Popular Discourses on Korean Culture:
From the Late 1980s to the Present

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Abstract

In this paper, the general trends and distinct features of "popular discourses on Korean culture" are analyzed. While the content and perspectives of the discourses on Korean culture vary greatly, they can be classified into the following types: the customs and manners thesis of Yi Gyu-tae; folkloric discourses that focus on searching for an "archetype" or the "depths" of Korean culture; cross-cultural discourses that compare Korean culture mainly with Japanese culture; and "interdisciplinary" discourses produced by members of the International Association for Korean Studies. As for analytical and methodological features, most of the works on Korean culture in this genre suffer more or less from cultural determinism and a lack of methodology. Finally, the cultural/political dynamics of the discourses on Korean cultural phenomenon, and the conditions for producing/consuming discourses on Korean culture and their "possibilities" are discussed as well.

Keywords: discourses on Korean culture, Yi Gyu-tae, Kim Yeol-gyu, Ju Gang-hyeon, Kim Yong-un, Ji Myeong-gwan, interdisciplinary discourses on Korean culture, Choe Jun-sik, cultural determinism

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Introduction

For any group of people, the task of defining oneself in cultural terms and configuring one's identity is a critical one. In such a process in Korea, the following questions are frequently raised: "What are the distinctive features of Korean culture?" "What is the social character of Korean people?" "How can we define Korean culture?" Various answers to these questions have been sought. Some are based on "serious" research using strict analytical frameworks and methodologies with the academic circle as the intended audience. Others may, with relatively loose methodologies, respond to the curiosity of general readers.

In this paper, I define the latter form of investigation as "popular discourses on Korean culture" (abbreviated as "discourses on Korean culture" hereafter) and discuss their implications in the search for Korean cultural identity. I focus on endeavors to characterize Korean culture through rather systematized discourses and theses, in other words discourses on Korean culture as texts.[1] Presupposing that boundaries between the "popular" and the "academic" may be blurred, this paper takes the readership, and not the authorship, as the primary standard of popularity.

Discourses on Korean Culture: Composition and Trends

In this section, discourses on Korean culture are analyzed to see whether general trends and distinct features can be found in the pursuit of the identity of Korean people and culture. For this, books which were published since the late 1980s and rather successful in attaining public attention and popularity are reviewed. Of course,

1. In a different paper (Kweon 1998), I attempted textual analysis of various and more fragmentary cultural phenomena including contents of mass media and consumer goods in order to figure out general trends in discourses on Korean culture since the late 1980s.

similar books were written before this time period, but they were rather intermittent products by specific authors. As will be further discussed in the concluding section, it was only in the late 1980s when producing and consuming discourses on Korean culture as a "genre" became a prominent phenomenon. Another reason why I confine this paper to a specific time period is because the production/consumption of discourses on Korean culture, as part of the more universal search for self identity, is a very significant phenomenon in and of itself, which can be helpful to the understanding of the general cultural dynamics of the time period. The contents and perspectives of the discourses on Korean culture that were circulated during the past decade or so vary greatly, but are classified below.

Customs and Manners Thesis: Yi Gyu-tae and Discourses on Korean Culture

One of the authors who should be mentioned in discussing popular writings about Korean culture is Yi Gyu-tae. Yi occupies a unique position in discourses on Korean culture. More than anything else, he is the author who has written the most number of books with "Korean people," "Korean culture," or "Korean Studies" in the title. Few people will be able to break his record. Admittedly, Yi Gyu-tae's books are not related to the phenomenon reflective of a specific period mentioned above, since a large number of them were written before the late 1980s. Nevertheless, the simple quantity and scope (and influence) of his writings make it impossible to exclude him from this review. The sheer number of his books exceeds far more than one hundred.

At major bookstores in Seoul, Yi Gyu-tae's books are not displayed in sections on "Korean People" or "Korean Culture," but can be found in the "Poems and Essays" corner. Among his works, those related to discourses on Korean culture can be classified into several categories. First, there is the Yi Gyu-tae Corner series, which are collections of essays written as a regular column by the same name in the Chosun Ilbo. Starting with Korean Studies of Tears, the first volume, to Korean Studies of "Rice Cake Money" (bribe money), the 22nd volume of the series, a total of 22 editions have been published thus far. Themes covered in the series include such diverse topics as navels, self-confidence (baejjang), greed (yoksim), laughter, lips, elation (sinbaram), arirang, fighting, hangover-curing soup (haejangguk), unrefined rice wine (makgeolli), money, self-respect, blame (tat), brown seaweed soup, cooked rice, gimchi, songs, hometowns, bean paste, and so forth. The first volume was published in 1983, and the 22nd one contains essays that appeared between 1995 and 1996.

