Articles

Doing Korean History Research Outside of Korea: An Advantage of Looking from Outside?

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Introduction

The present paper attempts to critically reflect on the current state of historical studies on Korea in the West, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that Western scholars of Korean history face. The discussion focuses on Korean historiography—as well as related disciplines such as human geography, literary studies and economic history, for example—while also trying to make more general observations about Korean studies abroad. Whereas language instruction presumably has obvious practical value for non-Korean speakers around the world, studies of Korean history might be considered more "esoteric" by all but a tiny and very specialized circle of scholars. However, the conclusions of this paper—based as it is mainly on reflections around the practice of Korean history writing in the "Western" world (Europe/North America)—may be relevant for scholars in other fields of area studies concerned with how their scholarship can be useful. This paper argues that what is considered one of the weaknesses of Korean studies in the West—lack of direct relevance to the South Korean discursive space—may also constitute a strength: Western scholars of Korean history can use their "foreignness" or "otherness" to question dominant narratives within Korea. I suggest that such discourses may otherwise be impervious to deconstruction from within the Korean scholarly community, due to the prevailing socio-political and cultural circumstances of the Korean peninsula. This argument may hopefully be generalizable to other fields of area studies.

Korean studies abroad, including the study of Korean history, are hardly in crisis. The field has been developing briskly since the 2000s, with many new professorships endowed and Korea-related research monographs published under sponsorship of the Korea Foundation (Korea Foundation 2007). However, this growth—quantitative as well as qualitative—has not resolved the issue of a certain "ghettoization" of foreign-based Korean studies. Although this may be the inescapable fate of research on a smaller country that is located in a region dominated by economic and political giants, scholarly books on Korean history seem to attract relatively little attention outside of the Korean studies field. They are sometimes consulted

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when materials on Korea are needed but are rarely referred to in connection with more general theoretical issues. At the same time, the recent expansion of overseas Korean studies has not bridged the gap that exists between Korean studies "at home" (in South Korea) and abroad. The latter seems to have failed to attract substantial attention even inside South Korean academic circles, much less the general public. The present article seeks to identify possible reasons for such a state of affairs and to suggest some solutions, while at the same time identifying underlying strengths of foreign-based Korean studies.

The Predicaments of Foreign-based Korea Scholars

It has became commonplace in our post-Foucauldian times that knowledge represents a special sort of power. Much of what we habitually term "scientific knowledge of the human world"—disciplines ranging from human geography to history and archeology—has indeed served the interests of nation states or hegemonic, imperial states, helping to formulate and legitimize their (often rather ominous) agendas. The various fields of "area studies" are often used as a case in point. While European scholarship on colonized areas in the pre-World War II era was arguably characterized by particular assumptions and prejudices, brilliantly described as "Orientalism" by Edward Said (1935-2003), postwar area studies, especially in the United States, were not so overtly enmeshed within imperial discourse and practice. As is well known now, many such studies were conducted in direct cooperation with the intelligence services and other agencies of the American state (Cumings 1997). It would be simplistic to dismiss wholesale all postwar area studies scholarship as just an intellectual component of Cold War efforts at alliance-building, "understanding of the enemy" and its subsequent demonization. However, even the works of established scholars, who highly valued independence of judgment and dispassionate objectivity as the hallmarks of good scholarship, were nevertheless often influenced by the agendas, international positions and current needs of "their" nation states.

A good example would be the study of Japanese history in the postwar U.S., as analyzed by John Dower. As Dower persuasively argues, wartime

and early postwar studies of Japan as an 'enemy state' were insidiously influenced by the perception of Japan as an essentially authoritarian state embedded in feudal tradition and different from the other states that constituted the mainstream of modern history. As Japan's position as a Cold War ally of the U.S. was cemented in the early 1950s, the focus of analysis shifted from Japan's "otherness" to the essential "similarity" of its development. Indeed, it was teleologically directed towards modernity in line with the Euro-American "standard." The Tokugawa period (1603-1868) was no longer labeled as simply "feudal"; it was "early modern," referring to its teleologically prescribed role in the creation of Meiji modernization's "miracle."[1] However, when Japan emerged in the 1970s as an economic competitor of the U.S., the new wave of historical research on Japan in the Western academia came to emphasize its divergence from the Western development model. It is remarkable that Japan was not necessarily depicted negatively, and instead of projecting and highlighting Japan's difference from the "West," it was now unambiguously seen as a capitalist success (Dower 1998).

