Analyzing the Two Different Nationalisms in the Two Koreas

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Abstract

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Undergraduate Senior Honors Thesis

The twentieth century was the era of nationalism: independent countries rose up calling for the recovery of their national identity. The imperial and colonial dominance of the European countries fell after the World War II, and the national identities were constructed through numerous national revolutions. Many countries that shared cultural practices, religious beliefs, historical roots or ethnicity defined themselves as nations and freed themselves from the influence of former colonialists. Korea, formerly colonized by Japan, achieved national independence in 1945. However, it remains divided as Nam Han, Republic of Korea (ROK), and Buk Joseon¹, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK); commonly referred as South

¹ I deliberately use the term Buk Joseon instead of Buk Han, a South Korean term referring to North Korea. South Korea assumes Han Guk to be the legitimate name of the nation but North Korea assumes Joseon to be as legitimate name. South Korea, Nam Han, refers to North Korea as Buk Han as an indication that the legitimate name of the nation is Han Guk. In contrast, North Korea refers South Korea as Nam Joseon; Buk in Korean means the north and Nam in Korean means the south. Naming of the nation derives from the legitimacy competition of the two Korean
Korea and North Korea.

Since the division, influenced by political ideology, economic system, and leadership, the two Koreas have become radically different from each other. One of the results of the division is nationalism. Both South and North Korea undertake an ethnic nationalism that calls for reunification of the two. However, the political climate both domestic and international has encouraged the leaders of the two Koreas to develop different forms of ethnic nationalism. Korea was one independent kingdom for almost 1100 years, but even the acknowledgement of its history differs between the North and the South. Therefore, Korea can serve as a rich source of understanding the impact of factors like leadership and political climate on nationalism.

Understanding the two nationalisms would yield a perspective in the call for reunification. The two Koreas do not acknowledge one another as countries but as rebels against each other. Since the division, to establish the legitimacy of their own governments, both have attempted to undermined the legitimacy of the other. Additionally, both Koreas have been influenced by the dictatorships in which the freedom of speech was severely oppressed and limited. In the 1960s and 70s, South Korea was under the rule of Park Jung Hee when North Korea was under Kim Il-sung. As a result, many of both Koreas’ interpretation of each other have been biased and lack full understanding of their counterpart. After the Korean War in the 1950s, both governments acknowledged that violence should not be the primary means of reunification. The detrimental repercussions of the war yielded valuable lesson to Koreans that peaceful coalition should be the vision at all times. But because neither acknowledges the other

governments. In an effort to remain objective amongst the legitimacy competition of the two Koreas, I will utilize the term North and South Korea throughout my research.

to be legitimate, the results of the peace talks have been futile. Although both have renounced physical violence each still assumes ideological superiority to the other, hindering useful conversation between the two. By comparing the different nationalisms in the two Koreas, this paper hopes to explore possibilities for peace in the Korean peninsula and further, even reunification.
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Chapter I. Introduction

The advent of nationalism in modern society has altered the dynamic within and across the borders of nations and states. Although there are numerous theories about the origin of nationalism, many scholars agree that nationalism is a modern phenomenon.\(^3\) Many nations have utilized nationalism for their political agenda, economic profit and so on. In doing so, they define themselves as a different group from others based on the factors like shared cultural values, language, religion, ethnicity, and, most importantly, historical context.\(^4\) Because many forms of nationalism has to “prove” that the group has historical roots that differentiate it from others, various nations often develop different forms of nationalism based on their perception of their history.


\(^4\) Ibid. P. 4 -5
In this process, nationalism influences politics, and vice versa. Nationalism can alter political situations within a state, but the political climate at the time can also influence nationalism. Therefore, it is critical to fathom the historical context and political situation of the state to fully understand the origin and the evolution of its nationalism. Hence, this paper will analyze the modern history of Korea since the late 19th century. Doing so, it will examine how Korean nationalism evolved throughout the fluctuating political situations and became the current two different forms of nationalism in the two Koreas.
Literature Review

Before delving into Korean nationalism and its developments, it is crucial to understand what nationalism is. Groups assume that they are a nation on different bases such as ethnicity, cultural practices, civil rights, religious beliefs, historical roots and so on. There is no sole definitive factor that binds the members of a nation into one; different groups derive national solidarity on different foundations. Such ambiguity results in nation-state disputes that can be currently seen in the Kosovo region, Kashmir, and so on. Because of its ambiguous nature, nationalism can easily create international and domestic conflicts. The discord between the two Koreas can serve as a great example of altercation resulting from nationalism. Hence, without fully understanding what nationalism is, it would be impossible to analyze Korean nationalism, its origins and development, and its impact on the Korean peninsula.

Ernest Gellner, European philosopher and social anthropologist, is one of the forefathers of theories of nationalism. In his book, Nations and Nationalism, Gellner claims that “nationalism is primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.” He believes that nationalism arose along with industrialization. As societies became more industrialized, they required their members to play specific and specialized roles. In order to ensure that members of the groups were positioned and functioning as they should be, leaders had to create a framework of cultural homogeneity and

5 These disputes can be seen as religious ones but they are nation-state conflict in a broader sense because these nations are defined by the shared religious beliefs.


7 Ibid. p. 50 -56

8 Ibid

9 Ibid. P. 56
standardization. In previous times, the leaders of countries did not have the incentive or the necessity to provide such concept to the members. Thus, Gellner believes that nationalism appeared only along with industrialization as it became a sociological necessity.\textsuperscript{10} Some of the Gellner’s account of nationalism is criticized by scholars. Some, like Damian Tambini, claim that it is too much of a functionalist approach, questioning whether an industrialized country can function without nationalism.\textsuperscript{11} Others, like Walker Connor or Daniele Conversi, state that it fails to take militarism and the passionate patriotism into account.\textsuperscript{12}

Anthony D. Smith, an English sociologist and a former student of Gellner, is also a scholar who disagrees with Gellner. Smith claims that Gellner’s theory fails to explain the national movements of pre-industrialization and resurgence of nationalism in post-industrial societies. In his book, \textit{Nations and Nationalism in Global Era}, Smith defines nation as “a named population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for its members.”\textsuperscript{13} Unlike Gellner who focuses on the relationships between industrialization and nationalism and claims that nationalism was invented by the social elites to establish a functional society, Smith claims that nationalism is not just a fabrication but originates from pre-existing kinship and historical understanding.\textsuperscript{14} Smith developed an approach called “ethno-symbolism,” a combination of


\textsuperscript{11} Tambini, Damian. “Explaining monoculturalism: Beyond Gellner’s theory of nationalism” Critical Review. vol. 10. no 2. 1996. P. 251 -70


traditional and modern theories of nationalism.\textsuperscript{15} He focuses on the historical roots of the nation and claims that whether the beliefs of populations be flawed or not, as long as they share a similar historical point of view, the members of a nation can remain as a nation.\textsuperscript{16}

Liah Greenfeld also believes the nation is based on the idea, and when the idea of the nation is agreeable amongst the nationals, the nation can remain as one regardless of the authenticity of their reasoning. In her book, \textit{Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity}, Greenfeld asserts that “the only foundation of nationalism as such, the only condition, that is, without which no nationalism is possible is an idea; nationalism is a particular perspective or a style of thought.”\textsuperscript{17} Stressing the unique perspectives of each nation, Greenfeld focuses on the emergence of particularistic nationalisms. She first explains the typology of nationalism; nationalism can be divided as either civic or ethnic nationalism.\textsuperscript{18} \textsuperscript{19} She defines civic nationalism as a nationalism in which the “national identity –nationality- was in effect identical with citizenship,” and “the civic criteria of national membership acknowledge the freedom of individual members.”\textsuperscript{20} In contrast, ethnic nationalism is a type of nationalism in which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid; See also Smith, Athony D. Nations and Nationalism in Global Era. Polity Publisher. United States of America. 1995. P. 1 -8
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid. P. 11
\item \textsuperscript{19} Greenfeld also uses a typology in which she divided nationalism into individualistic-liberitarian or collectivistic authoritarian. But I intend to focus on the former typology because it will help us better examine the evolution of Korean nationalism which developed into two different forms of ethnic nationalism in the two Koreas today.
\end{itemize}
“‘nationality’ became a synonym of ‘ethnicity,’ and national identity is often perceived as a reflection or awareness of possession of ‘primordial’ or inherited group characteristics, components of ‘ethnicity,’ such as language, customs, territorial affiliation, and physical type.”

Basically, civic nationalism focuses on the member’s citizenship of the nation which can be changed at an individual’s will, while ethnic nationalism focuses on the member’s ethnicity which is inherent. Analyzing five different countries and how distinct nationalism rose amongst them, Greenfeld demonstrates how the historical and political situations have constructed various types of nationalisms in different countries.

Based on the theoretical understandings of above, the paper will mainly focus on Greenfeld’s concept of nationalism. Influenced by the rapid changes in political climate in the 20th century, Korean nationalism transformed into various forms. Because Greenfeld’s concept is more broadly defined than the others, her concept and typology of nationalism would better help us understand the evolution of Korean nationalism which has taken diverse.

In addition, the paper will add another form of nationalism which is cultural nationalism. The core constituent of cultural nationalism is the shared cultural values of nationals. Michael Robinson and Park Chan-seung frame the 1920s to 30s in Korea as the age of cultural nationalism. Under the rule of Japanese colonial rule, the shared cultural values and heritage became the core focus of Koreans because of their lack of citizenship (as Koreans) and the absence of apparent phenotypic difference between Japanese colonizers,

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Methodology

The paper will divide the research into four periods: the one from the 1860s and 1910s, the one from the 1920s to 30s, the one from 1940s to 70s, and finally the one from the 1970s to the present. The paper will point out leading nationalist figures of the time, analyze their nationalistic narratives. It will focus on their definition of Korean nation and see whether they used nationalism for other political agenda. At the same time, the paper will examine the political situations of the time and see how it influenced the leader’s discourse on nationalism.

Nationalism of the period between the 1860s and 1910s will be framed as nationalism of self-preservation. Under foreign duress, Koreans utilized nationalism to protect their sovereignty. The paper will observe four major nationalist movements of the time and examine how the leading figures have utilized nationalism. Nationalism of the 1920s and 30s will be defined as cultural nationalism. Yi Kwang-su, the leader of cultural nationalist movement, and his narrative on the nation would be scrutinized in this section. In the final period, the era of division and ethnic nationalism, the paper will look into two highly influential South Korean leaders, Yi Syngman and Park Chunghee. Likewise, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, the two former leaders of North Korea, would be examined in the North Korean nationalism chapter. Ultimately, looking into the relationship between the political leaders and political climate of the time, this researcher hope to better understand (1) how and why Korean nationalisms of the two Koreas evolved to its current state, (2) how they react to each other, (3) how they have influenced politics and social class system of the two Koreas and vice versa, and (4) how they would influence the reconciliation and the possible reunification of the two Koreas.
The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into eight chapters organized in chronological order. The period that the paper will focus on is the 20th century. Nationalism and the concept of minjok arose in the late 19th century and has been transforming ever since.23 In order to compare and contrast the different nationalisms in two Koreas, the paper will analyze the political situations and historical roots that influenced the evolution of the nationalisms. Korean nationalism generally had the trend of changing from cultural nationalism to ethnic nationalism.24 The paper will focus on the transition of the national identities and what caused the changes.

In chapter two, the paper will offer historical background information of Korea. Since nations, like Korea, often justify their legitimacy from the shared history. The paper will analyze the history of Korean dynasties until the 19th century when nationalism spread into Korea.25 In doing so, it would also compare the difference in historical acknowledgement of the two Koreas.

In chapter three, the paper will look into the origins of the two nationalisms. Korean Nationalism arose in the late 19th century during the Joseon dynasty. The royalty and the elite class utilized the term minjok to solidify their dominance and protect the national security from international threats.26 The perception of nation changed radically after the dynasty fell in 1910.

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25 Ibid. P. 51 -65

In the early 20th century, under the oppressive Japanese colonial government, national awareness became stronger than ever.\(^{27}\) The four historical incidents to be examined are Heungseon Daewongun’s *Soeguk Jeong Chaek*, the *Donghak* movement, the First Sino-Japanese War, the March Movement.

Cultural Nationalism after the March Movement in 1919 would be observed in chapter four. Stung by the March Movement, the Japanese government in Korea implemented a more lenient policy in the 1920s which enabled the Korean intelligentsia to discuss their visions of the nation.\(^{28}\) Rediscovering or inventing a genuine Korean culture, the Korean intelligentsia called for cultural revitalization, and gave birth to the cultural nationalism in Korea. Thus, in this chapter, the paper will analyze the advent and the development of cultural nationalism in Korea from the 1920s to 1930s.

In chapter five, the paper will observe the 1940s when Korea was divided into two. After the end of cultural nationalism, gradualists lost their voices and activists rose into power.\(^ {29}\) Activists broke into two factions: liberalists\(^ {30}\) and socialists. When the Japan was defeated in World War II in 1945, the U.S. and the Soviet Union subsequently occupied Korea with military


\(^{29}\) Ibid. p. 255 -259

\(^{30}\) Many scholars, such as Bruce Cummings and Chong-sik Lee, have used the term idealists to refer this faction mostly because of two reasons: (1) the Korean term for the faction mentioned above is *Isangjuuija*, which can be directly translated as idealists, and (2) the faction followed Wilson’s political idealism, at least initially and outwardly. However, the paper will use the term liberalists instead because it better conveys the nature of this faction. *Isangjuuijas* were too closely related to real politics and made very practical and political choices to be framed as idealists.
forces dividing Korea into two. They employed nationalistic narratives as well, claiming that they are restoring the Korean nation. The paper will offer a historical background of the division and observe the international powers role in the division. At the same time, it would also look into the rise of ethnic nationalism in Korea.

In chapter six, the paper will examine South Korean ethnic nationalism. The chapter will focus on two political leaders who adopted ethnic nationalistic narrative: Yi Syngman and Park Chunghee. Yi established South Korean government and ruled for 12 years. Park Chunghee soon took over the regime with military coup and dictated for almost two decades. Under both regimes, freedom of speech was severely limited and the civil rights of citizens were oppressed, granting Park almost undisputed dominance over the country. As Park was such a powerful dictator, his vision and ideology were imposed on the whole country. But even then, because of the changing political climate, Park’s vision, or at least the vision he promulgated to the country, fluctuated. Hence, in this chapter, the paper will follow his writings in the 1960s and 70s to see how nationalism evolved under his dictatorship.

Similarly, in chapter seven, the paper will analyze the evolution of nationalism in North Korea. Under the leadership of Kim Il-sung, North Korea assumed communism and established


34 Ibid. P. 373

completely different economic and political systems from those of the South.\textsuperscript{36} Since he became the Supreme Leader of North Korea in 1948 and won the internal political faction quarrels in the 1950s, Kim remained in undisputable power until his death in 1994.\textsuperscript{37} His charisma was so powerful that North Korea became the first communist state for a generational leadership succession. In doing so, he utilized a belligerent and nationalistic narrative. After the Korean War in the 1950s, political climate and economic situations within North Korea changed. The international political dynamic changed as well. As a result, nationalism within North Korea transformed. The paper will examine Kim’s works, as a comparison to works of Yi and Park of the same period. Doing so, it hopes to explain how political factors, both domestic and international, are influencing the evolution of nationalism in North Korea.