The second category may be called the "consciousness structure" series. This series contains The Consciousness Structure of the Korean People in four volumes, The Consciousness Structure of Westerners, The Consciousness Structure of Classical Scholars (seonbi), The Consciousness Structure of the Common People, The Consciousness Structure of Korean Women, and The Consciousness Structure of Asians. On the back covers of these books, these nine books are presented together as "must-have books for Koreans." This paper mainly reviews books belonging to this category.

The last category is composed of various books, which have much more diverse titles and do not belong to either the Yi Gyu-tae Corner or the Consciousness Structure series. Titles such as Habits of the Korean People, Essays in Korean Studies, Affective Structure of the Korean People, Bragging Koreans, What Makes Us Korean, Life Structure of the Korean People,[2] and What Makes the Korean People Poor are found among books published before 2000. After the year 2000, Yi added more including The Dinner Table Culture of the Korean People, The Home Culture of the Korean People, The Spiritual Culture of the Korean People, The Folk Culture of the Korean People, The Consciousness Structure of the Korean People for High School Students, and The Hen Has to Sing for a Household to Prosper.

Yi Gyu-tae's work is characterized as the "customs and manners

2. Individual titles of this three-volume book are *Stories about Korean Clothing, Stories about Korean Food*, and *Stories about Korean Housing*, respectively. As with other books, we see that Yi's use of such concepts as "structure" is quite misleading.

thesis" on Korean culture. Even though a large number of Yi's works have academic sounding titles like "Korean studies" or "consciousness structure," his books are no more than enumerations of manners, customs, episodes, and practices of miscellaneous kinds and lack any systematic analysis. Yi seems to have tried a relatively analytical approach in the Consciousness Structure series, but these works also remain simple collections of customs and episodes with no or insufficient explanation of why those customs should be examined through pertinent "consciousness structures." Yi's works fall on the extreme popular side in the polarization between the academic and the popular, and, in that sense, best illustrate the epistemological and methodological problems of the discourses on Korean culture. They also explain why it is hard to find "Yi Gyu-tae's perspective" on Korean culture despite the vast number of volumes he has written on Korean people and culture. Whatever "contribution" he has made to the understanding of Korean culture lies not in providing organized frameworks but in his encyclopedic knowledge and recording of Korean folklore.

Folkloric Discourses on Korean Culture: Search for an "Archetype" or "Depths" of Korean Culture

By folkloric discourses, I refer to books which were written by folklorists for ordinary readers and have in common the search for "archetypes," "codes," "depths," or "roots" in their explanation of Korean culture. Riddles of Korean Culture by Ju Gang-hyeon and Fifteen Codes of Korean Culture by Kim Yeol-gyu are two representative cases from recent years. As may be expected, in folkloric discourses on Korean culture, "culture" refers either to "folklore" or "customs." In this sense, these books may belong to the same categories as Yi Gyu-tae's books. However, while the customs and manners presented by the journalist Yi Gyu-tae are mostly piecemeal and episodic with little interpretation and explanation, folkloric discourses on Korean culture try to interpret the presented data and apply analytical imagination. In fact, it is the discipline of folklore that has most consistently

produced theses on Korean culture for general readers.

Then, how can we characterize folkloric discourses on Korean culture? I find two general trends, namely "reflexive discourses," and "sintoburi (body-earth-not-two) discourses" on Korean culture. The former refers to the fact that these discourses start from negative evaluation of and "reflection" on the "present reality." The latter refers to discourses in which our "native" culture is asserted as a remedy to the "present (problematic) reality." Ju Gang-hyeon, for instance, clarifies in the introductory part of his book mentioned above why he wrote about the "indigenous and folkloric" cultural phenomena of Korea: he wanted to write a "thesis on our culture" for the "generation born without umbilical cords." He adds that it is all the more crucial in the age of accelerated intercultural contact to understand Korea's native culture which has been negated unjustifiably. To borrow his words, "For the last century, Koreans have been excessively daunted by the west wind. How can we properly measure our own culture using other people's standards? Now it is time to establish 'a sintoburi thesis on culture' by the east wind, a wind not just eastern but which has been transmitted tenaciously inside our nation" (Ju 1996, 7).[3] Similarly, Kim Yeol-gyu also introduces his book as containing longings for "things forgotten, shadowed, or

3. Similar assertions are repeated in *Our Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (Ju Gang-hyeon 1999) by the same author, which the publisher introduced as a book of cultural critique that critically examines our culture in the past hundred years and searches for the direction for our culture in the twenty-first century. The author argues that a hundred years of our culture has been a process in which the guest named imperialism has taken the host's seat and asserts that we should call up the east wind against the west wind. He adds that the first contact with western civilization at the end of the Joseon era ended not in sweet romance but rape. In particular, the homogenization policy of Japanese colonialism and the introduction of exclusive Christianity drastically wiped out the national culture including folk beliefs and plays. The author maintains that in order for Korean culture to have independence and autonomy, Koreans have to inherit the moral of *beopgo changsin* (retrospect the old, create the new), and cites canned *sikhye* (a sweet drink made from fermented rice), air-bubble washing machines which are based on traditional living science, earthen houses, and charcoal textiles as concrete examples.

neglected because of familiarity." He states that studies of Korean culture have leaned so far toward "things grand and famous," but he instead tried to look for "things forgotten but precious" in every nook and cranny of our lives. Throughout his book, this kind of longing and nostalgia for "forgotten but precious things" is contrasted to lamentations over the sterile and destructive "present." In other words, "reflexive" and "sintoburi" discourses on Korean culture are the two sides of the same coin.