Of course, the context of such original empirical scholarship is not just determined by such externally generated agendas, and the influences to which experts of area studies in the West are susceptible are not necessarily limited to the national agendas of their own states. In West European and North American studies of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet states, for example, the voice of "old" Russian emigrants (post-1917 émigré scholars) and the "new" Soviet or post-Soviet researchers, either publishing or living and working in the West, was always clearly discernible; their agendas were spurred largely by local, Russian (or post-Soviet) political and social concerns (Bonnell and Breslauer 2002). As I will discuss below, a similar phenomenon emerged within North American Korean studies in the 1980s-90s: new arrivals from South Korea or their descendants, strongly influenced by progressive trends inside South Korean society, entered North American academia with a burning desire to research and write on labor issues. This trend contributed greatly to the relative prominence of

1. The term "early modern" (*kinsei*) was first adapted for Tokugawa period by Uchida Ginzō (1872-1919), a prominent Japanese economic historian, in 1903 (Uchida 1903). In Euro-American scholarship, however, it became commonly accepted only after the 1950s.

labor history inside North American Korean studies. Even before this, in the 1960s-70s, many scholars of Korean studies in North America were South Koreans who chose to stay and work in academia after finishing their graduate studies at North American universities. Many of them were influenced by the April 1960 democratic revolution in their homeland and tended to be critical about the successive military dictatorships that had long suppressed democracy in South Korea. A number of scholars of area studies in the U.S. tended, especially after the 1960s, to oppose their government on foreign policy issues; criticism of the Vietnam War is the best-known example (Szanton 2002). Nevertheless, the general dependence of area experts on the paradigms generated by the mainstream intellectual milieus of their countries is undeniable. It may be said without exaggeration that the works by these scholars reveal as much about their own societies as they do the objects of their research.

Korean studies in the West, and particularly in the U.S., provide good material for a case study on the relationship between area research and the dominant agendas in the researchers' countries of origin. Much of early Korean studies in the U.S. had missionary origins, the main focus of interest being the conditions for and perspectives on (mainly Protestant) church growth in Korea. Aside from general introductions to their missionary endeavors (e.g., Gale 1909) and tales of Korea based on personal experience (e.g., Allen 1908), the missionaries tended to interest themselves in the areas that they could significantly influence, especially education (e.g., Underwood 1926) or religion itself. Indeed, one of the first outlines of Korea's religious history in English was penned by a missionary (Clark 1932). After 1945, introductory works on Korea and its culture, written by social scientists such as Osgood (1951), continued to be in demand. During that period, knowledge on Korea became increasingly relevant, given the peninsula's prominence in the Cold War confrontation. For more specialized research, however, the focus shifted to the weight of traditional legacies (McCune 1956), industrialization (Amsden 1989; Kuznets 1981; Repetto et al. 1981) as well as general "modernization" (Mason et al. 1980)[2] in friendly

2. For a general survey of opinions in U.S. academia and government on "Korean modernization," see Brazinsky (2007, 101-89).

South Korea; studies of "Communism" typified analyses of unfriendly North Korea (Scalapino 1963; Scalapino and Lee 1972).