Korean nationalism, born in Joseon dynasty and nurtured to its heights in the Japanese colonization era, developed radically different in the North and the South after division under different political ideologies. It seems that in the early stages after the division, both Koreas utilized nationalism to strengthen the powers of the dictators. However, after the 1990s, while North Korea remained under powerful dictatorship with family generational succession that resembles a classic dynasty, South Korea achieved a democratic political system after numerous demonstrations against its dictatorship.\textsuperscript{38} The paper will illustrate how the different political climate in the two countries have developed different forms of nationalism and have failed the Koreans’ wishes of peaceful reunification.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Yeok Sa Hak Yeon Gu So. Ed. Yi, Yeong Seon. Korean Modern History for Everyone (Ham Kke Bo Neun Han Guk Geun Hyun Dae Sa). Seo Hae Moon Jip, Republic of Korea. 2004. P. 476 -479
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid. P. 480 -482
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid. P. 423
\end{itemize}
Ultimately, the paper will examine the advent and development of Korean nationalism in chronological order, analyzing how political leaders or institutions have framed the concept of nation and utilized it to acquire political legitimacy. Because the political climates and systems of Korea have rapidly transformed since the 1860s, one would be able to observe the political and historical aspects of Korean nationalism.
Significance

Korea has been divided into two since 1945. Now, 67 years later, the two Koreas that had been a single independent state for more than 1100 years are radically different from one another. Koreans call the division “remnants of WWII” and refer themselves as the “victim of the Cold War.” Although divided and radically different from each other, both Koreas currently assume ethnic nationalism that calls for reunification. Because both South and North Koreans believe that they share ethnic lineage and genealogy, they still assume that the two Koreas are one nation. The rise of ethnic nationalism in the two Koreas seems almost natural because Koreans have been one state for more than 1100 years; sharing territory and history, Koreans today believe that the bloodline of Koreans are “pure.” Based on this, many Koreans assume that they are destined to be a single nation-state. However, it is crucial to understand that even such ethnic nationalisms in the two Korea are different from each other. Affected by different political ideologies and past and current leaderships, the two Koreas have different perspectives of what *minjok* (Korean term for nation or the people of the nation) is, and how they are supposed to be one nation once again. Hence, Korea can be a very interesting case where we see how even when members of the two states imagine themselves to be one nation, nationalism can develop in a drastically different way depending on the political situation.

In addition, Korea is an interesting case where the political leaders, many of them being dictators, have great influence over the general population and its nationalism. Especially during the 1960s and 70s, under the powerful dictators, Park Jung Hee of South Korea and Kim Il-sung of North Korea, Korean nationalisms took radically different paths. They were both ethnic nationalisms that call for reunification, but the actual perspectives about the nation were
drastically different those of the other. The paper will yield an insight into how political climate, like powerful dictators, can transform national identity and visions of the nation.

The paper will also demonstrate how nationalism affects the internal politics in return, influencing the social class system. Interestingly, when both South and North Korean nationalisms utilized anti-Japanese rhetoric after the Korea regained sovereignty, many Yangban families in South Korea still remained in powerful positions in the society when the ones in the North were effectively wiped out by the North Korean government. The paper will examine the role of nationalism in shaping the social class system of Korea.

Analyzing the historical evolution of two Koreas, the paper will also compare the different perspectives of South Korean historians and North Korean historians. Since the division, both Koreas claimed to have the political legitimacy, and this started the legitimacy competition between the two based on the historical perspectives. For example, influenced by Kim Il-sung and his ideology, North Korea focuses on the dynasties that existed at the Northern part of the Korean peninsula while the South Korean perspective encompasses both Northern and Southern parts of Korea. Even when both shared, or claim to share, Korean history, they claim legitimacy on the basis of different narratives. Also, unlike its Southern counterpart, North Korea had to struggle with nationalism because communism calls for international cooperation of the proletariat, the very notion of which transcends national borders. Korea would be an interesting case to look at to analyze the role of nationalism in shaping historical perspectives of nations.

39 Yangban were the elite upper class in the Joseon dynasty. The official class category ceased to exist after the fall of the dynasty but their influence perpetuated in South Korea, because their families continued their economic dominance in South Korea.
Ultimately, the paper hopes to offer critical understanding of the advent and the evolution of Korean nationalism in order to explore the possibilities of reconciliation and reunification of the two.
Chapter II. Korean History Overview

Both South and North Koreans in the present assume that Korea has shared a single historical root, and therefore, is a single nation. Koreans believe that they preserved a cultural uniqueness and single ethnic bloodline; they believe that their shared history shapes them as a nation.\textsuperscript{40} Although nationalism is a modern phenomenon in Korea, nationalists have consistently reasoned that the pre-modern history makes Korea an independent united nation.\textsuperscript{41} Therefore, it is important for one to understand Korean history before delving into their nationalism discourses. Thus, this chapter will illustrate the pre-modern dynasties that existed in Korean peninsula before the advent of Korean nationalism, and how current Korean historians acknowledge them.

One interesting fact about the current Korean nationalism is that even though both South and North Korea claim to share genealogy, history, and ethnicity, their historical narrative vastly

\textsuperscript{40} Kim, Chang-soon. “Korean Nationalism.” Buk Han Magazine. May 2007. P. 25

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid
differ from one another. After the division, South and North Korean governments adopted
different perspectives about Korean history. This is a result of the ideological division between
two Koreas and their different perspectives will be thoroughly scrutinized in this chapter and the
conclusion. In the meantime, to be objective in comparing the two different perspectives, this
section of the thesis will include a general overview of all notable dynasties that existed in the
Korean peninsula. It will also analyze the different historical perspectives of South Korea and
North Korea. To do so, the chapter will examine the South Korean perspective based on a South
Korean history textbook for high school students, and compare it with the North Korean
historical perspective.

Before the division in 1945, Korea had been one independent kingdom for more than
1100 years. The origin of Korean nationalism traces back to Gojoseon, a semi-mythical nation
that was supposedly founded in 2333 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{42} After Gojoseon’s fall in 108 B.C.E., the Korean
peninsula was divided into three states which the Korean historians call the Three Dynasties era;
the three states being Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla.\textsuperscript{43} During this period, Gaya existed between
Baekje and Silla.\textsuperscript{44} Because it was not a monarchy but rather a confederation of small local
states, Gaya is often overlooked. Eventually, with the help of Chinese military, Silla united the
three dynasties through aggressive warfare.\textsuperscript{45} Although Silla conquered the Goguryeo and
Baekje, some of the descendants of Goguryeo defied Silla’s rule and established another dynasty

\begin{itemize}
\item[42] Jung, Jae Jung. Korean History (South Korean History Textbook (officially acknowledged by the South Korean
\item[43] Ibid. P. 25-26
\item[44] Ibid. P. 26
\item[45] Ibid. P. 31
\end{itemize}
called Balhae in the Northern part of Korea. Balhae and Silla coexisted roughly about 300 years and were united by Goryeo dynasty which ruled Korea for about 500 years. Goryeo dynasty fell in 1392 because of the coup de tat by one of the military generals, Yi Seong Gye, who founded Joseon dynasty which some refer to as the Yi dynasty. The Yi dynasty changed its name to the Daehan Empire in 1897 but soon fell to Japanese colonizers in 1910.

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47 Ibid. P. 44

48 Ibid. p. 58

49 Ibid. P. 159
Gojoseon

Unlike the more recent Joseon, Gojoseon, meaning the “old” Joseon in Korean, was a semi-mythical nation that is said to have been founded by Dangun, the founding father of Korea, in 2333 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{50} According to the myth, Dangun was the child of Hwan In, the son of god, and a “she-bear.” Like any other, the exact date and the narrative of the myth is not based on any written historical facts since “there is no written history of Korea until the centuries just before the birth of Christ.”\textsuperscript{51} However, “of obscure origin, Dangun has nonetheless exercised his influence on Koreans in every century since Christ, and no doubt many before” and “nationalist historians assert a linear, homogeneous evolution of the Korean people from the distant point of Dangun’s (Dangun’s) appearance to the Korea of today” (Cummings, 24).

Although Korea’s origin and the founding father remain semi-mythical, both South and North Koreans acknowledge Gojoseon as the single root of Korea, and their nationalism is founded based on “the First Nation,” Gojoseon. As Greenfeld asserts, the foundation of nationalism is an idea of the nation, a perspective the history of the nation, not the actual history.\textsuperscript{52} Whether Gojoseon and Dangun existed as a historical fact does not matter as long as the both South and North Koreans believe so. An interesting fact is that Dangun was ignored, even denounced, in the early days of North Korea (roughly from the 1950s to 70s) but as its nationalism transformed due to the shifting political situations, the North Korean government

\textsuperscript{50} Jung, Jae Jung. Korean History (South Korean History Textbook (officially acknowledged by the South Korean Ministry of Education)). Ji Hak Sa Publishing. Republic of Korea. 2013. P. 20


adopted Dangun for its benefit.\textsuperscript{53}

Three Dynasties era

After the Gojoseon fell, there was a period of decentralization where many powerful tribes arose. “In the first three centuries A.D. [C.E.] a large number of so-called walled states in southern Korea grouped themselves into three federations, known as Chinhan, Mahan, and Pyonhan,” while in the Northern part of Korea, states like Buyeo and Goguryeo rose.\textsuperscript{54} The tribes then conquered each other forming themselves into three monarchies in the Korean peninsula; this period is often called the Three Dynasties era by Korean historians.\textsuperscript{55} Goguryeo was a strong military kingdom located at the Northern part of Korea (B.C.E. 37 – C.E. 668).\textsuperscript{56} Baekje was a civilized kingdom situated in the Southwestern part of Korea (B.C.E. 18 – C.E. 660), and Silla, another civilized kingdom in the Southeastern corner of Korea, was the first to establish centralized government among the three.\textsuperscript{57} It was situated in the Southeastern part of Korea and conquered the other two, militarily supported by the Tang dynasty of China (B.C.E. 57 – C.E. 935).\textsuperscript{58} Although “certainly some of the characteristics of each kingdom had survivals in unified Korea, … there was way too much warfare, migration and intermingling to make for a homogeneous race of people, distinct from their neighbors, and far too little verifiable historical material for us to know the boundaries, ethnic stock, and linguistic differences among the three

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. P. 26-27
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. P. 27. 31
The current regionalism within Korea has its original roots from the Three Dynasties era; North Korea is formerly the area of Goguryeo and South Korea is formerly the areas of Baekje and Silla. Even within South Korea today, people of the Cholla province, where Baekje used to be, and people of Gyeongsang, forerunning Silla, are frequently in conflict. Thus, the Three dynasties era may be the most controversial period between the two Koreas because they recognize different ancestry. North Korea derives its legitimacy solely from Goguryeo, and subsequent Balhae which was also located in the North after Goguryeo fell under Silla. In contrast, South Korea acknowledges all three dynasties as a part of its lineage and there have been recent efforts from South Korean scholars to acknowledge Balhae as part of its history. They are also “rediscovering” Gaya, the confederation of powerful city-states that was situated between Silla and Baekje. The difference in historical acknowledgement demonstrates utilization of regionalism; both governments are struggling for legitimacy by the two Korean governments.

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62 Ibid. p. 192


64 Despite the rising awareness of Gaya, the fourth state during the three dynasties era, many Korean history scholars still refer to this period as the “three dynasties era” because Gaya did not have a centralized government. But Gaya’s existence and its heritage is being more acknowledged in the South Korean history textbooks. See Jung, Jae Jung. Korean History (South Korean History Textbook (officially acknowledged by the South Korean Ministry of Education)). Ji Hak Sa Publishing. Republic of Korea. 2013. P. 27-30
Silla/Balhae era

The Silla era is generally acknowledged by South Korean history textbooks as the first period when Koreans reunified after the fall of Gojoseon. Formerly called Saro, Silla allied with Tang China and conquered Goguryeo and Baekje in the AD 660s. One of the military elite groups of Silla was called the hwarangs, and “the warrior oath of the hwarang symbolized the mix of Buddhism and Confucianism that had come to characterize Korean thought by this time.” The spirits required of hwarangs combined Buddhism and Confucianism that was prevalent among the three countries.

However, the North Korean perspective is different from that of the South. “In spite of Silla’s military triumphs in the seventh century, broad territories of Koguryo were not conquered, and a section of the Koguryo elite under a general named Tae Cho-yong established a successor state known as Balhae.” The descendants of Goguryeo, who refused the Silla rule, established Balhae in the Northern part of Korea and “saw itself as the embodiment of old Koguryo.” North Korea currently does not acknowledge Silla as a unified kingdom of Korea and views that Balhae held the political legitimacy over Silla.

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66 Ibid.


68 Ibid. p. 28 -29. 33


70 Ibid.

Nonetheless, Silla “developed a thriving indigenous civilization, one of the most advanced in the world.” After uniting the three dynasties under a centralized government in Kyoungjoo city, Silla established Buddhism as a national religion. Without any states to dispute Silla’s rule, Silla enjoyed a peaceful period of dominance which enabled it to nurture Buddhist arts; relics of the time still exist demonstrating the advanced craftsmanship of Silla. Silla remained a powerful and culturally rich state till the 10th century. But, “Silla’s power began to dissipate in the ninth century when influential regional leaders splintered central power and rebellions shook the state’s foundations,” and eventually fell under Goryeo.

This period is also controversial between South and North Korean historians. South Koreans frame this period as the “United Silla period,” acknowledging Silla as the first kingdom to unite the three ever since Gojoseon. In contrast, North Korean historians do not even try to acknowledge this period; Silla’s unification era constitutes only 7-10% in the major history book published by the North Korean government, Joseon Tongsa. North Korean historians denounce Silla’s unification saying, “it extremely foolish and dependent on others to fix the internal problems with the aid of foreign country.” They believe Silla does not hold the historical and political legitimacy of Korean nation because Silla called for help of Tang dynasty of China to unify the three kingdoms. Also, one should remind that North Korean historians stress Goguryeo

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74 Ibid. P. 31-34
77 Ibid. p. 192
history much more than that of Silla, acknowledging Goguryeo to be the kingdom with true national sovereignty and political legitimacy.\textsuperscript{78} They believe the Silla sold Korean sovereignty that Goguryeo held to the Tang dynasty of China.

\textsuperscript{78} Jung, Doo Hee. One History, Two Perspectives. Sonamu publishing. Republic of Korea. 2001. P. 202
Goryeo Era

By the ninth century, “Silla’s decline encouraged ‘restorationists’ of both the defeated Paekche and the still-extant Goguryeo (through the vehicle of Parhae) to try and bring this great dynasty to an end.”79 The former Goguryeo and Baekje descendants, who preserved their culture, established the Later Goguryeo and Later Baekje in the regions of Korea where the two states flourished. Wang Geon, the founding father of Goryeo, was among these restorationists.80 He was a military general of Later Goguryeo under Gung Ye, the founder and the leader of Later Goguryeo.81 Gung Ye was initially an efficient political leader who united the local leaders under the name of Later Goguryeo, but later on, he became a violent dictator. Seeing this, Wang Geon rose up against Gung Ye’s rule.82 After his coup d’état against Gung Ye, Wang Geon then changed the name of the country into Goryeo, which is the etymology of “Korea” in English.83 Goryeo was the nation that both South and North Koreans acknowledge as a unified Korean kingdom. While North Korean historians belittle Silla’s unification of three dynasties, they uphold the foundation of Goryeo because it embraced people of Balhae and recovered large portion of Goguryeo’s territory.84

Learning from the mistakes of Silla, Wang Geon actively embraced the local leaders by

81 Ibid
82 Ibid. P. 44
83 Ibid
marrying their family members. In doing so, Wang Geon successfully gained the support of the regional clans and tribes, centralizing the government. However, Wang Geon did not neglect all the legacies of Silla as he proclaimed Buddhism to be the state religion. By implementing Buddhism as a way to achieve political stability, Wang Geon ascribed a single identity to different tribes combining the different cultures in the Korean peninsula. Goryeo embraced both Silla and Balhae which created the united nation now divided into modern day North and South Korea.