Discourses like these might induce reflections from readers on "distorted" modernity, and provide the basis for resisting forces of cultural homogenization which gather strength daily. What is problematic, however, are the "archetypes" and "depths" of Korean culture which are proposed as cures for these "modern evils." They are much too distant and mystical to use as practical guidelines. Let's take the example of "The Village Code" from Fifteen Cultural Codes of Korea. Here, the author begins his text by deploring the "distressing" situation of urban and rural space in contemporary Korea. He laments that "urban planning is nothing but chopping by butchers and executioners, and construction activities are just putting make-up on waste—and that this kind of situation makes today's space a fundamental curse on modern people." Contrary to this devastation, the "archetypal" space of the Korean people described by him is no less than a paradise.

> The mountain behind with its ample breast wide open, and the usil[4] standing in front with its long, long arms spread to form a high ridge. With these, a village becomes a big nest or roost. The breast of our mother, the shape of her with arms open to embrace us—that's it. That is perfect cohesion, protection, and anchoring of our being. Thus, once inside the village entrance, each of us becomes an egg nestling in the mother hen's breast. . . . Narrow alleys circle round house by house, low mud walls and hedges leave no room for the concept of exclusive private space to enter. Except for the minimum space of the inner house and the women's quarters, there is no room for closeness and exclusion (Kim Yeol-gyu 1997, 140-141).

4. *Usil* refers to a village fence. It is usually made of stones or clay near the village entrance, or sometimes trees are planted surrounding a village. It protects a village from wind or invaders, and also performs Chinese geomantic functions.

The political implications and ahistorical nature of the discourses of nostalgia for so-called "traditional communities" have been examined by many scholars since Raymond Williams (Williams 1973; Stewart 1988). The above quotation rasises several crucial questions: The author uses the word "we" or "us" repeatedly, but who is included in this "we"? For some of "us" who are homogenized by the author, isn't the village a space of hard labor, oppression and discrimination? After all, whose interpretation is this? Is it that of the villagers who lived their lives in the "archetypical space," or the author? Furthermore, what practical meanings can we, who have to at any rate live in the "present," find in this type of discourse? The author's interpretation that the current distortion may be a "fundamental curse" on modern people and that the "favorable treatment of women", which is seen in the existence of the inner house and rooms for women, may derive from the "cultural instinct of men," sounds too void to be a solution provided by a "reflexive" discourse on Korean culture. (Simply put, the existence of inner houses and rooms is closely related to patriarchal restriction of women's space.) In addition, discussing the "cultural codes of Korea" or the "archetypes of Korean culture" based on this kind of interpretation does not seem to contribute much to our understanding because it provides a "mystical" explanation which nobody can prove or disprove.

Cross-Cultural Discourses on Korean Culture: Comparison between Korean and Japanese Cultures

Exploration of self-identity often takes the form of comparison with an Other. Because of familiarity, it is not easy to grasp the distinct aspects of one's own culture. When compared and contrasted to an Other, characteristics of the self become more salient. In fact, interest

in one's cultural identity often begins through encountering the Other and becomes even intensified with increased cultural contact. Thus, one of the most common and effective forms that discourses on culture take is a cross-cultural perspective.

Frequently, "the West," "Japan," or "China" have been the important "Other" to which Korean culture was compared in clarifying its characteristics. Among the three, Japan is by far the most significant Other in the genre of discourses on Korean culture. This is because of the historical, political, economic, and cultural importance of Japan for Korea, and, to some extent, the influence of "discourses on Japanese culture" in Japanese society. While defining oneself culturally is common to most groups, the production and consumption of "discourses on Japanese culture" in postwar Japanese society has been on such a massive scale and with unusual fever.[5] This in itself has been a big cultural phenomenon. In the case of the "discourses on Japanese culture," a large number of academics as well as popular writers have participated in its production, and books and theses by foreigners as well as Japanese have contributed greatly.