In addition, "tradition" and "traditional elites" was brought to the center of Korea historians' attention. The Modernization theory, which dominated American academia from the 1950s through the 1970s, viewed the "persistence of tradition" as a major impediment to "them becoming more like us" (Lerner 1958, 3-16; Weiner 1966, 145-50), and "traditional societies," with their ruling classes and governance systems, were to be studied in order to understand what differentiates them from normative ("our") modernity and how their diverse particular features are to be dealt with. In this vein, studies of Korea's traditional elites, governance system and Neo-Confucianism as the ideology of the Joseon dynasty's (1392-1910) ruling classes became one of the strengths of Korean historical studies in the U.S. (Deuchler 1992; Palais 1975; Wagner 1974). One of the most distinguished scholars of this school, the late Prof. Edward Wagner (1924-2001) of Harvard University, made explicit his views on the connections between Korea's "tradition" and its path towards modernity in a 1963 paper. Here, he tried to distinguish the features of the "Korean political tradition" that were not conducive to "modernization"[3] from those that were seen as more benign with the benefit of hindsight[4] (Lee 2004; Wagner 1963). While many of his observations on Joseon politics may be considered plausible interpretations of the original sources he meticulously studied, his presentist point of view is noteworthy. "Tradition," by definition, was seen as essentially different from modernity, and was to be studied in juxtaposition to "modernization." Just as "modernization" in South Korea apparently proceeded in a top-down fashion through the agency of "modernizing elites," research on "Korean tradition" also centered on elites in terms of their ways of governing, patterns of mobility, and worldview.

Of course, studies of Korean history as well as the broader studies on Korea in the humanities and social sciences in the U.S. were never limited to the agenda described above. Many other factors influenced the choice of

3. For example; "weak royal power, fractional infighting, misgovernment," etc.
4. For example; relatively high literacy, absence of a Japan-type imperial institution, and thus lower risk of "totalitarian and militaristic development," etc.

researchers' topics; for example, the general upsurge of interest in East Asian Buddhism, especially Zen (Kor. Seon) in the Western world from the 1960s through the 1980s, also brought attention to the Korean Buddhist tradition and resulted in a series of prominent scholarly works (Buswell 1983; McBride 2007; Park 1983). While traditional interest in the history of Korean Christianity remained strong (Clark 1986; Kang 1997; Yoo 1988), the new generation of researchers, often ethnic Koreans deeply influenced by the labor struggles and other progressive movements unfolding in South Korea in the tumultuous epoch between the 1970s and the 1990s, enriched English language scholarship with a number of good books on Korea's working class and the labor movement (Kim Seung-kyung 2009; Koo 2001; Lee 2007; Nam 2009). From the 1970s onward, revisionist historiography of modern Korea (Cumings 1981; 1990; Hart-Landsberg 1998) greatly contributed to clarifying the agendas of the American state, especially U.S. policies toward Korea. This also brought into sharp relief the agenda of the mainstream American Korea experts, influenced as they were by the dominant political climate (Cumings 1997). At the risk of stating the obvious, a Koreanist who is supported by research funding from his or her country of residence—such as the U.S. or any other nation state capable of and interested in supporting Korean studies—will inevitably be influenced, at least to a certain degree, by both the dominant discourses and prevailing interests of that community.

It is also clear that while, for a variety of reasons, certain topics attract greater attention from foreign-based Korean history scholars, other topics scarcely draw any interest. For example, following the permissibility of research on the Communist movement in colonial Korea by the South Korean government in the late 1980s, such studies soon flourished, flooding the market with several dozen major research monographs, document collections and biographic dictionaries on the topic.[5] Apart from a few articles (e.g., Robinson 1982-1983), however, there was hardly any tangible interest in Korea's Leftist radicals of the 1920s through the 1940s, communists included, within American academia subsequent to the studies by Scalapino and Lee Chong-sik of the 1960s and 1970s, which were

5. For a good critical outline of this research in the 1990s, see Im Gyeong-seok (1998).

largely framed by the Cold War context. While the "alternative modernity" promoted by colonial-era Korean communists continued to draw the attention of South Korean researchers, who often saw themselves as direct ideological heirs of the radical forces of the colonialperiod, it evoked little interest within American academia, which tended to view Leninist socialism as a cul-de-sac of sorts—a deviation from what is imagined as the mainstream path of modern development. The Donghak movement, another major preoccupation of post-1970s South Korean academic circles, also failed to attract much interest among U.S.-based Korean history experts; research on Donghak in North America yielded a handful of good articles (Kallander 2009; Shin 1978-1979; Young 2002) and just one major monograph (Weems 1964). While the Donghak movement tended to be seen in South Korea as an important indigenous attempt at modernization from below,[6] U.S. researchers had little interest in exploring the possible autochthonous roots of Korean modernity. Following the logic of the modernization theory, modernity was to be learned by the modernist elites from outside (that is, "from us") rather than developed indigenously on the basis of "traditional values."