Goryeo adopted a class system where the intellectuals called Mun Beol elites (meaning intellectual faction in Korean) were venerated and placed above any class but the royals, but by the early 13th century, these elites started to abuse their power; they became so powerful that they forced the royals to marry their children and amended the laws to exploit the lower classes. Military officials resented the class system where intellectuals were placed above them, and in 1170, military coup led by Jung Joong Boo slaughtered Mun Beols in high government positions and the military officials rose into power. From 1170 to 1270 (roughly for 100 years), military officials basically ruled Goryeo; they were powerful than the king and dominated in the high

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87 North Korean historians believe so because Goryeo dynasty recovered the “historical legitimacy and heritage.” They believe Goryeo unifying Korea without foreign help made it as the “first truly unified country after Gojoseon.” See Jung, Doo Hee. One History, Two Perspectives. Sonamu publishing. Republic of Korea. 2001. P. 195


89 Ibid P. 46

90 Ibid. p. 47
government positions.\textsuperscript{91} This period is called as Mu Shin Jeong Gwon (meaning the Military Regime in Korean).\textsuperscript{92} The military regime eventually fell when the Yuan dynasty of Mongol invaded Korea in the 1230s. The South Korean history textbook analyzes the Mongol invasion as “ordeals threatening the Korean sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{93} After 40 years of war, the Goryeo government surrendered, but Sam Byul Cho, a national military police of Goreyo led by Bae Joong Son, independently continued the war with Yuan dynasty for 4 more years until the its last troops were dismantled in Jeju island.\textsuperscript{94} The fight of Sam Byul Cho is considered by the South Korean historians as patriotic and nationalistic actions.\textsuperscript{95} North Korean historians share this perspective. While North Korean historians denounce the military regime, evaluating it as “bureaucratic, selfish, and anti-people regime,” they highlight the 40 years of war against the Yuan dynasty as “people’s struggle that eventually fought off the Mongol invasion in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century.”\textsuperscript{96} As Yuan dynasty started to weaken, its influence over Goryeo diminished as well.\textsuperscript{97} But the domestic and international disputes of Goryeo have already severely weakened the dynasty.

\textsuperscript{91} Jung, Jae Jung. Korean History (South Korean History Textbook (officially acknowledged by the South Korean Ministry of Education)). Ji Hak Sa Publishing. Republic of Korea. 2013. P. 47

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. p. 49

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid

\textsuperscript{96} Jung, Doo Hee. One History, Two Perspectives. Sonamu publishing. Republic of Korea. 2001. P. 197. 199

\textsuperscript{97} Jung, Jae Jung. Korean History (South Korean History Textbook (officially acknowledged by the South Korean Ministry of Education)). Ji Hak Sa Publishing. Republic of Korea. 2013. P. 49 -50
Joseon Era

At the late stage of Goryeo, Mongols, one of the strongest military empires in human history, was in decline and the Ming dynasty of China rose to power.\(^9^8\) Goryeo officials debated who Goryeo should side with. Yi Seong-gye, the founding father of Joseon dynasty, was a military general among the pro-Ming party.\(^9^9\) However, the last King of Goryeo ordered him to “Marshal their [Goryeo’s] forces for an assault on Ming armies in the Liao-t’ung peninsula; Yi Seong-gye had an abrupt change of mind; he reached the Yalu River only to turn back and charge toward the Koryo [Goryeo] capital, which he subdued quickly. He thus became the founder of Korea’s longest-ruling dynasty, the Choson [Joseon] (1392 – 1910).”\(^1^0^0\)

Soon after the establishment of Joseon, Yi faced downsides of the coup; because many of the elites of Goryeo still remained in power, Yi had to struggle against great political resistance. Koreans were used to the Goryeo rule, its culture, and its system. Thus, Yi implemented different sets of policies and embrace a different ideology, Confucianism.\(^1^0^1\) One of the greatest strengths of Confucianism is its social consolidation power. Because it upholds a hierarchal social order and commands followers to “use the virtues to discipline the passions and interests,” Confucianism soon gave Yi the legitimacy he needed.\(^1^0^2\) Bruce Cummings states that

All the reforming came in the name of Neo-Confucianism and Chu Hsi, the great

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\(^9^8\) Jung, Jae Jung. Korean History (South Korean History Textbook (officially acknowledged by the South Korean Ministry of Education)). Ji Hak Sa Publishing. Republic of Korea. 2013. P. 50

\(^9^9\) Ibid


\(^1^0^1\) Jung, Jae Jung. Korean History (South Korean History Textbook (officially acknowledged by the South Korean Ministry of Education)). Ji Hak Sa Publishing. Republic of Korea. 2013. P. 50

progenitor of this doctrine. Much of what we now reckon as ‘Korean culture’ or ‘Korean tradition’ was the result of this major social reorganization accomplished by self-conscious ideologues, who got going in the fifteenth century. What started as a military putsch by General Yi ended up centuries later in the apparent solidarity of a hierarchical Confucian society.\footnote{Cummings, Bruce. Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History. W.W. Norton & Company. Unites States of America. 1997. P. 48}

Under Confucianism which venerates loyalty to the king, Yi and his successors enjoyed a great amount of centralized power.\footnote{Jung, Jae Jung. Korean History (South Korean History Textbook (officially acknowledged by the South Korean Ministry of Education)). Ji Hak Sa Publishing. Republic of Korea. 2013. P. 58 -59} It may be seen as the single most important factor that made Joseon the longest unified dynasty in Korean history. Within this system, social elites of Joseon, Yangbans, ruled over peasants. There were mainly five social classes: royals who were at the top, Yangbans at the upper class, farmers at the middle, merchants at the lower-middle, and slave class at the bottom.\footnote{Ibid. p. 66-67} Undergirded by the Confucius teachings, the social class system was extremely rigid.\footnote{Ibid} Yangbans were literate, owned large portions of lands, and did not have to provide national services (\textit{Guk Yeok}) that were forced on to the lower classes. They also were the only class, other than the royals, allowed in the government positions.\footnote{Ibid} The Yangban class maintained its dominance throughout Joseon dynasty and even perpetuated its influence in the South Korean government after the division of two Koreas. Yangban and its influence in the social class system will be further examined in the later chapters. Under this Confucius system, Joseon was able to protect its sovereignty. However, it faced more international threats beginning in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century when the modernized imperial countries, like Japan and European countries,
started to aggressively expand themselves. The dynasty eventually fell in 1910 under the Japanese military rule.

The perspectives of South and North Korean scholars vastly differ in the establishment of Joseon. South Korean historians claim that foundation of Joseon was inevitable because of the internal and external disputes within Goryeo society. They also evaluate Joseon to have cultivated the national culture and enhanced the life quality of the lower classes. While the South Korean perspective is positive toward Joseon, the North Korean perspective is extremely negative. North Korean historians decry Yi Seong Gye’s coup as “cowardly treason which allowed Yi family to be the selfish royals.” They also criticize Joseon’s social structure and Confucianism, claiming that the Confucius teachings made Joseon a tributary ally of China, and made the rigid social class division. North Korean historians stress only two things within the Joseon period: the resistance movements against foreign threats and internal peasant movements.

Interestingly, despite its hatred toward Joseon period, North Korea today strikingly resembles Joseon. When North Korea criticizes Yi Seong Gye and his family for being the royals without the political legitimacy, the Kim family and their generational succession are no different from Joseon’s Yi family. In addition, contrary to their outward claim, rigid social class system

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109 Ibid

110 Ibid. 201


112 Ibid. 204
based on the “Kim cult” exists within North Korea just like the class system of Joseon.\textsuperscript{113} Also, North Korea is currently just as dependent on China as Joseon was. Lastly, North Korean nationalism is focused on resistance of foreign threats, and this highly resembles the self-preservation nationalism in the late Joseon period.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{113} “Kim cult” will be further discussed in the North Korean Nationalism chapter.

\textsuperscript{114} The north Korean nationalism and the self-preservation nationalism of Joseon will be discussed in the following chapters.
Chapter III. Nationalism of Self-Preservation in Korea

From the 1860s to the 1910s

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, Korea has been invaded or influenced by foreign countries numerous times. The transactions with foreign countries drastically increased in the late 19th century when the imperialist countries such as the U.S. and France reached out to Korea. Experiencing bitter encounters with the other countries, Korea deliberately rejected foreign political influences. This gave birth to nationalism in Korea in the 19th century.

Scholars have very different perspectives about the genesis of Korean nationalism. Differing opinions among scholars about Korean nationalism seem to reflect different perspectives of nationalism. Some, like Lee Chong-sik, date it from the First Sino-Japanese War.

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in 1894 because there was an immediate and physical foreign threat within Korea that urged Koreans to gravitate together. They believe that only when the Koreans were threatened by the physical existence of foreign influences did they unite under nationalism. Others, like Yi Hyun Hee, date from the March Movement of 1919 because it was the first nationwide upheaval against the oppressive Japanese colonizers.116 Many Western scholars, like Bruce Cummings, who study Korean history, tend to focus on the March Movement because it was the most explicit nation-wide call of Koreans for Korea’s sovereignty against foreign influences.117 In contrast, Kim Young Jak and the ones who believe the consolidation of nationals under the name of nation trace the advent of Korean nationalism from the Donghak peasant movement which was initiated by the lower classes to protect Korea from foreign influences.118

This section of the paper will analyze these events that are considered the basis of Korean nationalism. The nationalism of this period was developed in the course of resistance against the Japanese colonization; this is the basis for the later development of cultural nationalism in the 1920s and 30s.119

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Heungseon Daewongun’s *Soeguk Jeong Chaek*

The first nation-wide policy built from nationalism was the *Soeguk Jeong Chaek*, meaning the policy of closing national borders.\(^{120}\) The political leader at the time who implemented the policy was Heungseon Daewongun. Based on the monarchal tradition of the Joseon dynasty, the oldest prince took over the throne when the former king died. But when the king died without direct heir, one of the young royals was chosen to be the king, and his father was appointed as a Daewongun, a government position given specifically to King’s father. When the Gojong, Heungseon Daewongun’s son and the last king of the Joseon dynasty, became the king on December 1863, he was only 12 years old. As a result, Heungseon Daewongun rose to power, and implemented the *Soeguk Jeong Chaek*, a seclusion policy.\(^{121}\) Under the *Soeguk Jeong Chaek*, Joseon became not only seclusive but antagonistic toward foreign influences. China, Japan, France, and the U.S. endeavored to penetrate the Joseon dynasty even using military force\(^{122}\). Such efforts made Joseon only more seclusive. Heungseon Daewongun believed that foreign influences harmed Joseon’s cultural homogeneity and political sovereignty, and implemented *Saoe Guk Jung Chaek*, a nationalist policy.\(^{123}\)

Heungseon Daewongun never used the term *minjok*, but the intent of his *Soeguk Jeong Chaek* was clearly to protect the sovereignty of Joseon dynasty against foreign threats. His anti-imperialistic tendency is clear as he says “the West and Japan have invaded our country for centuries. ... Since China has agreed on a treaty with them, they became more violent than ever,


\(^{121}\) Ibid. P. 23

\(^{122}\) Ibid. P. 24

\(^{123}\) Ibid. P. 25
committing crimes and hurting people. But their actions will not be tolerated in our country (Na Ra) as our founding father of our nation is looking after us from the heavens.”

Although he does not directly use the term minjok or define what our country is, Heungseon Daewongun actively promoted nationalistic awareness in Joseon as a reaction against foreign threats.

Although Heungseon Daewongun’s policy is controversial because it deterred Joseon from international interactions and modernization, there is little disagreement that his policy was nationalistic in nature. Kim Heaseung, a Korean scholar who studies Korean nationalism, says “Heungseon Daewongun’s international policy was not a seclusion policy; rather it was an anti-invasion resistance policy. The ideology behind the policy was to maintain Joseon’s sovereignty, and to strengthen the country both militarily and fiscally. In other words, Heungseon Daewongun tried to convert Korean nationalism into a policy.”

Developing a nationalistic atmosphere in Joseon through an implementation of Saoe Guk Jung Chaek, Heungseon Daewongun actively fostered nationalism and utilized it to solidify his political legitimacy. In the end, as Robinson asserts

Korean nationalism was born in the fifty years that preceded the fall of the Yi dynasty and the advent of Japanese rule after 1910. Initially, nationalism in Korea was a response to an international threat to the traditional political and social order of the Yi dynasty. At one level, the Yi dynasty elite sought to preserve Korean political autonomy and cultural integrity by revitalizing the traditional system.

Heungseon Daewongun’s Soeguk Jeong Chaek clearly portrays his effort to protect Korea’s political autonomy under foreign duress. Another thing to be noted is that Heungseon

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124 Gojong Sil Rok. Historic Recording of Joseon royals. See the book written in September 1867


Daewongun attempted to modernize Korea while rejecting foreign forces; he was a revolutionist after all, trying to fix the wrong doings of former kings of Joseon. The first nationalistic policy in Korea, *Soeguk Jeong Chaek*, was implemented against political threats of imperialistic countries.

**The Enlightenment Faction**

After Heungseon Daewongun’s decline in the 1870s, different perspectives of the nation arose.

By the 1880s, however, a new progressive elite had emerged opposing this approach. The progressives also wished to preserve Korean political autonomy, but their vision as to what constituted the nation and what means were necessary to accomplish this goal was profoundly different. It was from this beginning that the modern nationalist intellectual elite emerged.127

This new progressive faction of intellectuals was comprised of Yangbans as well. They called themselves the “Enlightenment Faction” (Gae Hwa Pa). The leading intellectual of the faction was Kim Ok-gyun and Park Yeong-hyo. When Heungseon Daewongun lost power, *Soeguk Jeong Chaek* became no longer effective, and the enlightenment faction took advantage of this; they went to Japan and learned the importance of modernization.128 When they came back to Joseon, they were infuriated that Joseon was once again relying on China.129 Before *Soeguk Jeong Chaek*, Joseon respected China as the senior country and paid tribute. *Soeguk Jeong Chaek* forbid this but when young King Gojong and Queen Myeongseong rose to power in an effort to deter Japanese influence in Korean politics, Korea again relied on China.130 In the end, the

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129 Ibid. P. 34

enlightenment faction decided for a military coup and succeeded in October 17, 1994, killing many of the political leaders of the conservative faction; the revolt is referred as *Gapsin Jung Byun* (the political revolt in *Gapsin* year (1884)).\textsuperscript{131} The enlightenment faction then placed themselves in high government positions. However, this coup regime did not last more than three days. Three days later, Chinese army attacked the enlightenment faction and killed seven major figures; the rest fled to Japan.\textsuperscript{132} Aided by Chinese army, the conservative faction of Yangban took control of the government again. An interesting fact is that the enlightenment faction tried to bring Heungseon Daewongun back to power. This was because though they had slightly different perspective of Korean nation, Heungseon Daewongun and the enlightenment faction agreed on two major things: protection of Joseon’s sovereignty and modernization. In the end, both *Soeguk Jeong Chaek* and *Gapsin Jung Byun* can be viewed as nationalist movements.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. 37

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. 39
The Donghak ideology and Donghak peasant Movement

Regardless of different opinions of the advent of Korean nationalism, there seem to be very little disagreement that more nationalistic awareness spread during the late Joseon dynasty. Heungseon Daewongun’s policy was successful in rejecting foreign influences, but 10 years after he rose to power, Heungseon Daewongun lost his political legitimacy as his son Gojong became old enough to rule Joseon by himself. After Heungseon Daewongun’s decline in the 1870s, different perspectives of the nation arose.