Authors who have written about Korean culture based on Korea-Japan comparisons vary from journalists to those in the cultural industry or business, or regular company employees. Among them, those who are the most influential and write rather systematic theses have one thing in common: they have had direct experiences with Japanese culture for an extended period of time and have participated in the production of "discourses on Japanese culture." To cite a few examples, Kim Yong-un, Yi Eo-ryeong, and Ji Myeon-gwan come to the fore. Yi Eo-ryeong's The Miniaturizing Tendency of the Japanese, for instance, is a very important book in the genre of discourses on Japanese culture, and Kim Yong-un had published first in Japan Korea-Japan cultural comparisons based on his "archetypal historical view." Ji Myeon-gwan's case is no different. In other words, these

5. For a discussion of the discourses on Japanese culture phenomenon, see Yi Suk-jong (1992) and Han Kyung-Koo (1994) for concise references. For more detailed discussion by Japanese authors, see Aoki Tamotsu (1997), Minami Hiroshi (1999), and Befu Harumi (1987, 2000).

authors first participated in writing discourses on Japanese culture, and then applied conceptual and methodological insights acquired in the process to Korean culture or to Korea-Japan comparisons.

In cross-cultural discourses on Korean culture, views of culture as "difference" are very pronounced. Korean culture is compared with and contrasted to Japanese culture and differences are what are emphasized. The differences are then compressed into a few select concepts and features (psychological, ethical, aesthetic, or behavioral features) which are thought to represent the cultural distinctiveness of both countries. (These kinds of writing strategies may have been influenced by discourses on Japanese culture.) To give a few concrete examples, the prominent traits of Korean culture, in contrast to Japanese culture, pointed out by Yi Eo-ryeong, Ji Myeong-gwan, and Kim Yong-un are as follows: the "warrior (mu) culture" of Japan vs. the "literary (mun) culture" of Korea (Kim Yong-un contrasts "sword culture" to "pen culture," and Ji Myeon-gwan talks of "yoroi, the Japanese armor" and "jeogori, the Korean traditional jacket"); the emphasis on loyalty (chung) in Japanese culture vs. the emphasis on filial duty (hyo) in Korean culture; the tight culture of Japan vs. the loose culture of Korea; aesthetic character vs. ethical character; duality vs. straightforwardness; situational ethics vs. universal values; realistic attitudes vs. idealistic attitudes; and so forth, of the Japanese and the Koreans, respectively.

However, this emphasis on "differences" presupposes the inner homogeneity of both Korean and Japanese culture.[6] Otherwise, it would be impossible to compare the two cultures as a whole. Korean and Japanese cultures are set up as homogeneous units, and compressed into a few simplified cultural principles. But, any culture includes historical, regional, class, and gender variation and diversity that can hardly be condensed into a unitary principle. Furthermore, specific cultural rules (principle of filial piety, for instance) are far

6. Of course, all three authors admit some basic similarities between Korean and Japanese cultures, but the similarities are presented as a precondition for discussing main differences.

from existing in only one country (Korean culture, in this case).

On the other hand, in the "holistic" cultural theses presented by these authors, readers may feel the "attractiveness" and "allurement" which Aoki attributes to a holistic approach to culture (Aoki 1997, 46-47). According to Aoki, a holistic approach, differing from a "positivist measurement" method which aims at getting at the "truth" by accumulating individual facts, is based on "imagination" about the suggested data, and this provides a distinctive "attractiveness" and "allurement" for readers. This may be in fact the core of the "popularity" that "popular" cultural discourses enjoy. If the goal of discourses on Korean culture lies in "drawing a general picture of Korean culture," authors of "cross-cultural discourses on Korean culture" seem to provide a relatively "complete" and "attractive" picture. Of course, this evaluation is irrelevant by "professional" academic standards. For example, how many cultural differences between Korea and Japan are apparently explained by the contrast between "sword culture" and "pen culture," and how "essential" these differences seem! In spite of all this, however, the overly simplistic and ahistorical explanations that cross-cultural discourses end up using, are too frequently exposed. For instance, discussing the features of the "warrior culture" of Japan, Ji Myeon-gwan asserts that "ijime" (ostracism of an individual in Japan, especially at school), which has become a big social problem in Japan recently, does not exist in Korea: "People do not do such things as everybody flattering a strong person and tormenting just one" (Ji Myeong-gwan 1995, 67). Looking at the "wangtta" (the Korean version of ijeme) problem that emerged in Korea during the past several years, one wonders whether Korean culture has become a "warrior culture" too then, according to this flawed logic.

"Interdisciplinary" Discourses on Korean Culture: International Association for Korean Studies

One noteworthy movement related to discourses on Korean culture in recent years is the publication of the Series on Korean Culture by Sakyejul Publishing Company. These books are written by members of the International Association for Korean Studies (Gukje Hanguk Hakhoe) led by Choe Jun-sik and Choe Bong-yong. Through this series, the following books have been published to date: The Face of the Korean (1994), Confucian Culture of the Joseon Dynasty (1997), The Nature of Korean Culture (1997), Do Koreans Have a Culture? (1997), Abuse, Its Aesthetics of Catharsis (1997), Reading Korean Religion through Culture (1998), Korean Culture and Korean People (1998), Hahoe Masks and the Aesthetics of the Hahoe Mask Dance (1999), Food War, Culture War (2000), Who Says Koreans Have No Culture (2000), and so on.