While there is nothing inherently negative in such a divergence of research agendas, it may, however, inhibit the development of cooperation between foreign-based and South Korea-based Korean historians. No doubt researchers interact across national borders, and generally speaking, foreign-based scholars of Korean studies—especially in such fields as history and literature—draw heavily on such South Korean resources as critical editions and translations of classical texts into modern Korean, as well as works of original scholarship. South Korean academia, on the other hand, as a consequence of its own internal dynamics, may be at certain points highly susceptible to some external impulses. The influence exerted by the U.S. revisionist historiography of the American Occupation period (1945-1948) and the Korean War (1950-1953) on academia and, more broadly, political and social opposition in South Korea in the 1980s, is a case in

6. To what degree such a view is justified is a different and an extremely complicated issue; see Yu (1998, 111-229).

point.[7] However, Korean historical studies outside South Korea still remain relatively estranged from both South Korean academia and the South Korean public in general. This state of affairs is hardly desirable given that a very significant proportion of Koreanists worldwide—in history as well as in most all other fields—reside and work in South Korea, and that South Korea has the largest potential readership for any Korean studies-related book, as well as the largest pool of talent for postgraduate Korean studies programs elsewhere. Of course, the peculiar research agenda of foreign-based Korean history scholars is not the only—and may not even necessarily be the main—reason for their relative alienation from the South Korean mainstream of Korean history research. The interwoven hierarchies of diverse academic lineages that constitute South Korean academia have strict "gate-keeping" standards in terms of academic credentials and personal ties; outsiders, be they "fellow" Koreans or foreigners, are not necessarily welcomed unless they either acquire the needed amount of cultural and social capital within South Korean institutions or otherwise prove particularly useful. However, lack of perception and relevance to such pressing socio-political or scholarly concerns inside South Korean society also hinders many foreign-based Korean historians from entering the public or/and academic discursive space in South Korea.

Unable to secure their place inside the intellectual or public debate in South Korea, foreign-based Korea researchers—historians included—are not necessarily recognized as creative or central to the development of the humanities as a whole by scholars in their countries either. They do provide information on Korea that is, in most cases, unavailable for non-Korean speakers; but they rarely seem to be producing challenging knowledge that will engage and interest researchers in other fields than Korean studies. While producing such knowledge requires a particularly strong engagement with theory, theory definitely does not constitute a special competitive strength for many Korean studies scholars in the West. The situation is somewhat similar to that in the field of Japanese literary studies in the West, in which learning Japanese and digesting the original sources as well as Japanese research literature often simply does not leave

7. For a critical survey of this influence, see Yu (1997).

much time and energy for a serious engagement with theory (Tansman 2002). As a result, it happens sometimes that foreign scholarship on Korea, especially in such disciplines as history, with its traditionally low level of theoretical awareness, either demonstrates little embeddedness in theory at all or draws upon relatively outdated theoretical sources. For example, twelve years ago international scholarship on pre-modern Korea was enriched by one of the most successful monographs on Korea's traditional history in recent decades. It was rich in empirical details and based on meticulous study of original sources. It also provided important conclusions that significantly corrected the prevailing understanding of the nature of the Goryeo-Joseon dynastic shift. However, it was theoretically based on Shmuel Eisenstadt's 1963 *The Political System of Empires*. All its strong points notwithstanding, this social science classic of the 1960s still displayed a visible Eurocentric tendency towards strictly differentiating between European "feudal" and non-European "bureaucratic" societies. It also denied the non-European bureaucratic empires any possibility of reinventing themselves as modern societies (Duncan 2000). While many of Eisenstadt's findings are certainly useful for analyzing Korea's traditional polities, theoretical scholarship on typologies of premodern societies has progressed greatly since the heyday of the modernization theory in the 1960s (e.g., Amin 1989). Given the recent thirst for theory in certain parts of South Korean academia—especially with some scholars of literary and modern history fields who tend to keenly follow the newest theoretical developments in the "Western" world[8]—the relative deficit of attention towards theory in some of the foreign-based Korean historical studies may not appeal to the taste of scholars in South Korea. This leads us to the following set of questions: can we identify the potential strengths of foreign-based scholarship of Korean history that will redeem their seemingly inescapable weaknesses?; and what are the ways that foreign-based Korean historians might contribute to both their "own" communities and South Korean public and academia, aside from simply introducing lesser-known Korean material to non-Korean readers?