Donghak ideology was one of these different nationalist perspectives, and was the most influential one. Founded in 1860 by Choe Je-u, the Donghak ideology was extremely widespread especially in the Southern part of Korea. The basic principle of Donghak can be characterized as “Save the nation, make people peaceful” (Bo Guk An Min). Donghak ideology was similar to Heungseon Daewongun’s Soeguk Jeong Chaek in that it rejected foreign influences, but its focus was clearly in the people, not the king or the Joseon dynasty. It focused on the dignity of individuals that has often been disregarded in the class system of Joseon. Donghak was founded by Choe Je-u who was born as an elite but became a lower class because of the death of his father. Experiencing two different social classes, he cried out for equality, and many mid-level elites adopted his ideology. This was because the mid-level elites at the time were the lowest literate class. Common people were illiterate, and therefore had difficulty reading and understanding the complicated scripture Choe wrote. However, later on his ideology was

134 Ibid. P. 215
135 Ibid. P. 214 -218
136 Ibid
eventually passed on to the lower class; Choe died in 1864 but his ideology continued on, and later on influenced a peasant movement which present day scholars characterize as the *Donghak* peasant movement.

The *Donghak* peasant movement was initiated in February 15, 1894 in Cholla province, one of the Southern provinces where Donghak ideology was prevalent. Jun Bong Jun, the leader of the *Donghak* movement, and a small group of impoverished farmers rose against corrupt local government officials. The peasant soon adopted the pre-existing *Donghak* ideology of Choe Je-u, the founder of *Donghak*.\(^{137}\) Adopting the *Donghak* ideology, the farmers’ revolt in Cholla province enlarged itself in an immense velocity, and on May 31\(^{st}\), 1894, the movement took control of the southern half of the Korean peninsula. Until it was subdued by the joint military forces of the Joseon government and the Japanese army on May 1\(^{st}\), 1895, *Donghak* peasant force remained as powerful in southern Korea.\(^{138}\)

*Donghak* was a very nationalistic movement because it was developed when Joseon was under foreign duress, such as the ones from the U.S., Japan, France, and so on. Its ideology built from two oppositions: anti-feudalism and opposition to foreign forces. Such a tendency is apparent in Jeon Bong-jun’s principles written in May, 1894:

1. Do not kill people or harm their belongings
2. Be loyal to your country and parents. Save the world and make people peaceful.
3. Banish Japanese forces and purify the divine national capital
4. Ride to Seoul and exterminate the corrupt.\(^{139}\)

The second and third parts of the principles clearly illustrate the existence of a nationalism of


\(^{138}\) Ibid. P. 56

\(^{139}\) Guk Sa Pyon Chan Wui Won Hoi. Historical review of Korean government historical department. Available at the Korean Congress Library. See the book written in 1971
self-preservation. Endeavoring to oust the Japanese forces within Korea, *Donghak* viewed itself as a movement “saving Korea.” The first and fourth parts depict *Donghak*’s anti-feudal tendency. At the time, many of feudal elites of Joseon, Yangbans, were corrupt, exploiting the means of living of lower social classes like local farmers. Because Yangbans were literate and local farmers were not, it was easy for Yangbans to manipulate the land possession documents of free farmers, and seize the land for themselves; having been stripped of means to survive, these farmers became peasants or slaves. On top of that, peasant class was solely responsible for military service and certain taxes which Yangban did not have to offer. In this social milieu, peasants rose up against the Yangbans, and soon adopted *Donghak* ideology which also focused on the equality amongst various social classes. As a result, the *Donghak* peasant movement was focused on removing corrupt government officials, Yangbans, to improve the civil rights of farmers.

Although, the two characteristics of *Donghak*, anti-foreign and anti-feudal, may seem distinct from one another, they intricately intertwine with one another because both are based on a belief that people, not just the elites, should be allowed their civil rights. Jeon describes the ideology of the movement asserting, “People are the foundation of the country. When the foundation wanes, the country would fall.” This was a revolutionary idea because Joseon was under a hierarchical Confucianist system where the king solely assumed political legitimacy, and social elites, Yangbans, holding the economic and political power. The initial farmers’ revolution

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141 Ibid. P. 20

142 Dong Hak Nan Gi Rok. The historic recording of Dong Hak movement. Available at the Korean Congress Library. P. 142
gained support of the general population as it assumed *Donghak* and its nationalistic perspective. When the peasants’ revolution was focused on eliminating corrupt elites, *Donghak* embraced the nationalistic perspective, granting political legitimacy based on the support of Koreans; the anti-feudal movement became more powerful as it combined with the opposition to foreign forces because the combination of the two effectively legitimized the movement.

Although the Heungseon Daewongun’s *Soeguk Jeong Chaek* and *Donghak* are essentially different in nature, both assumed nationalistic narratives and actively utilized them to legitimize their political actions. The difference between Heungseon Daewongun’s policy and *Donghak* is that when both called for the sovereignty of the nation, because *Donghak* was a grass-roots nationalistic movement (with early elite roots), it envisioned a new form of Joseon. While Heungseon Daewongun utilized nationalism to preserve the power of Joseon elites, *Donghak* used nationalism to modify the system. However, one should note that both *Soeguk Jeong Chaek* and *Donghak* were developed under foreign duress, assuming nationalism as self-preservation, and thereby, gained support of the general population.
The First Sino-Japanese War

Although Donghak’s nationalistic narrative gained the support of Koreans, the movement did not persist long. As the revolution enlarged, the Joseon government felt threatened and sought help from China to subdue the movement. China ineffectively reacted to the request, but Japan actively dispatched its troops because Joseon asking China for help violated a long-established treaty with Japan. “The opportunity desired by the Japanese expansionists was very conveniently given by the Donghak rebellion.” The Donghak movement was brutally repressed on May 1, 1895, but even after the fall of the rebellion, both Japan and China refused to withdraw their troops. Because Japan and China viewed Korea as the buffer zone of the two, they wanted to gain more control over Joseon. The Korean peninsula subsequently became the war zone of the two when “the Japanese engaged the Chinese fleet in its first modern sea battle on June 25 and subsequently defeated the crumbling Chinese forces at sea and on land.” The War ended with Yuan Shikai, the Chinese general, fleeing back to China, and “the Japanese consolidated their position in Korea.”

Japanese ambition enlarged as it gained more control over Joseon. “The cabinet was reorganized under Japanese hegemony and staffed with pro-Japanese and neutral members … Various governmental reforms were initiated under Japanese supervision.” Joseon rapidly fell into Japanese control, and now the major political enemy the Japanese faced was the queen,

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144 Ibid
145 Ibid. P. 41
146 Ibid
147 Ibid
Queen Myeongseong, whom they decided to take out. The account of Yi Pom-jin depicts the Japanese atrocities:

Japanese soldiers, entering from the Kwanhwa Gate, surrounded the building occupied by the king and queen. Under the protection of the troops, thirty or more soshi (strong men in Japanese) rushed in with drawn swords and searched the private rooms. They seized the palace women, dragged them about by the hair, and beat them to make them divulge the whereabouts of the queen … The soshi finally found the queen hiding in a side room and cut her down with their swords. Her body was then wrapped up with a silk quilt and taken to a grove of trees not far distant; wood was piled around, kerosene was poured on, and all was set on fire.\(^{148}\)

The queen’s assassination struck Koreans with immense shock. Under Confucianism teachings, the king and queen represented the country. As manifested in Soeguk Jeong Chaek and Donghak, Koreans were aware of the foreign threats, but it was the first time in Korean history that foreign assassins murdered the queen in her own palace. “Although the assassination of the queen did not evoke any large-scale revolt, the news of it traveled afar, and indignation against Japanese became deeply implanted in the Korean people.”\(^{149}\)

The fury against the Japanese transformed into nationalistic discourses and actions. Kim Gu, an important nationalist leader of a later period, provides us with an interesting illustration:

After this defeat [queen’s assassination] Kim Gu took upon himself the task of revenge. Early in 1896 he met a strange man at a ferry station between Seoul and Anak – a Japanese in disguise. Since the man was traveling under a Korean name and was secretly carrying a Japanese sword, Kim Gu concluded that he must have had a part in the assassination of the queen, or in any event was a person harmful for Korea. Determined to revenge the national grievance, Kim attacked the Japanese and killed him.\(^{150}\)

Although Kim was not certain whether the stranger was the queen’s assassin, his fury


\(^{149}\) Ibid. P. 46

\(^{150}\) Ibid
transformed into a vengeful nationalistic action. Like Kim’s account, many regional and individual uproars broke out, which the Korean historians refer to as the *Eulmi Ui Byung*, meaning “the Soldiers of Justice in *Eulmi* year (1895).” However, the nationalistic individual actions were never centrally organized.

The assassination of the Queen shocked King Gojong and he moved his residence from his own palace to Russian embassy for his safety in February, 1897.\(^{151}\) The general population of Korea pleaded the King numerous times to return to his palace, and only after six months did he return to the palace. To recover his political dominance, the king proclaimed Korea to be an imperial state, like Japan and China, and instated himself as the emperor in 1897.\(^ {152}\) He changed the name of the country from Joseon to the Daehan Jeguk (the Daehan Empire). In doing so, he tried to ensure his political legitimacy and gain more equal status with the Japanese. Because the proclamation of the Daehan Empire was intended to gain political sovereignty against the imperialistic countries, king Gojong’s efforts can be viewed as a nationalistic effort.

The King believed that the first priority is to modernize the empire, and to do so, he established the Independence Club. The goal of the club was mainly two things: (1) regaining the sovereignty of Korea, and (2) modernization.\(^ {153}\) As one can see, the initial goals of the club were very nationalistic and many nationalist intellectuals joined the club. But soon, the government felt threatened by the existence of the club because many intellectuals leading the club, including Seo Jae-pil, believed that the King’s power should be much more limited than before.\(^ {154}\) So, the

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\(^ {152}\) Ibid

\(^ {153}\) Ibid. P. 71

\(^ {154}\) Ibid. p. 73
government disbanded the club in December, 1898.\textsuperscript{155}

In conclusion, the First Sino-Japanese War resulted in two nationalistic efforts: the \textit{Eulmi Ui Byung} and the proclamation of the Daehan Empire and the Independence Club. Although these nationalistic efforts were unsuccessful, they were intended to recover Korea’s sovereignty against the Japanese threat to the nation.

**Advent of the Concept \textit{minjok}\**

One thing to be noted is that the modern Korean term for nation, \textit{minjok}, was rarely used until this period, the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Nationalism in Korea was developed as a reaction to threats of the expansionist and imperialistic states. Facilitating nationalistic discourse, Korean nationalists claimed a need for a Korean definition of nation. The modern term for nation in Korea is \textit{minjok}. Koreans adopted the Western concept of nation, \textit{minjok}, through Japan and China only by the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Before then, the most common term of referring to nation was \textit{jokryu}, the closest English translation being the “lineage of tribes.”\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Jokryu} was commonly used since the Joseon period to distinguish Koreans from the Manchu, and the Japanese. The trend changed in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century when Korea faced tremendous international threats of imperialistic countries, like that of Japan. At the same time, the worldwide urge for modernization spread into Korea as well. Situated at the Far Northeastern corner of continental Asia, Korea had very few international interactions besides those with China and Japan until then. As transportation technology advanced and countries that are far apart became more intertwined,

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Korea was influenced by other countries more than ever. Under foreign duress and influences, nationalism arose in Korea and the term minjok was developed along with it. As Andre Schmid states in his book, “the term minjok was part of the new lexicon that accompanied the rise of nationalism in East Asia.”\(^\text{157}\) Having few international encounters, Koreans did not have the incentive to define themselves as an independent nation until the 19\(^{th}\) century. When nationalism rose in East Asia, the term minjok was developed in Korea as a definition of national categorization.

Pronounced minjok in Korean, minzu in Chinese, and minzoku in Japanese, the two characters of this neologism had strong resonances with ancient terms for ethnic or racial groupings. The first character, min, appeared in the most ancient texts as a term for ‘people,’ whereas the second character, also present in classical texts, denoted the ‘clan,’ ‘tribe,’ or ‘family.’ Both terms were separately combined with other characters to designate a variety of social groupings, variously translated in English as ‘ethnicity’ or ‘race.’ However, it seems that in none of the premodern writings of Korea, China, or Japan were these two characters regularly linked as a single compound to designate large collectivities.\(^\text{158}\)

Because Korea, China and Japan culturally interacted with one another even in the pre-modern era, many Korean and Japanese words are based on Chinese characters. But minjok, minzu, or minzoku were never the terms to define the social aggregation of nation until the 19\(^{th}\) century when nationalism arose in East Asia. Although both characters min and jok represent a form of social cohesiveness, the combination of the two was rarely used in the past.

It did not take long for the term to be predominantly used by nationalists in East Asia. The exact origin of the term still remains obscure, but it is apparent that “the term rarely appears in the canonical texts of various streams of the Korean nationalist movement in the ten years


\(^\text{158}\) Ibid
before the Protectorate Treaty of 1905.”159 Japanese nationalists were the first to employ the term in East Asia and Chinese nationalists soon followed. Most of the modernity and industrialization developed in Japan influenced Korea and China because Japan was the most accepting of modernization among the three. Many Korean nationalist intellectuals “did not employ the word minjok in the early stages of the nationalist movement because it had not yet found a conspicuous place in their conception and definition of the nation.”160 The earliest nation-wide use of minjok in Korea appeared in Hwansong Sinmun, a widespread influential newspaper at the time, in 1904 (Park: 2010, 65). On October 7th, 1904, Baek Dong Hyun, one of the earliest nationalists in Korea defined the term Korean minjok as a “nation of four thousands years of legacy” in Hwansong Sinmun. Baek’s narrative clearly demonstrates one of the characteristics of Korean nationalism: its tendency to legitimize itself by drawing from the past.

One thing that should be noted about the term minjok is its ambiguous origins. Although minjok is a neologism, it consciously deemphasizes its modern advent. The combination of min and jok “two venerable characters traditionally used to denote various types of social groups – served to blur the term’s recent origins, suggesting an etymology that, like the claims being made for the nation, stretched into the distant past.”161 Synthesizing the two characters that have come to represent a form of social structure in the past, the term minjok became the major term defining nation.

