced pseudo-history, one particularly peculiar point becomes apparent. Despite the clear fascist basis for pseudo-historical principles and arguments, they are unreservedly embraced by conservatives and progressive alike.²⁶

“Hwandan gogi Book Concert” and “Reciting the Hwandan gogi” constitute the majority of programming. The lecturer featured in these oft-repeated televised *Hwandan gogi* recitations is Ahn Gyeong-jeon Jongdosa, the *Jeungsando* leader. In 2012, Sangsaeng Publishing (*Sangsaeng chulpan*) published his translated and annotated version of the *Hwandan gogi*, which has become a *Jeungsando* holy text.

²⁴ “Gwangbokjeol chuksa e wiseo inyong han daetongnyeong” [The president who cited a forged text in a National Liberation Day commemorative speech], *Midieo oneul* [Media today], August 21, 2013.

²⁵ “Bak geunhye daetongnyeong, 5 ja hoedong seo minsaeng bangjeom” [President Park Geun-hye, national livelihood emphasis at five-member meeting], *Metuero* [Metro], October 23, 2015.

²⁶ Looking at the media, for example, progressive outlets such as *Hangyeore Sinmun*, *Sisain*, and *Pressian* have each featured articles uncritically accepting the arguments of pseudo-historians. “‘Chiu cheonwang’ gwa ‘guyekjil la neun sanguk sagi’” [King Chiyou and the nauseating Chronicle of the Three States], *Hangyeore Sinmun*, October 5, 2005; “Goguryeo ui pyeongyang, daeryug e isseonna” [Did Goguryeo Pyeongyang lie on the continent?], *Sisain* 391 (March 18, 2015); “Singmin sagwan geudaero ddaragan dongbuga yeoksa jido” [Northeast Asia map precisely adheres to colonialist historiography], *Pressian*, April 2, 2015. “Progressives” embracing pseudo-history, including the likes of teachers, labor activists, literary figures, politicians, and scholars, exist across diverse professional fields too numerous to list. The character of pseudo-history in Korea is such that it transcends the political spectrum, embraced by left and right as well as conservative and progressive alike.

This curious situation is attributable to pseudo-history's outward presentation as "nationalist" and "anti-colonialist." Denouncing the historical mainstream as "pro-Japanese," thus implying one's own antithetical position in this regard, it is but a simple matter to draw sympathy from a Korean public so conscious of the urgent need to resolve the colonial collaborative legacy. This situation is thus also indicative of the vulnerability of Korean society to chauvinism.

Currently, popular history writer Yi Deok-il is spearheading the propagation of pseudo-history. Over the years he has published various books, including *Gojoseon eun daeryug ui jibaeja yeottda* (Gojoseon: Continental ruler),²⁷ *Uri an ui singmin sagwan* (The colonialist historiography within us),²⁸ and *Maegug ui yeoksahak, eodi ggaji wanna* (History betraying the nation: How far has it come?).²⁹ He also spreads the ideas of pseudo-history as an active public speaker. The content of his ideas is largely the same as that propagated by Ahn Ho-sang beginning in the 1970s; there has been little change in pseudo-history over the years. However, the extent of Yi Deok-il's public influence is now perhaps something that cannot be overlooked.

Recently, Yi Deok-il was critical of the state-owned Northeast Asia History Foundation's East Asia mapping project. While he cited various issues, questioning the depiction of Dokdo, for instance, he was mainly concerned with the locations of the Gojoseon capital and the Lelang Commandery erected following Gojoseon's collapse, each of which had been located at what is now Pyongyang.

On April 17, 2015, the National Assembly summoned Yi Deok-il and Im Gi-hwan (Seoul National University, Department of History), who had overseen the Northeast Asia mapping project, for questioning at

²⁷ Korea: Wisdom House, 2006.

²⁸ Korea: Mangweondong, 2014.