8. For example, the possibilities and challenges of "post-modern" history writing has been a hotly debated theme in recent years; see Yun Hae-dong (2010, 121-28).

The Advantages of Difference?

I would suggest that the main comparative advantage of the foreign-based Korean historians may be their "otherness." This status also implies a relative freedom from the dominant narratives that undergird the prevailing historical visions of Korea and Koreanness in South Korea.[9]

These narratives, as is typical in most official historical nationalisms, are predominantly teleological (Eckert 2001; Yun Hae-dong 2010, 58-60). In other words, they tend to explain the past as a chain of events which inevitably leads to the present that is invariably portrayed positively. Since contemporary South Korea perceives itself as a modern, industrial, trade-oriented and democratic society, the nation's past, the alleged "national history," is viewed as inexorably leading to the development of modernity, an industrial and market-based economy, an open and trade-oriented society, and democratic forms of mass political participation. The bureaucratic monarchy of early Joseon times is often viewed, for example, as "early modern" (Min 2007), since the next historical period, late Joseon, is classified as the time when indigenous "sprouts of modernity" had already begun to develop in earnest. Development of trade, both external and internal, is emphasized at all stages of the historical "progress" of Korea, without any clear indication of the relative weight of trade and market exchange in the predominantly agrarian, natural economy. Indeed, the monetary part of the tax income of Korea's central government, even in 1891-1893, did not exceed approximately thirty-two per cent and the rest was paid in kind, mostly by rice and fabric (Kim Jae-ho 2010). The preponderant role of state redistribution over market forces is hardly visible in many descriptions of the "trade and monetary economy development" in late traditional—especially late eighteenth century—Korea (typically, see Won 1978). Notable early modernist political organizations like the Independence Club (1896-1899) are usually portrayed as being inherently nationalist and anticipating the further development of democratic tendencies in Korean society (Sin 1975). However, it is well known that their modernism was often tinged with intense "self-Orientalization." The Korean past was rejected outright,

9. On the general nature of collective historical memory in South Korea, see Yun (2010, 195-204).

harshly criticized, or ignored, and the West was seen as the object of almost complete emulation. Then, they were neither popular nor democratically oriented. Membership in such organizations was effectively restricted to elites or semi-elites (Ju Jin-o 1995). The teleology of modernity, market, nationalism and democracy thus tends to retroactively reshape the Korean past, ignoring, glossing over or "re-interpreting" everything that does not match the mainstream self-image of South Korea to the point of unrecognizability.

Apart from being teleological, these narratives tend to be self-centered. While self-centeredness is probably intrinsic to any historical nationalist narrative, a variety of post-colonial complexes make it more pronounced in the Korean case (Im Ji-hyeon 2004). To the same degree that Japanese colonial scholarship denied a progressive development or any independent subjectivity in the history of its Korean subjects, pronounced "stagnating" and "permanently shaped by external influences," Korean nationalism tends to portray the past in a self-centered and triumphalist manner. The role of "others" in such portrayals is mostly limited to providing a background against which "our" greatness may be appreciated in the best possible way. For example, the variety of East and Central Asian alphabetic and syllabic-alphabetic scripts—Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchu, Japanese and many others—is relevant only insofar as they provide either some explanations related to the possible external influences on Korean *hangeul* script or background against which one can claim that *hangeul* script should be seen as the most "scientific" in the world (Kim Bong-tae 2002). East Asian Buddhist tradition is relevant as the background for the emergence of such great Buddhist thinkers of ancient Korea as the celebrated Wonhyo (617-686), without any clear explanation about the degree to which Wonhyo was indebted to the pre-existing, predominantly Chinese tradition of doctrinal exegesis (on the roots of the somewhat exaggerated veneration for Wonhyo in South Korean Buddhism scholarship, see Tikhonov 2010). Yi Hwang's (1501-1570) thought is routinely described as one of the pinnacles in the development of East Asian neo-Confucian tradition (Yun Sa-sun 1986), without even an attempt to place it into the context of concurrent developments in Ming China which witnessed philosophical ferment, as is evident in the role of the Yangming School of Mind during this period in shaping a new, much more subjective and personality-centered Confucian