As mentioned in chapter two, under the rule of Joseon, Korea assumed Confucianism as the national ideology; this served to centralize the government and establish legitimacy of the


160 Ibid

161 Ibid
monarchic rule. Based on Confucianism teachings, the general population has highly valued the past. Therefore, it is crucial to understand Korean history and examine from which part political leaders draw political legitimacy from. The invention of the term “minjok” and the conscious de-emphasis of its recent birth were an nationalist effort to solidify Koreans and fight off the foreign influences.
Japanese Colonization Phase I

The March Movement

Despite Koreans’ endeavors to remain politically autonomous, Japanese political hegemony remained strong in Korea. Watching the defeat of China, which “had been the recognized suzerain of Korea for several centuries,” Korea sought another powerful country to deter Japanese hegemony in Korea.\textsuperscript{162} It eventually reached out to Russia, but the Japanese defeated Russia in 1904, positioning itself as the dominant power in Northeast Asia.\textsuperscript{163} Securing its political dominance in Korea, Japan forced King Gojong with its military to sign the \textit{Eulsa} treaty. The treaty essentially stripped Korea of its sovereignty because Korea was no longer able to do diplomacy with other countries without Japan’s supervision.\textsuperscript{164} The Daehan Empire eventually fell, and the Japanese took full control over Korea in 1910.\textsuperscript{165}

The first phase of Japanese rule in the 1910s is often referred to as the \textit{budan-seiji} ("military dictatorial government").\textsuperscript{166} Korea was “ruled in military fashion by the Japanese government-general,” who actively sought out nationalists and repressed their political activity with military forces.\textsuperscript{167} The Japanese’s “sugar-coated proclamations ‘for the prosperity and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{163} Ibid. P. 70 -75, 85
\bibitem{164} Ibid. P. 82
\bibitem{167} Ibid. P. 111 -112
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welfare of the Korean people,” acted just as a façade for conquest. The Japanese military government implemented discriminatory policies that stripped Koreans, not only of their civil rights, but also of their properties and financial assets. The general Korean population suffered from the oppressive policies and practices of the Japanese government. The most notorious policy Japanese colonial government implemented was the Land Investigation in 1912. The colonial government notified that any land owners should report their claim to the land within 30 to 90 days or else the “lands without owners” would be sold by the colonial government in an auction. Unfortunately, many farmers who owned small pieces of land did not even know about the Land Investigation because they were illiterate. Even if they knew about the investigation, the reporting process was too complicated for illiterates. On the other hand, many Yangbans were able to keep their properties and economic advantage because they were literate. Many being literate, they were more responsive to the policy changes of colonial government. As a result, many farmers who were stripped of their lands became peasants and resented the colonial government while many Yangbans who were more reactive to the colonial government became Japanese collaborators; when few Yangbans were able to preserve their economic advantages, the general population was infuriated

The March Movement in 1919 was a reaction of general Korean population against the suppressive military regime. There are some disagreements among scholars about the details of


170 Ibid

171 Ibid

172 Ibid
the March Movement, but scholars generally agree that the March Movement was the pinnacle of the nationalistic movement since Korean nationalism’s birth. “Drawing upon Woodrow Wilson’s promises of self-determination, a group of thirty-three intellectuals petitioned for independence from Japan on March 1 and touched off nationwide protests that continued for months.”173 Woodrow Wilson, the president of the U.S., gave a speech known as the Fourteen Points Speech in 8 January, 1918. The last clause of the speech denotes,

XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.174

This fourteenth clause highlights the nations’ right to self-determination regardless of the size of the state. Encouraged by Wilson’s speech, the March Movement had begun at Pagoda Park, Seoul at 2 pm on March 1, 1919. It was the first nation-wide nationalistic movement regardless of social classes, spreading across the nation like a wildfire; it is estimated that at least half a million Koreans participated in the demonstration.175 Because of the magnitude of the movement, Japanese military police were unable to contain the revolt and had to request the assistance of the Japanese army. The Japanese army brutally suppressed the mass protests and the “Japanese officials counted 553 killed and over 12,000 arrested, but Korean nationalist sources put the totals at 7,500 killed and 45,000 arrested.”176

The March Movement gave birth to the first Korean government of the people, not the


176 Ibid
royals or Yangbans: the Shanghai Korean Provisional Government (KPG). KPG was founded based on the March Movement’s principle in April 13th, 1919. As a result, KPG was nationalistic from its core. The government focused heavily on diplomacy, participating in international conferences and trying to get foreign military and diplomatic aid to efface the Japanese colonial government. However, KPG became extremely ineffective because of the internal dispute; it was divided into factions claiming for the political legitimacy.

Despite KPG’s failure, one can hardly deny that the March Movement was nationalistic. The declaration of independence that Choe Nam-seon wrote, which thirty three leading nationalist intellectuals signed, clearly demonstrated the nationalism as a central ideology behind the movement. The declaration was written in February, 1919 and was proclaimed on March 1st, 1919. It asserted the following seven points:

1. Korea is an independent nation (minjok)
2. Korea is suffering under an alien oppression
3. Every Korean has a moral duty to bring about independence
4. The merging of Japan and Korea is altogether harmful
5. The independence of Korea will be for the good of Japan, Korea, and China
6. A new age of justice has come
7. Koreans must display their desire and ability to maintain independence.

The intellectuals asserted that Korea was an independent nation that was suffering from Japanese oppression, and therefore should be liberated from Japanese control. One should note that the

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179 Ibid. P. 158 -159

180 Yi Syngman was one of members of KPG who fiercely fought for the presidency. He refused to acknowledge others being the leader of KPG, contributing to the implosion of KPG. See also Yeok Sa Hak Yeon Gu So. Ed. Yi, Yeong Seon. Korean Modern History for Everyone (Ham Kke Bo Neun Han Guk Geun Hyun Dae Sa). Seo Hae Moon Jip. Republic of Korea. 2004. P. 155 -159

181 Ministry of Information of Republic of Korea
intellectuals were now utilizing the term *minjok* to frame Korea and distinguish it from Japan. This was important at the time because after the annexation, the Japanese government endeavored to ascribe Koreans with Japanese national identity. The intellectuals’ call for national integrity and change in the political situation gained a great amount of support from Koreans of all social classes. Because the Japanese government implemented a discriminatory policy against Koreans just for their nationality, Koreans, regardless of their social classes, were furious against the Japanese regime. This political climate at the time enabled general population of Koreans to sympathize with the thirty three intellectuals and their declaration of independence. While previous nationalistic movements were either top-down nationalism or vice versa, the March Movement, as Kim Chang-soon, a Korean nationalist scholar framed it, was “nation-wide revolution.”

In sum, the March Movement was a nationalistic reaction against the Japanese military government and its discriminatory policy.

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183 Although Kim may be correct in that the size of the movement was unprecedented. Note that Kim failed to take Yangbans into account in their analysis. Yangbans who did not face economic difficulties or have bitter experience with the Japanese government were relatively uninterested in the movement. But because they were small portion of the population the thesis would focus on the general impact in the Korean society. The March Movement was the biggest nation-wide movement against the foreign influence.
Conclusion: Korean Nationalism of Self-preservation from the 1850s to the 1910s

This chapter has examined the nationalistic activities that are considered to be the advent of Korean nationalism by Korean scholars. As Kim Chang-soon states “it is impossible not to mention the foreign-influence-resistant nationalism and anti-Japanese nationalism when one studies modern Korean history.” While Kim distinguishes the late Joseon’s foreign-influence-resistant nationalism and anti-Japanese nationalism during the Japanese rule based on the physical existence of foreign influence in Korea, this paper frames both nationalisms as a nationalism of self-preservation because of their characteristics to rejecting foreign threats to Korea’s sovereignty. All four major events from the 1850s to the 1910s, Soeguk Jeong Chaek, the Donghak Movement, the First Sino-Japanese War, and the March Movement, demonstrate the tendency to deny the influences of imperialistic states at the time and bring political legitimacy to Koreans, whether it be the elites or common people.

One should also note that the political leaders or institutions of the movements have actively utilized nationalism to achieve their political agenda. Soeguk Jeong Chaek and the proclamation of the Daehan Empire are clear examples of social elites trying to maintain the status quo. In contrast, the Donghak ideology that initially started as a elite movement, aided Donghak peasant movement which became a grass-roots movement revolting against the corrupt government officials. Similarly, the March Movement was a revolt of the general Korean population (except Yangban) against the discriminatory policies of the Japanese military government. All four movements sought the support of the population in the name of nationalism.

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to acquire political legitimacy for political activities. Although it is hard to claim that all political leaders at the time deliberately used nationalistic narratives to manipulate the general population for their own benefit, most political leaders and institutions did acquire political legitimacy by utilizing nationalism of self-preservation at the time.
Chapter IV. Japanese Colonization Phase II and the Cultural Nationalism: the 1920s to the 1930s

Japanese Colonization Phase II and the Cultural Nationalism

Korean nationalism of self-preservation became more focused on the revival of Korean culture after the March Movement. Realizing that military oppression would arouse nation-wide resistances, like the March Movement, the mainland Japanese government appointed a non-military individual as the governor of the Japanese regime in Korea. In doing so, it employed a new policy referred to as the imperial cultural policy, *Bunka Seiji*. Unlike the military government before the 1920s, the new Japanese government relaxed many of the restriction on Koreans. Bruce Cummings illustrate the period as follows,

Stung by Korean resistance, Wilson and Lenin, and general foreign reproach, Japanese leaders suddenly understood that they were colonizers in the wrong century: wanting always to be ‘modern,’ they found their repressive rule condemned as out of date. So mid-1919 marked the start of the imperial ‘cultural’ policy (Bunka seiji), of tutoring Koreans for distant day of independence. The new policy inaugurated a period of ‘gradualist’ resistance to colonialism in which Koreans took advantage of relaxed
restrictions on their freedom of speech and assembly to organize a variety of nationalist, socialist, and communist groups, some openly and some clandestinely.\textsuperscript{186}

Under a more liberal Japanese regime, Korean intellectual discourse re-emerged. The Korean intellectuals examined the reasons Joseon fell and how to achieve independence. Through intellectual discourse, the nationalists were divided into two: activists and gradualists.\textsuperscript{187} Activists were radicals who believed that military actions, mostly guerilla attacks, were the only means of regaining national sovereignty. In contrast, the gradualists believed that Korea will achieve independence through successive steps of educating the younger generation and strengthening national power. Activists rarely wrote any articles or publications regarding their ideology, whereas gradualists fervently communicated with the general public through magazines, now available to Koreans under the new Japanese regime. The prominent figure of the gradualists was Yi Kwang-su, a cultural nationalist.\textsuperscript{188} His narrative on nation cultivated a cultural nationalistic atmosphere in Korea and influenced Korea’s religion, language, and intellectuals’ acknowledgement of history. In this chapter, the paper will analyze his philosophy and observe how cultural nationalism affected Korea.

There is an academic dispute whether to frame the nationalism of this era as the cultural nationalism. Therefore, before delving into the chapter, this researcher wants to provide my justification for framing the nationalism of this period as cultural nationalism. This researcher acknowledges that this chapter can be controversial because of three reasons: some may claim that (1) cultural nationalists cannot be framed as nationalists because they did not uphold

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Confucianism which constitutes major part of Korean cultural heritage, (2) cultural nationalists were essentially ethnic nationalists as well, and (3) Yi Kwang-su, a prominent cultural nationalist the chapter will analyze, was a Japanese Collaborator, and therefore should not be considered as a nationalist. Shin Gi-wook, a Korean nationalism scholar, criticizes cultural nationalists were not nationalists because they generally disregarded Korean culture and tradition, especially Confucianism. It is true that many cultural nationalists neglected to acknowledge Confucianism to be “Korean.” However, it is important to remember that cultural nationalists neglected Confucianism because they believed it was essentially Chinese. Instead, they rediscovered or invented other forms of Korean culture that was considered to be “truly Korean.” In addition, Shin Gi-wook also points out that Yi Kwang-su’s focus of the nation shifted in his article “Jo Seon Minjok Ron” (1933). He claims that Yi started to focus more on the ethnicity rather than the culture to be the core constituent of Korean nation, and therefore cannot be framed as a cultural nationalist. While this may be true, Yi clearly focused more on the cultural part in his earlier articles, and so do many cultural nationalists at the time. Also, this researcher believes that one of many articles written by one of many cultural nationalists cannot


190 This tendency of cultural nationalists would be further explained in the later chapter when the paper examines Yi Kwang-su’s Minjok Kaejoron and its anti-foreign tendencies.


193 Ibid. p. 86 -87
represent the general tendency of the whole. Therefore, this researcher agrees with Michael Robinson and Park Chan-seung that cultural nationalists were active in the 1920s and the early 30s, and cultivated the cultural heritage of Korean nation. Lastly, many South Korean history books refer Yi Kwang-su as a Japanese collaborator, a traitor instead of a nationalist. While this claim to be true, Yi’s narrative shifted in 1937 after the Soo Yang Dong Woo Hoi incident; Yi was initially a nationalist until he was arrested by the Japanese colonial government. The chapter will further explain the shift in his narrative later in this chapter.

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Yi Kwang-su

As intellectual discourse became widely dispersed, intellectuals began examining why Joseon fell to foreign forces. Although some solely blamed the Yi royals, others believed that minjoksong (national characteristic and culture) of Korea decayed. Michael Robinson framed these intellectuals as cultural nationalists, nationalists that called for a cultural revitalization of Korea.\(^{195}\) One of the leading cultural nationalists was Yi Kwang-su.\(^{196}\) Yi believed that “Korea’s past was responsible for the current national misfortune of colonization and sought to create a new Korean through the construction of a new nationality (minjoksong).”\(^{197}\) He believed that nationality of Koreans was dwindling and heralded the need for a reconstruction of national identity.

Yi Kwang-su’s most influential article “‘Minjok Kaejoron’” (Theory of National Reconstruction) was published in 1922 in a magazine called the Kaebyok. Kaebyok (meaning creation in Korean) became most influential amongst many new magazines appearing after 1919, and became the major intellectual forums in the 1920s.\(^{198}\) Although it was under Japanese censorship, Kaebyok “quickly became center for contending political philosophies.”\(^{199}\) Famous intellectuals like Yi Kwang-su and Choe Nam-seon Seon published articles in Kaebyok in an effort to influence the general public with their political philosophies. As a result, “Kaebyok

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\(^{197}\) Ibid. P. 48


\(^{199}\) Ibid, P. 56
served as a focal point for the development of a post-March First intellectual movement that stressed cultural and social development of Korean society.”

Yi’s “Minjok Kaejoron” was a series of articles in *Kaebyok* that aroused huge national awareness amongst intellectuals.

The main assertion of “Minjok Kaejoron” was the national spirit of Korea has dwindled. In his article, Yi contends that “hyolton (bloodline), songgyok (personality), and munhwa (culture) constitute a nation.”

Yi believed that because the personality and culture of the nation decayed, the nation lacked national integrity and strength to resist against foreign forces, and therefore, was annexed to Japan. While most Koreans believed that the Joseon royals’ mistakes had resulted the annexation, Yi held that the corrupt national spirit was accountable for the colonization, claiming:

One can blame the royals of the Yi dynasty, but what have the nationals done to fix the wrongdoings of the royals? The misfortune we are currently suffering from is to be blamed on all of us, the Korean nationals. If we had the national spirit that craves freedom like those of England and the U.S. or one that claims civil equality like that of France, we would have never let the Joseon royals or elites crumble the nation the way they did.

Challenging the popular belief, Yi urged general population of Korea to employ a reflective attitude. He asserted, even though the elites of previous dynasties were corrupt, Koreans would have overcome the foreign threats if they had a strong national spirit to correct the royals.