It was after 1997 that books of this series were published in large quantities. In 1997, four books came out every two or three months, and the rest came out after 1998. The Series on Korean Culture was intended to "present research by members of the International Association for Korean Studies" and other scholars who studied Korean people and culture through interdisciplinary and cross-cultural methods," according to the books published. I attend to the publication dates of these books because of the "opportuneness" of the series. In other words, entering the 1990s, when the world system proceeded in full scale, movements to "search for national cultural identity" expanded all the more. It was the publishing industry that led as well as reflected the trend.[7] Since the middle of 1990s, major publishers in Korea have participated in the heated "search for native things," and the Series on Korean Culture is considered one of these projects. It was the "genres" of "(Korean) history books for the educated readers" and "books about Korean cultural heritage" that got the most attention at that time. In comparison, the Series on Korean Culture appears distinctive in that it aimed at providing more systematic interpretations and discussions about Korean cultural identity through a holistic approach. It was in the 1990s when conditions were ripe for full-fledged discourses on Korean culture, and in that

7. For more discussion of the search for native things by the Korean publishing sector in the wake of increased globalization, see Kweon Sug-In (1998), which provides some details.

sense, this kind of movement is significant.

Korean Culture and Korean People, the first book of this series, demonstrates most clearly the intentions and goals of the International Association for Korean Studies and the Series on Korean Culture. In the beginning of the book, Choe Jun-sik, the practical leader of the group, asserts that approaches to Korean culture based on individual disciplines, so far, have not been able to see the forest for the trees and that interdisciplinary approaches are indispensable in order to see the bigger picture. He introduces the above book as "an effort to see Korean culture holistically" through such interdisciplinary approaches.

However, the studies in this book vary too much in their analytical perspectives and levels and lack the coherence needed to be grouped into a single volume. One example is "The Culture of Play and the Social Character of Koreans," in which vulgar "flower cards" (hwatu) is discussed by Choe Bong-yeong whose field of specialization is Confucianism of the Joseon dynasty. In this article, Choe sees the rules of "flower cards" as reflective of the dominant social character of the times. In other words, as Korean society transformed from an agrarian to an industrial society, the social character also changed from that of "laws and rules" to one of "expediency" and "trickery." According to Choe, the historical changes in the rules of "flower cards" playing are none other than the reflection of these changes in social character. However, what the author suggests as to the precise nature of the historical change from an agrarian to an industrial society is mostly at the level of common knowledge. As a result, besides the simple fact that he tried to relate this macro-transformation to play, this study adds little to the understanding and interpretation of Korean culture.

The rest of the book includes articles that are either enumerations of fragmented, "folk-historical" facts, mere observations and random thoughts about current cultural situations, skewed toward "enlightening" reflection, or basic summaries of specific articles by well-known scholars. All of these are mixed together, making it hard for them to constitute a coherent volume. In terms of basic writing

styles, as well, a severe imbalance is noticeable. Some sections are descriptions of observations or essays while others use a more "academic" format with citations and references. It is as if this book which maintains the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches ends up ironically illustrating the difficulty of such an approach. The lack of consistency shown in this particular book is in fact common to the Series on Korean Culture as a whole, and sometimes they fall short of agreement and consistency even on the most basic concepts. For instance, even though "an interdisciplinary rather than an enumerating approach to Korean culture" is their stated ultimate goal, they first have to make clearer their definition of "culture" and come to a basic agreement on utilizing other key concepts. In addition, what is meant by an interdisciplinary approach as well as methodology should be clarified and more carefully considered.

It should be added that "folkloristic" and "customs and manners" approaches have played a major role until recently in discourses on Korean culture, and the move by the International Association for Korean Studies may be considered as the beginning of the participation of various disciplines in this genre. In some sense, it is rather strange that the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences has been so meager in producing discourses on Korean culture when Korean culture is one of their main subjects of study. We should wait and see whether this move by the International Association for Korean Studies leads to increased participation from these "academic" fields.[8]

8. I might add one more trend of recent discourses on Korean culture that may be called enlightening discourses on Korean culture or degraded Korean culture thesis. This trend is a kind of *sintoburi* thesis on culture in that it is based on the positive evaluation and celebration of traditional, native Korean culture and asserts that this positive culture has been lost, deteriorated, or degraded. This has caused various problems, the solution of which lies in properly learning about our original culture and reviving it in today's context, the argument continues. When this is done, true globalization is allegedly possible. To cite a few examples, *What Remains for the Korean* and *The Traditional Culture of Korea in the Twenty-First Century* by Hong Il-sik and *Do Koreans Have Their Own Value System?* by Hong Sa-jung were quite influential enlightening discourses in the 1990s. *Criti-*