vision of the world. In this context, Yi Hwang's image of a rather static natural and cosmic order would look comparatively less conducive to the development of modern subjectivity an impression that the modernist teleology of South Korean nationalist historiography is keen to avoid. In sum, the rest of the world, seen from the viewpoint of the Korea-centered national narrative, is reduced to a setting in which teleological development of "our nation" to higher levels of "progress" has been taking place.

Last but not least, the teleological and self-centered narrative of Korea and Koreanness is also inherently hierarchical, as most official historical nationalisms tend to be. Korean history is supposed to be a general account of the historical experiences of the Korean nation, but some members of the nation and some experiences are definitely privileged over others. The hierarchies are multifaceted and are structured along familiar lines of social status, ethnicity, gender and age. The amount of research on Joseon period slaves is dwarfed by the number of books and articles on the politics, thought and lives of the elites, and research on women's history tends to be located on the very periphery of "national history" as a discipline. Research on childhood in the traditional past is almost nonexistent, and books and articles on discourses and experiences of childhood in modern times are sparse. Lastly, research on non-ethnic-Korean inhabitants of modern Korea—Chinese and Japanese—began to be included as a part of the "national history" literature only very recently. The contribution of South Korean scholars in this field is meager, and most studies related to this issue tend to focus on problems of the history of Korea-based Chinese and Japanese that are also of direct relevance for "mainstream" Korean history. By contrast, the history of overseas ethnic Koreans, especially in the context of the independence movement history of the first half of the twentieth century, is a well-established academic discipline in South Korea, with dozens of monographs and hundreds of articles in scholarly production. This contrast shows very well that "Korean history" is meant to be the history of a supposedly unitary ethnic nation of Koreans, rather than the history of the diverse populations of the Korean Peninsula.

The nationalist narrative of Korean history, produced in and disseminated from South Korea, is, of course, neither unitary nor unchanging. In fact, it would be better put as a cluster of such narratives, which are often in fierce competition with each other and change with time, the socio-political

climate, and the agendas of different fractions of the ruling class. The older nationalist narrative, which was formed in the 1960s-80s and influenced by leftist criticism of imperialism and the "development of underdevelopment" theories, viewed the economic policy of the Japanese colonial administration in Korea as one of "plunder."[10] In contrast, a group of mostly right-wing economic historians in the first decade of the 2000s came to view the institutional and economic changes of the colonial era (especially codification of property rights and industrialization) as a prelude to South Korea's capitalist success, with emphasis on "market-driven economic growth underpinned by sound modern governance" in colonial Korea.[11] While the former narrative took shape under the "neo-mercantilist" regime of Park Chung Hee (1961-1979) and the atmosphere of intense state-centered nationalism, the latter became prominent in 2000s in the predominantly neoliberal environment, in which South Korea's integration into the world capitalist economy, despite the conditions of colonial rule, was naturally viewed as inherently positive. However, the latter narrative in its essence is just as deeply nationalist as the former one, its point of departure being the vision of the South Korean nation state as a capitalist success and the need to explain why such success was possible and why the South Korean capitalist class, with its colonial roots, should be seen as a legitimate hegemonic force in South Korean society. The underlying ideological agenda did change, but not the nationalist mode of articulating it by projecting it onto history.