While Koreans generally agreed that the Joseon royals and Yangbans were solely responsible for the colonized situation of Korea, Yi shifted the focus to the degrading national

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spirit. He points out that even after the colonization, Koreans lack strong unity, saying:

In a healthy society, members can trust each other. Unfortunately, current Koreans are not like this even after the fall of the nation. We lie to each other all the time. We discuss the matter, but never act upon it. We do not have loyalty between each other, and we are not loyal to our nation. We do not help one another. Everyone is cowardly selfish and lacks social cohesiveness. This is why reconstruction of national spirit is revolutionary to Koreans.\(^\text{203}\)

Yi believed that even after the colonization, Koreans would have achieved independence if they had a strong national character to unite. He claimed Koreans lost the sovereignty of their nation and cannot claim it back on their own because Koreans’ lack of national unity.

Yi Kwang-su further asserted that to achieve national independence, Koreans must reform their national characteristics. He believed that Koreans were unaware of their own fault of not actively recovering the national spirit, warning:

Koreans are facing tremendous difficulties because we do not have anything, physically and spiritually. Our decaying national characteristic is accountable for the current situation. We are in a slippery slope; if the current state persists for another 30 years, we will find ourselves much more impoverished than we are now, unable to recuperate … I believe that reconstruction of our nation is the only means of turning the situation around. One can frame it as Korean cultural movement because it implements methods of other countries’ cultural movements and considers Korea’s unique situation.\(^\text{204}\)

Encouraging Koreans to be more introspective, Yi asserted that the reconstruction of the nation is the best remedy. He thought that once the cultural heritage was restored, Koreans would have a unifying ideology and therefore, gain the national strength to revolt against the Japanese colonizers. Yi believed that Koreans should take ten steps to achieve this goal:

1. A national leader realizes the importance of national reconstruction
2. The leader plans upon the realization
3. The leader gathers comrades


\(^{204}\) Ibid
4. The leader forms an organization to implement the reconstruction
5. The organization propagates its ideology to the general public
6. The general population discusses the ideology
7. Ideology becomes the dominant one amongst the people
8. A central figure amongst the people leads the reform
9. The ideology becomes viral
10. Finally, reconstruction will be completed when people consider the ideology as natural

The process of reconstruction Yi proposed can be summarized as, a national leader organizing a group of supporters who believe in the cause of national reconstruction and propagating its philosophy. One should note that Yi is planning a distant future. His views were radically different from those of the activists. While the activists claimed that reform of the nation should be executed after independence, Yi believed independence would naturally follow the successful reconstruction of the nation. For the reconstruction process to begin, Yi contended that the education of the general population is critical. In his article, “Yi echoed the concerns of other culturalists by advocating education, unity of values, and the dismantling of obstacles to progress in the Korean tradition.”

Although, Yi was extremely critical about the national spirit of Koreans, he intentionally used introspective and reflective narrative to highlight the importance of reconstruction, not just to criticize Koreans. After all, throughout his other essays, Yi “stressed pride in Korean heritage.”

Yi Kwang-su’s article soon became very influential, affecting the cultural nationalist. His article “brought together important elements of the discussion on cultural reform and rebirth.

These were: unity of values, consensus (at least at the leadership level), the attack on traditional class leadership and thought, and the insistence on education as a first step toward action.\textsuperscript{208} Yi’s “\textit{Minjok Kaejoron}” sparked the cultural nationalist movements in Korea, and intellectuals fervently endeavored to restore Korean cultural heritage.

Achievements of the Cultural Nationalists

Yi’s “Minjok Kaejoron” heavily influenced the cultural movement in the 1920s and 30s, such as Kyeong Undong (Enlightenment movement) and Munhwa Hyoksin Undong (Campaign for Cultural Revitalization). These movements “regarded minjok as the basis of Korea’s new identity and culture, calling for the recovery of minjok chongsin (the national spirit).” Recovering the national spirit, the cultural nationalist made significant changes in Koreans’ acknowledgement of their history, religion, and language.

History

In an effort to define the roots of Koreans, the cultural nationalist movement embraced the existence of Gojoseon and venerated Dangun. Before the Japanese colonization, Dangun, the founding father of Korean nation, was not much revered. The kings of the previous dynasties had such a dominant political authority that their legitimacy was rarely challenged. They were not motivated to explain how their political legitimacy comes from Dangun’s heritage. As a result, the Dangun myth was not stressed amongst Koreans.

The attitude changed during the cultural nationalistic movement when cultural nationalists tried to discover and define the origins of the nation. Song Jin-woo, a cultural nationalist, venerated Dangun as the founding father of the nation. In 1920, he wrote an article in Dong A Il Bo, one of the first Korean nationalist newspapers, looking for a financial supporter who would fund the newspaper company to establish a Dangun statue, saying:

Tan Gun (Dangun) is the father of our nation, the first person to establish the nation in our territory. His holiness and his spirit have passed down to our generation. Any loyal Korean should be honored to offer financial support for the company (Dong A Il Bo) to

establish his statue and respect his legacy.²¹⁰

He also stresses Dangun’s heritage and how Koreans have fought to preserve it, claiming:

Although we have encountered countless political complications since Tan Gun founded the nation five thousand years ago, Korea is still present and will be eternal. We have preserved our national culture and established unique social systems. Because we have protected our cultural integrity with all our heart fighting off the foreign threats, the nation Korea still exist to the present.²¹¹

He reminds Koreans they are the descendants of Dangun and their unique cultural heritage has been protected by prior generations. In doing so, he venerated the founding father, acknowledged the ancestry, and stressed the lineage.

Religion

Similarly, in an effort to define genuine Korean culture, cultural nationalists rediscovered an indigenous religion, Cheondogyo. Cheondogyo is a religion based on the Donghak ideology.²¹² As mentioned in chapter three, Donghak was a nationalist movement revolting against the foreign threats. Cheondogyo is a religious formation of believers of Donghak. Because it is based on a very nationalistic ideology, Cheondogyo “played an important role in the March First movement. Their religious status allowed them relative organizational freedom, and their syncretic religious philosophy, a mixture of native religious beliefs, was popular among modern intellectuals.”²¹³

²¹⁰ See Song Jin Woo’s Article in Dong A Il Bo. 11 April. 1920; The article does not have a specific title because it was written in a format of public advertisement.
²¹¹ Song, Jing Woo. “Consolation to the Koreans in the foreign Country and Frenzy in Joseon.” Dong A Il Bo. March 8, 1922
Adopting Cheondogyo, cultural nationalist effectively refused state Shintoism. Shinto is a Japanese indigenous religion but when the Japanese government enforced on both Japanese and Koreans, it discolored the local characteristics. Because it was culturally constructed by the Japanese nationalists in the government, state Shinto is essentially very different from the indigenous Shinto. The Japanese government deified Tenno (Japanese Emperor) in state Shintoism and attempted to eradicate Korean heritage by enforcing it on Koreans. Kim Dae Jung, a nationalist who later became the South Korean president reminisces how much he hated attending state Shinto ceremonies, but was forced to do so. As a reaction against the religion, cultural nationalist embraced Cheondogyo. As a result, Cheondogyo “had long been involved in the independence movement, advocating the formation of a modern elite, reconstruction of national life, and social equality.”

Language

The Korean written language, Hangul, was developed in 1446 by King Sejong, the third king of the Joseon dynasty. Until then, Koreans used Chinese characters, which are harder for the common people to learn because the written language, Chinese characters, and spoken language, Korean, were different. “As a phonetic alphabet, King Sejong’s invention was seen as a form of writing that enabled everyone to acquire the types of knowledge needed for the nation, precisely

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because it was so easy to learn.216 But even when Hangul was “appraised for their communicative abilities, few Korean writers gave them high marks.217 The Joseon Confucianist intellectuals, Yangbans, thought that reading the original writings of the Confucius was important, and therefore, degraded Hangul only for the use of peasants and women who were considered as lower class citizens in Joseon dynasty.

Koreans’ attitude toward Hangul changed significantly during the period of cultural nationalism. In the late 19th century, the importance of using Hangul was increasingly acknowledged by nationalists like Yoo Gil-jun.218 But Yoo Gil-jun was not as successful as the cultural nationalists in increasing the general population’s awareness of Hangul. “The calls by nationalists to rediscover the indigenous and discard the Chinese were most successfully realized in the writing reform movement.”219 Ju Si-gyeong, a nationalist who initiated the writing reform highlighted the importance of Hangul and legitimized Korea’s call for independence, saying:

On this planet, land is naturally divided, and a group of people living in these areas make and use a language appropriate to the local sounds prevalent in this climate. Moreover, they create a script that fits the sounds of their language. In this way, the existence of a special language and script in one nation is certainly a sign that this country is naturally a self-governing nation220

Ju believed that the existence of Korea’s own writing system, one that is compatible to the spoken language, served as an important evidence of Korea’s political autonomy.

217 Ibid
Cultural nationalists soon followed Ju touting “King Sejong’s alphabet as the only Korean writing system. What for nearly five hundred years had been known as ‘vulgar writing’ was transformed into the ‘national writing’ (Kungmun).” Yi Kwang-su also criticized newspapers using the combination of Chinese and Hangul, claiming that “this so-called mixed script was in fact just old-style Chinese with a smattering of the alphabet.” Hangul, whose usefulness was often belittled, became the national writing. In doing so, the cultural nationalists rejected the foreign, Chinese writing system, adopting the indigenous.

As demonstrated in this section, cultural nationalists, led by Yi Kwang-su and his “Minjok Kaejoron”, actively sought out the indigenous Korean culture in an effort to restore the national spirit and unity. In doing so, they rediscovered Dangun, Cheondogyo and Hangul, and redefined the Korean cultural identity. Yi’s “Minjok Kaejoron” encouraged the cultural movement in the 1920s and 30s, and successfully recovered the national heritages of Korea.

Demise of cultural nationalism


222 Ibid. P. 71
Despite its successes, cultural nationalism was dismantled in the late 1930s. Yi Kwang-su suddenly shifted his political stance in 1937. Yi initially denounced any form of political ideology interfering in the national reconstruction, saying:

The goal of national reconstruction cannot take on a political coloration. Political power is a fleeting phenomenon, but national reconstruction is a task that will take at the very least fifty or a hundred years. Political organizations cannot manage stability because of shifts in the political climate – if the Independence Club had stuck to its long-range projects of education, developing industry, and promoting the vitality of the people and had not interfered in politics, it would not have been repressed by the politicians.\(^{223}\)

Yi thought that political ideology cannot sustain the reconstruction because reconstruction is a gradual process of educating the next generation. He believed that the Independence Club, an activist nationalist group, was too political to sustain the reconstruction. He maintained his stance throughout his essays from 1922 to 1937, such as “Minjokchok Kyongnyun” (1924), and “The Three basic Tasks for Korean National Movements” (1932).

Yi’s position on the politics abruptly changed after 1937 when he was incarcerated by the Japanese government. Yi was arrested for the nationalist movement called Su Yang Dong Woo Hoi incident, a major oppression of the Japanese government where 181 nationalists were arrested and imprisoned.\(^{224}\) After half a year, he was released on a sick bail. It is not clear whether he was tortured or threatened with his family’s safety but his narrative on nationalism shifted significantly. He subsequently changed his name into Japanese, Kayama Misturo, and became the president of Joseon Mun In Hyup Hoi, a group of Japanese collaborators funded by the Japanese government. Considering that many nationalists imprisoned at the time were coerced to be Japanese collaborators, one can assume that he was under certain duress by the Japanese government.


\(^{224}\) Cho Seon Il Bo. “Establishment of Heung Sa Dan.” 2003.05.12 http://kid.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2008/05/12/2008051200544.html
Japanese government.

Yi began to claim that Korea is an inferior nation, and the Japanese government is “parenting” Koreans to be more “civilized.” He essentially asserted that Japanese rule in Korea was legitimate. In his previous essays, even when he criticized the decaying national spirit of Koreans, he acknowledged that the independence would subsequently be achieved after the reconstruction. In contrast, after 1937, his narrative became pessimistic even discouraging the Korean independence. Park Chan-seung, a Korean nationalism scholar, criticizes that Yi’s cultural nationalism assumed social Darwinism, legitimizing the Japanese rule in Korea: Yi asserted that it is “natural” for more civilized societies like Japan to dominate over “primitive” societies like Korea. Park claims that Yi’s shift in his narrative clearly demonstrates that he was no longer a nationalist but a Japanese collaborator.\(^{225}\) After 1937, Yi critiqued how uncivilized the Koreans were and how the advanced Japanese are educating Koreans. His essays granted political legitimacy to the Japanese and he was later on politically denounced as a Japanese collaborator.\(^{226}\) Although it is still not clear how or why Yi Kwang-su betrayed his earlier beliefs, Korean intellectuals of the present days acknowledge the extenuating circumstances of the time; most of them believe that under some form of threat by the Japanese government, Yi became their puppet. As Shin Gi-wook claims “Yi Kwang-su’s change in his perspective about the Korean nation is a good example that demonstrates the general tendency of nationalist movement in the 1920s to 30s.”\(^{227}\)

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against the Japanese rule but failed to do so.

Another general consensus of the Korean scholars is that the second phase of Japanese regime, the cultural policy (*Bunka Seiji*), was a manipulative strategy for the Japanese to justify their colonization. By allowing public academic discourses, Japanese police were able to identify the leading figure and turn him against his own people. Most of the nationalist movement under the Japanese military government in the 1910s was very clandestine. Either way, the Japanese government was unable to identify the leader of the nationalism. Stung by the March Movement, the Japanese government realized the power of nationalism in its colony. It also realized the importance of acquiring political legitimacy. In order to do so, they implemented the cultural policy. Under the cultural policy, Japanese government was able to realize that Yi was the leader. Using Yi’s social position as the leading nationalist, it infiltrated into discourse of Korean intelligentsia and effectively propagated the logic behind the colonization.

Cultural nationalism had flourished in the 1920s and 30s under the more lenient policies of the Japanese government. It encouraged fervent nationalistic discourse amongst the Korean intelligentsia. Yi Kwang-su with his article, “*Minjok Kaejoron*” soon became the leading figure of the cultural nationalism. His nationalistic narrative has urged the cultural nationalists to rediscover genuine Korean history, religion, and language. However, after his arrest in 1937, Yi became a pro-Japanese propagandist, betraying his prior beliefs. Yi’s shift in his political stance demonstrates the effectiveness of the Japanese cultural policy in controlling its colony. By using the Korean leading nationalist to legitimize their control, Japanese effectively utilized nationalism to justify their control over Korea. Also, Japanese government ended the cultural policy in 1932 and became oppressive once again because of the preparation of World War II. During the cultural policy era, the Japanese government was able to identify the nationalists who
became more out-spoken. After the end of cultural policy, it was able to effectively arrest cultural nationalists like Yi after the end of the cultural policy. As a result, by the late 1930s, many of the cultural nationalists were no longer active due to the severe oppression of the Japanese government. In the end, cultural nationalism had its limitation that it relied heavily on the Japanese government’s policy.
Chapter V. The Division and the Rise of Ethnic Nationalism:

The 1940s

After the cultural nationalism diminished in the 1930s, gradualists lost their voices, and the activists became the dominant nationalists in the 1940s. Especially after Japan’s defeat in World War II in 1945, they gained more support from the general population as they claimed that the independence should be achieved prior to the educational and cultural reform. These activists were divided into two: liberalists who were politically supported by the U.S. and socialists politically backed by the Soviet Union. After the Japanese retreat, the United States and the Soviet Union militarily occupied Korea: the U.S. army stationed at the southern part of Korea while the Soviets occupied its northern part. In an effort to gain more political control over

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229 There was no specific distinction between the socialists and the communists during the colonial era. They were mainly described as the left-wing parties. As a result, some scholars in the present days use the term, communists, when others use the term, socialists. The confusion how to frame this faction is created because of the vagueness of their character. They did not have a strong leader or ideals to unite them at the time. However, the paper will use the term socialists in this chapter to make a distinction between North Korean communists. When the competition between socialists and liberalists began after the independence, many socialists became more influenced by the Soviets communist ideals, fully becoming communists.

the Korean peninsula, the U.S. supported the liberalists, such as Yi Syngman, while the Soviets-backed socialists advocated for their socialists brethren, such as Kim Il-sung. Under the two contending foreign forces, Korea became divided: the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north. One has to be fully aware of this period to understand how nationalisms of the two Koreas developed differently. The chapter will observe how foreign forces occupied Korea, how they utilized nationalism, and how they divided the nation into two.