Analytical Features of Discourses on Korean Culture: Cultural Determinism and the Methodology of "No Methodology"

Judged by the criteria of "professional" academic writing, the works on Korean culture reviewed above suffer more or less from cultural determinism and a lack of methodology. Cultural determinism poses "culture" as the final explanation of a phenomenon, but this "culture" is a decontextualized, ahistoricized given from the beginning. For this reason, such expressions as cultural "archetype," "essence," "depth," or "code" are frequently used. However, explanations through an essentialized culture like this is no more than a form of circular reasoning, and end up explaining nothing. Furthermore, they make the error of reducing to ahistorical culture things that could and should be explained historically, politically, or economically.

The best example of this kind of cultural determinism is the discourse on Korean culture by Yi Gyu-tae. In the beginning of The Consciousness Structure of Koreans, for instance, Yi defines "the consciousness structure of Koreans" as "ways of thinking which dominate and determine every behavior and feature of Koreans who are different from foreigners." In the first volume alone, the following various consciousness structures are suggested: inferiority, hierarchy, upward, group, cover-up, integration, abstinence, family, decency, introversion, and public consciousnesses. These "consciousness structures" are offered as explanations for the diverse customs and episodes the author reviews.

For instance, Yi explains the words "ttungi," which means (according to the author) a petty thief and originated from the word

cisms on Korea and Korean People Written with Readiness for Death by Beating, which was much discussed because it was written by a Japanese, and *Do Koreans Have Culture?* by Choe Jun-sik can also be added to the list. However, since the concept of culture refers largely to being cultured and morals in these books, they are very different from the search for Korean cultural identity examined in this article.

"dongi" (eastern barbarians seen from the perspective of China), and "gorinnae" (stink), which (again according to the author) originated from "goryeochwi" (bad smell of the Goryeo people), as follows: "These two words are disgraceful expressions humiliating our nation and should be discarded. However, far from discarding them, we have accommodated them with care and incorporated them into our own vocabulary. This is nothing but an outcome of the common consciousness structure of the Korean people to shun and loathe themselves" (Yi 1983, 16, emphasis mine). This kind of explanation, an exemplary case of the ahistorical linguistic determinism, appears so frequently throughout the book that one could call it a "typical Yi Gyu-tae-like explanation." But language as an element of the larger culture goes through continuous changes and words may acquire new meanings. One may question how many Koreans actually know the expression "ttungi" and are conscious of its origin even when they use the word "gorinnae." These two expressions might have been related to feelings of inferiority toward China at a specific time in Korean history, which would be an example of how the social dimensions of a language reflect contemporary power relations. However, at least in the present context, this kind of assertion merely reduces "concrete and real history" to an ahistorical "consciousness structure." Furthermore, on what ground can the assertion be made that it is a "common" consciousness structure of Koreans to loathe themselves?

Besides this, most other episodes and cases he presents are, from today's perspectives, inappropriate examples or wrong interpretations. This gap comes from the ahistorical nature of Yi's analysis. Instead, we need to contextualize the subject of analysis within concrete history and see the interaction of various factors. Of course, the dynamics and the meanings of the factors may change. Explaining them through some timeless consciousness structure of Koreans is not very useful for deepening our understanding.

Ahistorical explanations like this are easily found not only in "popular" writings, but in the works of "academics" in specific disciplines. For Choe Jun-sik of the International Association for Korean

Studies whose field of specialization is religion, for instance, Korean culture is ultimately reduced to the religious culture of Korea. In Do Koreans Have a Culture?, which purports to have taken a "theoretical approach, not simply an enumeration of fragmentary facts," though Choe states that he applied Hobstead's social psychological frameworks in his analysis, final explanations are sought in the religious culture of Korea. For example, he spends the most amount of space discussing "Korean groupism," which is explained by ahistorical "Confucianism."

The same can be said about his discussion of the influences of shamanism on Korean culture. He poses the "spiritual revival" feature as characteristic of Korean Christianity and contrasts this to the "calm and refined" Christian culture of the West. The answer for this difference is found in shamanism, which is, according to the author, the "eternal religion of Korea." In other words, Christianity that was originally the opposite of shamanism became "shamanized" after it was transmitted to Korea. In fact, the "spiritual revival" aspect of Korean Christianity is rarely negated and has been pointed out by quite a number of scholars and observers. However, this feature should be understood through more comprehensive and historical analysis rather than explained away by the "native" disposition of Koreans that was allegedly formed by shamanism.