In this respect, foreign-based Korean historians, who are not as much subject to the societal pressures inside South Korean society as scholars in South Korea, enjoy a distinct advantage. They may try to subvert the whole paradigm of the history of a unitary Korean people, teleologically ordained towards modernity and hierarchically arranged in a way which privileges the "center" (ruling class/educated ethnic Korean males) over the manifold "peripheries" (from females to non-ethnic Koreans). As long as they find themselves in a position of not being obliged to project the boundaries, demands, interests and claims of the current, "ethnically" Korean nation or those of the South Korean state (or South Korea's ruling groups) onto

10. For a recent study that typifies this line of reasoning, see Jeong (2007).
11. A typical recent work representative of this group is Ju Ik-jong (2008).

the past, it becomes possible to view the past—and, by extension, the present as well—in a fundamentally different conceptual manner. Instead of a linear narrative of "progress and development," the story of the past will in this case look like a complex, almost chaotic, mixture of competing forces, groups, agendas and discourses. It will be clearly shown that most of the protagonists on the Korean historical stage had strong connections outside the Korean Peninsula. It will be also made clear that the outcomes of the struggles among them were decided by a complicated combination of externally and internally generated influences. If any Regelmäßigkeit (a Marxist term, meaning pattern of regularity) is traceable here, it is related rather to the development of the productive forces, issues of control over the means of production and ideological and social hegemony, rather than any sort of teleologically prescribed movement towards modernity, democracy and capitalism.

For example, the story of South Korea from the 1960s through the 1990s should be seen as an attempt by the South Korean ruling elite—whose nationalistic credentials were fatally flawed owing to this group's well-known colonial roots—to surpass the dynamically industrializing and militarily superior North Korea. They adopted the strategy of simultaneously reinventing the South Korean economy as a labor-intensive assembly platform for the world market and thoroughly militarizing South Korean society. This strategy was not a "step forward" towards the teleologically predestined stage of "modernity." The success of the South Korean ruling elite in accomplishing its objective of decisively outshining its Northern rival by the late 1980s (at least economically), needs to be understood primarily from the perspective of the general dynamics of the world-systemic situation. These factors include Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, as well as the fact that North Korea's original models, main donors and trade partners by the late 1980s had foundered in their attempt to build a mini-world-system of their own, based on state-capitalist principles, and moved towards reintegration as a part of the periphery or semi-periphery of the world capitalist system; these developments were more decisive than South Korean "success in modernization" as such. While the introduction of formal democracy and some elements of pluralist civil society in South Korea during the late 1980s are often viewed in conventional historiography as the crowning achievement of "modernization," in the non-teleological

perspective, it is in reality a by-product of world-systemic contingency. It needs to be remembered that the U.S. government realized by 1987 that in light of the Soviet retreat, introduction of some measure of democracy in South Korea would not threaten its interests, and it was within this political context that the United States withdrew the crucial support it consistently lent to the military dictatorship. In a different world-historical situation, the outcome of democratization struggles in South Korea could have been different, ranging from a radical anti-imperialist revolution of the Iranian type to the continuation of authoritarianism of the kind one can find in Singapore. There is no historical law stipulating that capitalist industrialization should automatically bring institutional democracy in its wake. The outcome of struggles surrounding the shape of the newly built urban, industrial society is decided by a host of complicated internal and external factors. Last but not least, a degree of (relative) freedom from the demands imposed by membership in South Korean society may allow a historian to appreciate differently the continuing survival of the North Korean state—emphasizing not the "failure" of the North Koreans to achieve the consumption standards and "freedoms" on the current South Korean level but the amazing ability of North Korea to survive the death of the mini-world-system of the planned Soviet-type economies to which it originally belonged. The miracle of North Korean survival raises intriguing questions about the degree to which North Korean culture, ideology and its social system are all deeply embedded in the Korean tradition. I would suggest that objective answers to such questions can only be provided by a historian located outside the political framework of the North-South antagonism. This comprises the most immediate and easily perceivable aspect of what may be termed "the advantage of being an outsider" in the field of Korean historical studies.