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The Foreign Intervention and the Division: 1945 - 1948

After cultural nationalism failed, gradualists who heralded the importance of generational cultural revitalization lost their voices. As the leading ideology and its followers were no longer present, diverse perspectives on the nation were developed. Seeing the limitations of domestic ideology, and how easily it can be compromised by the Japanese government, Korean intellectuals started looking for an ideology or philosophy they could adopt outside Korea, hoping that they would gain international supports.

In doing so, the intellectuals reached out to Wilson’s liberalism and Stalin’s version of communism. Discourse on liberalism and socialism existed in Korea since the 1920s. As Bruce Cummings explains:

The largest split brought Korea into the mainstream of world history after World War I: it was between liberal idealism and socialism, between Wilson and Lenin. Liberals had the advantage of association with Wilson’s ideals of self-determination, and the disadvantage that the United States was not interested in supporting Korean independence; furthermore, their social base within Korea was very slim. The socialists had the advantage of Japanese police action, which targeted and walked off to jail anyone espousing ‘Bolshevik’ ideas, and the advantage of a potentially large mass base and a spirit of sacrifice on behalf of Korea.

The liberalists who believed in Wilson’s self-determination demonstrated more nationalistic tendencies, while the socialists were more focused on easing the class division in Korea.

But still, “socialists and communists were always Korean nationalists as well.” They believed that Korea was an independent nation and refused the Japanese government’s promotion of the idea that Japan and Korea are essentially the same (Naeson Ilchae). Unlike the cultural

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233 Ibid. P. 159

234 Ibid. P. 158
nationalists who were gradualists, both liberalists and socialists were more active in calling for immediate independence rather than a gradual one. While most liberalists were leading the exile movements outside the nation, the socialists led the nationalist movements inside Korea. However, “many nationalist (liberalists) and communist leaders were thrown in jail in the late 1920s and early 1930s, only to emerge in 1945.” This enabled gradualists who urged “a path of preparing Koreans for independence through cultural and educational activities” to be the dominant nationalistic leaders in the 1920s and 30s because the Japanese government favored their political stance over that of the activists. As a result, the division between the socialists and liberalists had never been the mainstream concern until the 1940s because the academic discourse between the two was unsustainable with the leading figures constantly incarcerated.

The debate between the two soon became fierce in 1940s and especially after 1945 when Japanese imperialistic rule in Korea abruptly fell. The Japanese imperialistic state surrendered unconditionally after the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Soviet Union showing active intent on participating in the war in the Pacific Ocean area. Seeing the diminishing Japanese power, heated discourse began in 1945 and continued until 1948 when Korea was officially divided into two republics. Bruce Cummings describes the three years from 1945 to 1948 as follows:

Here was the breeding ground of the two Koreas, of a catastrophic war, and of a

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236 Ibid. P. 158

237 Ibid. P. 183

238 The Soviets only entered the war in the Pacific area only during its final week.

239 The division was imposed by the Joint, the U.S. and USSR agreement.
reordering of international politics in Northeast Asia. In these events the United States had a major role, in many ways the predominant role among the big powers.\textsuperscript{240}

When the Japanese colonial government crumbled and retreated back to its homeland, an “ostensible Korean government did exist within a few weeks.”\textsuperscript{241} The government was established in September 6, 1945 under the support of the Soviets who “began fighting the Japanese in Korea on August 8 … and ‘let’ the Americans come into the South.”\textsuperscript{242} Many South Korean and U.S. scholars claim that Koreans did not yet have a government before 1948 when Yi Syngman declared the foundation of South Korea. However, unlike their claims, the first government of Korea, People’s Republic of Korea (PRK), did exist before 1948. Right after the independence, Preparatory Committee for National Construction was founded by nationalists like Yeo Woon-hyung and An Jae Hong.\textsuperscript{243} Initially, the Committee embraced any political faction in Korea, but soon, the right-wing political parties broke away from the Committee because of the internal political tension. Few years after its foundation, the Committee’s high ranking positions were filled with socialists, and they led the foundation of PRK. Naturally, the U.S. feared that this left-wing government may be influenced by the Soviets and denied even its existence.\textsuperscript{244} When the Committee founded PKR, the local branches of the Committee were renamed as Local People’s Council. These councils were comprised of members from various

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\textsuperscript{241} Ibid

\textsuperscript{242} Ibid. P. 186


\textsuperscript{244} Ibid P. 257-259
\end{flushleft}
social classes and represented that people are now the rightful owner of the nation.\textsuperscript{245} As a result, many South Korean scholars overlook the importance of PRK because it was primarily comprised of socialists who were physically in Korea when the Japanese fell.

Despite its ephemeral existence, PRK was an independent government supported by the majority of Koreans. The government fell within few weeks when the U.S. intervened and militarily occupied the southern part of Korea. The two strongest international powers clashing in Korea for hegemony, PRK lost its political authority because it did not yet have a military force to support its claims. Korean independent government no longer existing, Koreans began choosing sides, and Washington and Moscow reinforced the choices; “within a few months Korea was effectively divided – long before the establishment of the two republics in North and South in 1948.”\textsuperscript{246}

Under the military occupation of U.S. and Soviet military, Yi Syngman and Kim Il-sung rose to power as the leading figures of the two ideologies. The U.S. military regime favored the exiled liberals, like Yi resided in the U.S. for a long period of time. Similarly, Kim Il-sung, who had served in the Soviet army as a military official, was supported by the Soviet Union. Although Kim was not one of the socialists whose anti-Japanese movement took place in Korea, he quickly became the leading individual who became the bridge between the socialists in Korea and Moscow.

When the U.S. and Soviets occupied Korea, they claimed that the objective of their military occupation was to establish a democratic and independent nation of Korean nationals.


The U.S. and Soviet army generals asserted that their occupation was only a temporary measure and that Koreans lacked the ability to establish their own government because they were under Japanese rule for a long period of time.\textsuperscript{247} In the Moscow Agreement, a diplomatic agreement in 1945 between the U.S. and the Soviets regarding Korean independence, a nation-wide election should take place to establish sovereign government of Korea.\textsuperscript{248} They agreed that their militaries should be withdrawn from Korea in the near future, and a sovereign united government of Korea must be established. However, this soon proved to be just a political façade to assuage Korean population who rejected their military occupation.

Unwilling to concede their political influence over the Korean peninsula, the U.S. and the Soviets refused to agree on the matter of when to end the military occupation in Korea; the U.S. proposed that the Korean government should be established first while the Soviets claimed that armies of both countries should leave Korea first.\textsuperscript{249} When the negotiation process was dragged down, the U.S. proceeded with the establishment of South Korean government in 1948, excluding the northern part of Korea under the Soviet military control. In August 1948, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) was established after the separate election in the South, and Yi Syngman was elected as the first president. Northern part of Korea subsequently proceeded with the establishment of separate government, and Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) was established in September 1948.\textsuperscript{250} After the formation of two governments, the

\begin{flushleft}
\vspace{0.5em}
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid. P. 86
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\textsuperscript{249} Ibid. P. 97
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\end{flushleft}
Soviets withdrew their army but the U.S. remained within South Korea. It is truly interesting to see how the U.S., the self-proclaimed protector of the democratic values, ruled against PRK, the sovereign democratic government of Koreans, when the USSR and North Korea ruled through it and its Local People’s Councils.

Seeing the foreign influences impeding the foundation of a sovereign national government, many Korean nationalist scholars claim that if Korea achieved independence from the Japanese regime on its own and freed itself from the foreign influences, Koreans would have established a united government. Yi Wan-beom, a Korean nationalist scholar contends that the objective of military occupation of the U.S. and the Soviet Union was clearly motivated by their competition in international hegemony, and their competition divided Korea into two. Similarly, Kim Chang-soon states that “Korean nationalist cannot forgive Stalinist expansionism militarily occupying the northern part of Korea. Its military occupation subsequently changed into political conquest and established Marxist-Leninism in North Korea.”251 Although Kim solely blames the Soviet Union for the division, like Lee, he claims that the foreign influences and interference is what impeded the establishment of one nation.

Korean nationalists under the Japanese colonization yearned for an independent nation, and tirelessly worked for it. However even after the fall of the Japanese, foreign powers still influenced Korean politics. Both the U.S. and the Soviets claimed that they are restoring national sovereignty in Korea, but they had their own expansionist political agenda. Like the later Japanese cultural government (Bunka Seiji) which claimed that it was “parenting” Korea, the U.S. and the Soviets claimed that Koreans lacked the ability to form their own government and they

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were assisting Koreans to ensure that the government reflected the will of Koreans was established. Nationalist narrative was again employed by the foreign country to justify their intervention. As both refused to concede their influence over Korea, they divided the nation into two, like the Germany after the World War II. Divided, Koreans started focusing on the ethnicity and the bloodlines as the factor that unites them.

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Rise of Ethnic nationalism

After the liberation from the Japanese, seeing how Koreans were getting divided under the influence of the U.S. and the Soviets, intellectuals like Yeo Woon-hyung, Kim Gu, and An Jae Hong tried to narrow the disagreement gap between the two factions. They actively communicated with both liberalists and socialists, endeavoring to facilitate a negotiation. Yeo Woon-hyung’s political views were a “mixture of Christianity, Wilsonian democracy, and socialism” and he was a “tireless advocate of coalescing the left and right ends of the Korean political spectrum and eliminating North-South division.”\(^\text{253}\) He was the leading figure in establishing a sovereign independent country, and was one of the first nationalists to act upon it. In 1945, Yeo organized the Preparatory Committee for National Construction which subsequently became the cornerstone of PRK. Although socialists became the majority of the members of PRK, Yeo as an individual, embraced both liberalism and socialism, and tried to mend the divided nation. However, his ambiguous political stance was targeted by the radicals; they beat him, destroyed his home with a grenade and finally murdered him in 1947.\(^\text{254}\)

Yeo’s political actions to unite the country were supported by intellectuals like An Jae Hong. After the liberation, An wrote an article entitled “Neo-nationalism and Neo-democracy” (Shin Minjok Ju Ui Wa Shin MinJu Ju Ui).\(^\text{255}\) In this article, An asserted that “nation and nationalism were developed in the pre-modern area,” and a social grouping can be considered as a nation (minjok) if it has “1) one ethnic bloodline, 2) social solidarity within national border, 3)
sharing of common destiny.” He believed that “because our nation (Korea) has preserved one pure bloodline, has protected the ‘fatherland’ (Korean territory) for more 5000 years, and share common cultural heritage, we have the right to establish a sovereign country and be part of the international society.” Defining what a nation is, he concluded that Korea has the right to found a self-governing political institution because he believed that Koreans have preserved the “pure” lineage. Unlike the cultural nationalists of the 1920s and 30s who focused on unique cultural heritage of a nation, An claimed that Korea is an independent nation due to its pure ethnicity.

Kim Gu, a prominent nationalist, similarly contended that Korea’s single bloodline makes it a sovereign nation. In his book, *Baek Beom Il Ji* (Diaries of Baek Beom (Kim Gu’s nickname)) published in 1946, Kim asserts that “the division between so-called ‘liberalists’ and ‘socialists’ is just another ephemeral political tension within our eternal history of pure lineage. Political ideologies and religions come and go as time passes, but ethnic minjok shares a common destiny forever.” Kim believed that ethnicity forms a nation and strong ethnic purity within a nation would allow it to last forever. Kim also claimed that sovereign government of Korea should be established without foreign influences interfering in domestic politics. In his book, Kim reminisces “Ah! The Japanese surrender. It was not delightful news to me at all; rather it was very sad news for me.” Kim strongly believed that foreign forces should not interfere in Korean domestic politics for Koreans to establish a sovereign government. Until

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257 Ibid. P. 19


259 Ibid. P. 120
1945, Kim was in China, gathering Koreans to form an army that would liberate Korea from the Japanese rule. However, Korea was liberated not on its own but as a collateral benefit from the World War II. Seeing the U.S. and the Soviets occupying once again like the Japanese, Kim feared that their interference may harm the sovereignty of Korea.

As demonstrated in the discourse of An and Kim, Korean nationalists started focusing on the purity of ethnicity and highlighted that the nation shares a common destiny based on that. The division of the nation triggered the ethnic nationalism which strongly called for unity amongst Koreans. The intellectuals’ focus on nationalism became the purity of Korean bloodline unlike the cultural nationalists in the 1920s and 30s. However, one should note that though ethnic nationalists in the 1940s and the cultural nationalists had different opinions on the primary constituent of nation, ethnicity v. cultural heritage, both nationalisms were reactions against the foreign influences. Cultural nationalists tried to rediscover genuine Korean culture when Japanese attempted to eradicate Korean culture. Similarly when the nation was being divided by the U.S. and the Soviets in the 1940s, ethnic nationalists claimed that Korea must stay united because it is a nation of a single bloodline since a very distant past.
Chapter VI. South Korean Ethnic Nationalism:

From the 1940s to 70s

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the division has urged the ethnic nationalism in Korea. Ethnic nationalists tried to mediate between the two, but the result of their effort was futile. Yi Syngman, supported by the U.S., proclaimed the establishment of independent country in the Southern part of Korea, naming the country, Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1948. The North soon followed, founding its own government named Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The nation was divided into two states.

In this section, the paper will analyze the South Korean nationalism, and how it changed throughout time. In doing so, it will examine the nationalistic narratives of two predominant leaders of their time: Yi Syngman and Park Chunghee. Yi established South Korean government and ruled South Korea for twelve years from 1948 to 1960. Park Chunghee rose to power in
1961 and dictated the country until 1979. One should note that both leaders adopted ethnic nationalism, a belief that the Koreas are a single nation and therefore, should be united. They employed nationalistic narrative to acquire political legitimacy and establish political stability in South Korea. However, it seems that their nationalistic discourse changed throughout time depending on the shifting political climate. Hence, the chapter will examine the fluctuating political atmosphere in South Korea and analyze how it affected the nationalistic view of the two leaders.
Yi Syngman and Il Min Ju Ui

Despite the ethnic nationalists’ effort, Korea was divided into two. One interesting thing to note is that even when Yi Syngman was one of the individuals responsible for the division, he employed an ethnic nationalistic narrative. He recognized the power of nationalism in governing the country, and rigorously utilized it to acquire political legitimacy. After the South Korean government was established in 1948, Yi proclaimed the proposal called Il Min Ju Ui, the idea that Korea is one nation and therefore, should stay united, saying “we should form a homogenous nation under the Il Min Ju Ui ideology.” Yi elaborated his belief in his article “What is Il Min Ju Ui?” the following year, claiming “as a unitary nation [tanil minjok] that has a long history, we are always one and not two. As a one nation, we have to be one always. The division urged Koreans to yearn unitary nation, and Yi gained support of the general population with his Il Min Ju Ui.