More than anything else, concerning the "spiritual revival" feature of Korean Christianity, neither Korean nor Western Christianity can hardly be understood as uniform. For instance, even within the United States, Christianity shows great variety depending on the sect. In Pentecostal churches or the Crystal Cathedral, experiences of mystical ecstasy are considered very important, and this is quite true of many African-American churches as well. In addition, one can interpret the "spiritual revival" feature as characteristic of the early stage Christianity, and the case of speaking in tongues also has its grounds in the Bible. Rather, the "spiritual revival" feature needs to be seen as a quality common to most, if not all religions in general, and the analytical focus should be on how and why this general element comes to take a specific form in the Korean context. Additionally, the missionary policies that Protestant churches applied to Korea, and the nature of the sects that were active in missionary projects in Korea should also be included in the analysis.

Let's briefly review the theoretical and methodological aspects as well. The Australian scholars Yoshio Sugimoto and Ross Mouer who have consistently criticized "discourses on Japanese culture" point out several methodological problems found in most books in this genre (Mouer and Sugimoto 1982): "episode-ism" (assembling piecemeal facts into a whole picture); "language-ism" (finding linguistic expressions that are thought to be unique to the Japanese language and presenting them as grounds for Japanese uniqueness); "comparing heterogeneous samples" (for instance, comparing manager-level employees of large companies in Japan with all workers in the West); "exclusive experience-ism" (the belief that no others but the Japanese can understand things Japanese); "uniform-west-ism" (assuming "the West" or "the Euro-American" to be a single entity). These criticisms are applicable to the discourses on Korean culture to a considerable degree. As mentioned above, most of them, being just enumerations of fragmentary facts and episodes, also lack an analytical framework. Even when some "theoretical" efforts are found, the "theory" posed is too simplistic to provide any actual explanation (Choe Jun-sik 1998a, for example). Or, there are even extreme cases of copying another scholar's theoretical framework to the extent of plagiarism.[9]

9. For instance, discussions on hierarchy consciousness and group consciousness in the first volume of Yi Gyu-tae s *The Consciousness Structure of the Korean People*, literally restates Nakane Chie s analysis. Even though Yi is emphasizing group consciousness as the essence of Koreans or an important key to understanding Koreans, his actual argument is a repetition of *Human Relations in a Vertical Society: Theory of a Homogeneous Society* by Nakane which is considered one of the most important theses on Japanese culture. Following Nakane, Yi distinguishes, as basic principles of group formation, *jang* from *jagyeok.* (The only difference here is that while Nakane translates *jang* into frame and *jagyeok* to attribute. Yi provides the rather ambiguous English terms potential and class.) In particular, the contents on pages 126-128 are an exact copy of the contents on pages 40-46 of the Korean version of Nakane s book. No citations or references to Nakane s book are provided.

Concluding Remarks: The "Possibilities" of Discourses on Korean Culture

The aforementioned problems are generally found in most discourses on Korean culture consumed by popular readers. Despite these "flaws," however, books of this genre are constantly being written and read. The fact that the production and consumption of discourses on Korean culture have become more prominent than ever since the late 1980s attests to the great popular interests in Korean cultural identity.

Nevertheless, compared to the case of Japan, a country that frequently becomes the object of comparison for Korea, one may ask "why is there so little discourse on Korean culture in Korea." It is estimated that more than 2,000 books on Japanese culture were written from the end of World War II to the end of the 1980s (Aoki 1997), and the popular influence of the genre was to the extent that it created a big "boom" through the 1970s and early 1980s. Writings that search for Korean national and cultural identity have been produced consistently to be sure, but these are far from comparable to the Japanese case both in popular influence and amount. The question of why discourse on Korean culture has not flourished in contrast to Japan may provide some clues to understanding the current situation and future trends of the "discourses on Korean culture" phenomenon and the general relationship between academic and popular writing in Korea. In lieu of a conclusion, I will try to provide several answers to this question.

First, differences in the readership of both countries should be considered. The size of the publishing market is much larger in Japan (according to one estimate, the size of the Japanese publishing market is about ten times that of Korea), and more importantly, the relationship between writing and reading, or between writers and readers differs in two countries. In Japan, academics participate in writing books of a "popular" nature much more actively than scholars in Korea, and general readers consume books of a more scholarly nature in large numbers. Let's take the case of Human Relations in a Vertical Society by Nakane Chie. While the English version of this book[10] was read mostly by those in academia (this is also true of the Korean version), it has been a steady bestseller among the general public in Japan. This book is far from exceptional. In a nutshell, the boundary between academic and popular writing/reading is more loose or ambiguous in Japan, and therefore, the market for discourses on Japanese culture could expand to that extent.