More generally, status as an "outsider" enables a researcher to "de-homogenize" the collective "insiders." While the conventional logic of the in-group emphasizes "our" homogeneity and cohesiveness, "outsiders" are better positioned to trace the differences, cleavages and contradictions that the in-group tends to easily gloss over. That is why it was a foreign (American) scholar of modern Korean history, Carter Eckert, who first produced a magisterial monograph on colonial Korea's leading entrepreneurial family, the Gochang Kims, showing the degree to which the interests of the colonial

business elite were intertwined with the aims and objectives of the colonizers (Eckert 1991). Interpenetration of the Korean and Japanese entrepreneurial worlds is also vividly shown in Dennis McNamara's masterful monograph on the colonial origins of modern Korea's business elites and practices (McNamara 1990). Both authors plausibly argue that, in essence, the main lines of cleavage in colonial society were largely class-based rather than simply ethnic—as conventional South Korean histories tend to suggest, with their focus on colonial exploitation by the "Japanese" as an undifferentiated ethnic entity. By implication, both books clearly show that the society of the colonized was far from being a homogenous community; it was riven with socio-political tensions that laid the groundwork for Right-Left conflicts in post-1945 Korea and ultimately, the tragedy of the Korean War. This point seems to be more accepted, at least by the politically progressive part of the South Korean research community, from the mid-1990s,[12] but it comes as no surprise that studies on colonial entrepreneurial elites' cooptation by the colonial power apparatus were pioneered by foreign-based scholars. It was easier for them to see "Koreans" as a conglomerate of socio-economic groups enmeshed in inevitable conflicts of interests rather than a "homogenous" ethnic entity. In addition, they were free from the socio-political taboos confronting research that might potentially undermine the nationalistic credentials of South Korea's elites—who are directly related to the colonial-era businessmen, often by family ties—that characterized the societal atmosphere in the anti-Communist, right-wing-dominated South Korea before the early 1990s.

In Place of Conclusion

In most cases, the practice of studying "national history"—that is, the history of the nation state the researcher him/herself belongs to—is inherently presentist. The nation state, with its distinctive problems and demands, is what often constitutes the starting point for these researchers, whether

12. See, for example, Kim Dong-chun's masterful study of the Korean War's social history; Kim Dong-chun (2000).

consciously or not. While more conservative researchers sometimes tend to produce self-congratulatory accounts explaining, in a laudatory tone, "how we got to where we are now," more critical minds frequently try searching for the historical roots of the problems their societies face. In both cases, however, it is the narrative of the nation as the subject of a teleologically ordained history "progressing" towards its present state that dominates the research agenda. Foreign-based researchers, however, often feel freer to identify the multitude of historical agencies as what they really are: social, political, cultural and religious groups enmeshed into complicated struggles, often crucially influenced by the world-history and power shifts, for the sake of control and domination; or to subvert existing patterns of domination. One will be able to see more clearly how the outcomes of these struggles are contingent, and to which degree they are influenced by the general course of world-history outside of the Korean Peninsula. One will be able to explore the aspects of the past that were neglected or intentionally disregarded for their lack of visible presentist meanings for the researchers inside the South Korean academic milieu. Being based in Europe, then, helps a Korean studies researcher to be more alert to the nationalist undercurrent of the very paradigm of "national history." After all, it is Europe in which the genre of "national history" has the longest tradition. It is also crucial, however, to be self-conscious of the degree to which the agendas of one's own society may decisively affect the course of scholarship in area studies. Only thus can one avoid the pitfalls of the sort some U.S.-based Korean history scholars fell into by allowing their research to be influenced to a certain degree by the inherently Eurocentric modernization theory, the limitations of which are so clear today.

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Abstract

Studying and teaching Korean history abroad is not easy, since awareness about Korea is still generally low, especially in Europe, compared to countries located closer to the Korean Peninsula that are more influenced by South Korean mass culture, like China, Japan, or Vietnam. This article seeks to identify what sort of special contribution Korea historians based in Europe or North America may offer to the field of Korean history worldwide. The principal conclusion is that one distinctive advantage that foreign-based historians of Korea possess is their ability to distance themselves from the present, and in many cases, from the nationalist or dominant classe-imposed agendas of mainstream historiography of both states on the Korean peninsula. Europe-based historians may be expected to show their strength in deconstructing the nationalist narratives of Korean history produced in both Koreas.

Keywords: Korean Studies, subjectivity, nationalism, public debates, colonialism.

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