²⁹ Korea: Mangweondong, 2015.

a meeting considering “Northeast Asian History Distortion Countermeasures.” The atmosphere of the meeting was reminiscent of the public hearing held by the National Assembly Culture, Sports, and Information Committee in 1981. Whether part of the ruling party or the opposition, National Assembly members adopted a favorable attitude toward the pseudo-historical claims of Yi Deok-il. Newspaper, broadcasting, and other media representatives, as well, uncritically reproduced Yi Deok-il’s one-sided and provocative argument that the Northeast Asia mapping project faithfully reflected the distorted historical claims of China and Japan.³⁰

As a result, the Northeast Asia mapping project, which had involved the efforts of dozens of historians and cost 4.7 billion won of taxpayer money over a period of eight years, was thrown into crisis: incorporate a number of pseudo-historical claims or be terminated. If the former does indeed occur, Korea will become an international laughingstock and its reputation for academic standards will be greatly damaged.

Amid its campaign for the national standardization of history textbooks, the ruling party asserted that ninety percent of Korean historians were “leftists.”³¹ As well, members of the New Right, an organization closely affiliated with the Park government, declared history in Korea to be excessively nationalist. Meanwhile, Yi Deok-il and other

³⁰ See “Segeum euro yeoksa yeongu ‘dokdo neun ilbon ddang?’ jido, iraeseoya...” [Mapping project paid for by tax dollars, “Dokdo a Japanese territory”? How can this be...], *Meoni tudei* [Money Today], September 7, 2015; “‘Hanbando e hansagun’ waegok doen godae sa jaryo mi uihoe e bonaetda” [‘Four Han Commanderies on Korean Peninsula,’ textbook distorting ancient history sent to U.S. Congress], *Jungang Ilbo*, October 5, 2015; etc. There were a striking number of media reports. What deserves close attention is the fact that, in general, such coverage closely followed the publication of Yi Deok-il’s *Maegug ui yeoksa hak, eodi ggaji wanna* (History betraying the nation: How far has it come?) (August 15, 2015). It looks as if National Assembly members and the media have aligned with Yi Deok-il’s marketing strategy to sell more books by stirring up the public through irresponsible arguments.

³¹ “Gim museong ‘guksa hakja deul 90% ga jwapa ro jeonhwan’” [Kim Mu-seong, ‘Ninety percent of Korean historians now on the left’], *Gyeonghyang Sinmun*, October 17, 2015.

pseudo-historians continued to use the label “traitorous colonialist scholarship” with regard to Korean historians.³² Synthesizing the claims of these conservative groups yields a rather baffling description of Korean historical scholarship: it is “pro-Japanese” but also “ultra-nationalist,” and some how still “leftist.” Needless to say, such allegations merely amount to ridiculous slander. What is more worth paying attention to is the extremeness and irrationality of dismissing the entirety of Korean historians as leftists or pro-Japanese colonialist historians in order to establish one’s own biased historical views as “national history.”

Meanwhile, there are also those concerned that the government-promoted nationally standardized textbooks’ treatment of modern history justifies or glorifies “pro-Japanese” and “dictatorship.” In order to address such criticism, it is likely that the government will strengthen the nationalist perspective in the ancient history sections. In fact, a plan to expand content in the textbooks pertaining to ancient history and the Goguryeo Dynasty has already been announced.³³

As the textbook composition process continues, it is not so implausible that the National Assembly or high-level bureaucrats, amicable to pseudo-history as they are, will attempt to involve pseudo-historians or directly ensure the content reflect unverified pseudo-historical claims. If such a scenario does indeed unfold, the nationally standardized Korean history textbooks will come to exhibit a chimerical makeup, with the parts on ancient and modern history respectively reflecting utterly different forms of historical fascism.

³² In his book, *Maegug ui yeoksa hak*, Yi Deok-il writes, “Beyond colonialist historiography, this [Korean historiography] is historiography betraying the nation” (6). This is not an expression used sparingly in the book. Through it’s 400 or so pages, Korean historical scholarship is repeatedly referred to as “colonialist historiography” and “historiography betraying the nation.”

³³ “Sidong geon gyogwaseo pyeonchan jageop... godae sa ganghwa ro yeoksa waegok daeung” [Textbook compilation underway... strengthening of ancient history reaction to historical distortion], *Yeonhap News*, November 3, 2015.

Currently, Korean historical scholarship is in crisis, under siege on two fronts from “wrongful state interference” and “pseudo-historical attacks.” The arduous task that lies before historians, then, will consist of balancing against and breaking this twofold siege.

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