Second, the role of commercialism should be considered. Advertising and marketing have become very important in the publishing industry in Korea in recent years. In Japan, however, the role of commercialism related to the publishing industry is not confined to marketing efforts by publishing companies. I refer here to the "sensational commercialism" widespread in the Japanese mass media which takes up a so-called "topical book" and turns it into "a must have consumer good." For example, Ecological Historical Perspectives on Civilization by Umesao Tadao is also one of the discourses on Japanese culture that swayed an era.[11] I received my copy of this book as a gift from a village elder who seemed to have purchased the book following the "fever" of the time but ended up not reading it. Finding out that I was an anthropologist, he willingly presented his copy to me.

Third, there is what may be called a "psychoanalytic" explanation. This explanation states that the tremendous success of discourses on Japanese culture, which is unprecedented in any other country, is the very evidence for the "unstable self" of the Japanese. Translating Minami Hiroshi's Discourses on Japanese People, Yi Gwan-gi comments:

> Looking at the mirror so frequently. . . . There must be some reason. Japanese people are just like a child who, seeing a handsome child in the neighborhood, returns home immediately and becomes

10. The English version of this book was published as *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).
11. Umesao Tadao, *Munmyeong-ui saengtae sagwan* (Ecological Historical Perspectives on Civilization) (Tokyo: Chuogoronsha, 1967).

> frustrated when he looks at his own face in the mirror. He looks at the mirror again, and comments, “Well, mine is okay, too.” Then, he looks again once more and states, “Well, I have a better personality, more talent, or more heart than them,” and again becomes absorbed in thinking “No, I’m ugly after all.” Japanese people are just like this child (Minami 1999, 315-316).

The causes for this “unstable self” is beyond my discussion here.

Fourth, it can be explained by a phase thesis, which is what I would like to focus on here. Theses on culture are after all a search for a collective self and cultural identity. This pursuit of the self certainly presupposes questioning the Other, since questioning self-identity basically means searching for oneself apart from the Other. The case of discourses on Japanese culture shows this very well. In conceptualizing the Japanese self, the important Other changed from China to the West as Japan went through the process of Meiji Restoration, and questioning the self as different from the Other became more urgent than ever as Japanese society rapidly internationalized following great economic growth.[12] As a result, discourses on Japanese culture which appeared in the context of internationalization have rather become an ironic u-turn anti-internationalism with their emphasis on the uniqueness of Japan (Befu 1983).

As for the Korean case, one might say that various distortions in modern history have brought distinct results to this kind of cultural questioning. Just in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, issues of survival were the absolute object in the wake of the Korean War, and self-reflection became possible only after the destruction caused by war was addressed to some extent and people concentrated on the goal of modernization. Discourses on culture, during the process of modernization in the 1960s through the 1970s, had a strong nature of “statist ideology” as the state played a major

12. Many researchers agree that through the experience of total defeat in World War II, the West came mainly to mean the United States for Japan. Harumi Befu estimates that about 70 to 80 percent of the discourses on Japanese culture discuss Japanese identity in comparison to the United States (Befu 1987).

role in the production of discourses on “national culture” (O Myeong-seok 1998). Additionally, the modernization of Korea took place under a form of “developmentalist dictatorship” which means that “political issues” were the dominant discourse in Korean society in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, discourses on culture in the 1970s and 1980s were either “theses on minjung (the people’s) culture” which saw culture as a means for political struggle or just dominant ideology concealed in cultural covering (Song Do-yeong 1998). In other words, since the 1960s, discourses on Korean culture were consumed by ideology and could hardly secure “popularity.”

Considering these factors, it was then only after the late 1980s and 1990s when conditions were in place for discourses on Korean culture to be produced and consumed as a “popular consumer good.” The weakened influence of “political discourses” due to the achievement of democratization to some extent, the “confidence” that we could afford to discuss about “culture” now, and the necessity caused by accelerated internationalization to properly define the relationship between self and the Other constitute the conditions. In a nutshell, there is a high possibility that full-scale discourse on Korean culture will emerge in the future. Regardless of its lack of “scholarly value” or objective truth, discourses on Korean culture will likely become “a cultural phenomenon” itself. As a last comment, this kind of search for one’s own culture is more than mere “intellectual play” or a “popular consumer product,” and can easily take on “ideological” dimensions and thus rather hinder the readers’ understanding of reality. The discourse on Japanese culture mentioned above, for instance, displayed an irony in the era of rapidly expanding internationalization in that “it, rather than pursuing open universality, went in the direction of narrow-mindedly asserting particularistic Japan” (Aoki Tamotsu 1997, 159).

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GLOSSARY

arirang	아리랑	makgeolli	막걸리
baejjang	배짱	minjung	民衆
chung	忠	mu	武
dongi	東夷	mun	文
gimchi	김치	seonbi	선비
gorinnae	고린내	sinbaram	신바람
goryeochwi	高麗臭	tat	탓
haejangguk	해장국	ttungi	뚱이
hwatu	花鬪	usil	우실
hyo	孝	wangtta	왕따
jeogori	저고리	yoksim	慾心