An Ho-sang, the first minister of Education and political ally of Yi, further articulated Yi’s Il Min Ju Ui in his book Fundamentals of Il Min Ju Ui, proclaiming, “we are one people. One people has the same bloodline, the same fate, and the same ideology … Il Min Ju Ui is the guiding principle of creating a new history of our nation and a peace of the world.” An believed that Koreans have preserved ethnic homogeneity throughout their history, and therefore, was a one nation that must stay united. Reflecting this idea, Yi administration’s political slogan was “we will die if divided, but will live if united.” Both Yi and An’s definition of nation was

based on the purity and homogeneity of ethnic Koreans. As Shin Gi-wook, a Korean nationalism scholar, asserts “*Il Min Ju Ui* was clearly an expression of ethnic nationalism.”

Yi built *Il Min Ju Ui* with two oppositions: opposition to Japan and anti-communism. His opposition to Japan was widely known since the Japanese colonization period. Yi was one of the exiled nationalists who endeavored to recover national sovereignty. His earlier works, such as “The Spirit of Independence (*Dok Rip Jeong Shin*)” written in 1899, demonstrates his anti-Japanese sentiment. In the article, Yi asserts that Korea is an independent nation claiming, “for more than four thousand years, they (Koreans) have lived in a nation known for its good manners in the East and have maintained self-rule and independence.” He further contends that foreign threats have undermined the national sovereignty and that Koreans must unite against the foreign influences, including that of Japan. In the 1940s, liberated from oppressive Japanese rule, majority of Koreans were furious against Japan. Yi effectively used anti-Japanese nationalistic narrative to gain support from the general population.

*Il Min Ju Ui* also rejected the influence of communism in Korea. Yi reframed the debate between the liberalists and communists as one between nationalists and communists. Although Korean socialists and communists were essentially nationalists, Yi claimed that they were not nationalists and that they harmed the political integrity of Korea. His view becomes clearer when he says, “we (Koreans) must stand against communism, forming a democratic nation.”

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clear in his statement that Yi is proposing *Il Min Ju Ui* as a weapon against the communist influence. An Ho-sang stressed the importance of *Il Min Ju Ui* even more claiming, “even democracy is just another ephemeral phenomenon. It is too meager and shallow to be our nation’s governing ideology. This is why we need *Il Min Ju Ui.*”\(^{268}\) An further asserted that *Il Min Ju Ui* is a nationalism that stresses the purity of the Korean ethnic group.\(^{269}\) Yi intentionally propagated the idea that communism is an enemy of Korean nation, instilling hostile sentiment in the general population. Influenced by Yi’s *Il Min Ju Ui*, Koreans supported Yi’s administration. By opposing Japan and communism in his nationalistic discourse, Yi successfully acquired the popular support in the south and the political legitimacy of inaugurating a separate South Korean government.

Although Yi rigorously propagated his ethnic nationalistic views and effectively acquired political legitimacy, it is questionable whether he was a true believer of his ideas. Many Korean scholars criticize that his political actions did not correspond his nationalistic claims. Oh Yoo Seok, one of the Korean nationalism scholars, asserts that Yi’s anti-Japanese element was just a political façade. He criticizes that:

> The problem of Yi’s anti-Japanese nationalism was that it was just a political manipulation; he sought popular support of the Koreans by utilizing anti-Japanese discourse. If he truly opposed Japan, Yi would not have appointed pro-Japanese individuals as government officials. Yi intentionally provoked the anti-Japanese sentiment outwardly, but he neglected to clear off the influence of Japanese collaborators inside his own government.\(^{270}\)

2010. P. 226


After the liberation, the major task of the nationalists was to cleanse the Japanese influence in Korean politics. As mentioned in chapter three, Korean nationalists were severely oppressed when the pro-Japanese individuals were rewarded with financial benefits during the colonial era. Many Yangbans were literate, collaborated with Japanese government, and preserved their economic advantages even under the Japanese rule while many farmers lost their land and became peasants or slaves. This created a class division between the two; Japanese collaborators, former Yangbans, became the upper class while the nationalists and the general population were stripped of their financial assets, mainly their lands at the time, lowering their social status even more. After the establishment of the South Korean government, Yi was financially supported by the upper classes, former Japanese collaborators, and appointed them in high rank government positions.\(^{271}\) Because the South Korean government failed to cleanse the influence of Japanese collaborators in its own government, “the remnants of the colonial era perpetuated in an anti-democratic and anti-nationalistic form.”\(^ {272}\) As a result, many Yangbans who became Japanese collaborators preserved their economic dominance even after the independence.

Yi’s earlier career in the Japanese colonization period was clearly nationalistic, but his presidential career makes one wonder if he maintained his anti-Japanese stance. If Yi truly opposed Japanese influence within his own administration, he would have shunned them and appointed nationalists as government officials instead. This is a clear example of Yi’s duplicity; Yi was just utilizing Korean nationalism to gain popular support and legitimize his own government.

Similarly, his anti-communist stance is questionable because Yi later on, completely

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\(^{272}\) Ibid.
disregarded the cultivation of democracy in South Korea. Two years after the inauguration of the two governments in Korea, the North, supported by the Soviets initiated a civil war, commonly known as the Korean War. Other international powers quickly joined the fight within the Korean peninsula. With the Soviet Union temporarily absent from the Permanent Five Committee in which the five countries have the right to veto any UN decision, the United Nation dispatched its Command Group when Yi implored UN for military help. The war lasted for three years from 1950 to 1953, and killed nearly two million soldiers from both sides. In addition, more than three million civilians, roughly a tenth of entire population at the time, were killed and another five million became refugees.273 The war devastated “both halves of a country that had only just begun to recover from four decades of Japanese occupation and sudden shock of division.”274

After the war, Yi’s political stance shifted to radical nationalist. Yi was an individual who rejected violence even during the Japanese colonization; he was an intellectual who believed that Korea can be liberated with international support, not with guerilla or terrorist attacks on the Japanese. However, as the anti-communist sentiment became prevalent amongst the Koreans after the war, Yi assumed a radical nationalist narrative. Seeing the devastating effect of the war that the Northern communists initiated, South Koreans became hostile against the communism more than ever. Adapting the changing political atmosphere, Yi’s criticism against communism became stronger. Yi, who was open to peaceful reunification in his early presidency, utilized radical nationalistic narrative that called for violent reunification. Yi asserted that the war must be continued even after the cease-fire in 1953. He even implored the U.S. to


execute an atomic bomb attack in the region between China and the North Korea. Yi’s adaptability to changing climate demonstrates that Yi was not an individual who genuinely opposed the communism; rather he was a political leader who acknowledged the power of nationalism and implemented it to legitimize his regime.

Most importantly, Yi’s disregard of democracy after the war illustrates his true political intention. In 1950, the CIA wrote a report on Yi to the U.S. government defining Yi “a man of little imagination and mediocre intelligence, possessing a forceful personality, great political ambitions, and an intensely nationalist viewpoint.”275 Although whether Yi was a genuine nationalist remains questionable, as the CIA puts it, he did have great political ambitions. His political ambition became more apparent after the cease-fire. In his article “What is Il Min Ju Ui?,” Yi clearly asserted that the main reason he reject communism is because it disregards democratic rule of people.276 However, his post-war political actions were not democratic at all. The devastating result of the war cultivated a strong anti-communist sentiment in South Korea. This gave Yi the justification to suppress democracy. Claiming that he was protecting the national security from communism, Yi eliminated his political rivals and maintained his political dominance in South Korea.”277 For example, Yi severely oppressed the intellectuals and politicians who called for peaceful reunification, labeling them as communists.278 Oh Yoo Seok contends that Yi’s political oppression serves as an example of Yi’s political façade; Yi adapted

278 Ibid
to the changing political climate and utilized corresponding nationalistic narrative to ensure his political domination in South Korea. Similarly, Park Chan-seung, another scholar who studies Korean nationalism, claims that Yi’s Il Min Ju Ui was a Fascist nationalism which legitimizes a political leader’s oppression under the justification of national security.\(^{279}\) In conclusion, Yi was a political leader who quickly adapted to the fluctuating political climate and utilized nationalism to ensure his political dominance in South Korea.

As Yoo and Park assert, though Yi called for a democratic nation, Yi’s political ambitions impeded the cultivation of democracy in South Korea. Yi’s political ambition reached its peak during the Korean War, in 1952, Yi proclaimed a martial law incarcerated political rivals and was elected as the president again. Four years later when the next presidential election was imminent, Yi amended the constitution that essentially granted him lifetime presidency. Politically dominating, Yi was elected as the president again. In 1960, Yi collaborated with his political party to tamper the election results, and resumed his presidency. Seeing how Yi was manipulating the Korean population with nationalism to legitimize his dictatorship, citizens of Ma San city, mostly comprised of high school students, rebelled in April 11, 1960.\(^{280}\) The anti-dictatorship movement in Ma San soon spread nation-wide when Kim Ju Yeol, one of the missing students who participated revolt in Ma San, was found dead with tear gas bomb stuck into his skull through his eye socket.\(^{281}\) Unable to contain the national rebel against his dictatorship, Yi conceded the presidency and migrated to Hawaii where he died in July 19, 1965.


\(^{281}\) Ibid
Yi along with the U.S. was responsible for the division, the Korean War, and lack of democracy in South Korea. It is truly interesting how Yi anticipated Korea’s complications in 1899 even before the fall of Daehan Empire. In his book, *The Spirit of Independence*, he claims “if the people should be united in accordance with unenlightened thoughts and against commonly held ideas- and only for the sake of private concerns – grave dangers would await them.” Indeed, under Yi, an ambitious political dictator, Koreans faced grave dangers such as the division and the Korean War. Yi was a politician adaptable to changing political climate. He was also a cunning dictator who acknowledged the power of nationalism in governing the country and rigorously implemented a nationalistic narrative to acquire political legitimacy of his dictatorship. Therefore, Yi’s nationalism should not be understood just as an ethnic nationalism but a dictatorial nationalism.

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Park Chunghee and developmentalistic nationalism

After the fall of Yi administration, Korea was in disarray. The sudden absence of a dictator has compelled many politicians to be ambitious, and soon political practices of the government officials became corrupt. Politicians received illegal political funds from private businesses, street gangs, and so on. In this political milieu, Park Chunghee took power through a military coup on May 16, 1961. He established the Nation Reconstruction Committee, which assumed political dominance under the martial law and appointed himself as the chair of the committee. The president at the time was Yun Bo-seon, but scholars agree that Yoon did not have political power and Park was the political leader of the time. Park subsequently took over the presidency in 1963.

Park was also a leader who acknowledged the power of nationalism in governing the country. His nationalistic narrative was composed of three elements: ethnic nationalism, anti-communism, and developmentalism. Like Yi, Park saw Korea as a nation stemming from a single ethnic lineage and therefore, should be united. He “accepted the basic premise of ethnic homogeneity and the eternity of the Korean nation stemming from Dangun.” In his book, *Nation, Revolution, and Me*, Park claims that

> Our nation’s wish is to be reunited. Unification! We have shared an ancestry and buried our forefathers on our grounds for five thousand years. But divided, we are becoming unfamiliar with our neighbors (North Koreans) … I fear that ultimately our nation would be torn apart not just in territory but in our spirit and ethnicity as well.

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Calling for reunification of the two, Park argues that because Korans have shared an ancestry and have preserved their ethnic homogeneity, Korea is one nation. Unlike the cultural nationalists in the 1920s and 30s who stressed the shared cultural heritage, Park, like Yi, demonstrated fascist and racist tendency clearly focused on the ethnic purity as a major component of the Korean nation.

Park succeeded an anti-communist view from Yi as well. Despite his call for reunification based on ethnic nationalism, Park claimed in his other book *Our Nation’s Future Path* that “if reunification means being ‘enslaved’ by the communist party, I would fight it till my death.”

Like Yi, Park framed the disagreement between the South and the North as nationalists’ effort to preserve national integrity against the international influence of communism that is exterminating the Korean national identity. He contends that the current national crisis is caused by “consistent and invasive threats of evil Communists of the North.”

Because Park took power with military coup, he needed a justification for his political dominance. Labeling communists as “evil” expansionists, he effectively utilized nationalism to reinforce the hostile political sentiment between South and North Korea. His claimed that his coup was a nation-saving revolution against the communist threats, legitimizing his illegal rule in the South.

While Park succeeded ethnic nationalistic and anti-communistic component from Yi and his *Il Min Ju Ui*, he separated himself with Yi mostly by promoting developmentalism. Park believed that “because we were not strong, our nation has been constantly invaded by the foreign


powers.” He specifically pointed out how England maintained its political sovereignty due to its industrialization. One point to be noted is that he prioritized industrialization over democracy. In his book, Our Nation’s Future Path, he clearly stated that “establishment of healthy democracy” is the primary objective of his promotion of nationalism. However, he also asserted that “in this period of revolution, we should not imitate the democracy of the West. We should establish a democratic government that fits our society and political milieu.” The Korean style democracy he proposed was “first-economic development, later democracy.” Park believed that “in human society, economy is more important than politics and culture.” Park viewed politics and political ideologies as “nothing grandeur, and therefore politicians should focus on providing the nationals with good food and good clothes, trying to benefit the country as a whole.” In his call for developmentalism, Park considered economic development to be the priority of the nation in order to maintain its political sovereignty against the international powers.

Under developmentalism, Park deviated from policies of the Yi administration in international politics as well. Unlike Yi who actively reinforced the anti-Japanese sentiment amongst Koreans and rejected any international interactions with Japan, Park signed the

290 Ibid. p. 246
292 Ibid. P. 257
295 Ibid
diplomatic normalization treaties with Japan and began economic trades.\textsuperscript{296} One of the major characteristics of developmentalism is practicality. Park asserts “if it truly benefits the nation, trade with Japan, China, or any other country is fine.”\textsuperscript{297} He argues that as long as the nation is able to economically thrive, trade even with the former colonizers can be justified. Because of the anti-Japanese sentiment, originated from colonial era and reinforced during Yi administration, that was prevalent in South Korea, many Koreans criticized Park’s practicality.\textsuperscript{298} But Park was an autocratic leader and pushed through the trade negotiation process and initiated trade with Japan. The trade normalization granted Korea huge amount of investments and technologies leading to the economic success during Park’s regime.

Park’s anti-communism and developmentalism can be understood as a form of nationalism because he rigorously employed nationalistic narrative to encourage the two ideas. Park’s views somewhat resemble those of Yi Kwang-su. Before his political shift, Yi stressed the importance of educating people in order to restore cultural integrity in Korea. He believed that without a national strength stemming from a strong cultural unity, Korea cannot be politically independent from other countries. Although Park focused on Korean economy over its culture, Park, like Yi, essentially claimed that the nation would not be freed from foreign influences if it is not strong enough. He argued that because the nation was economically weak, foreign forces could easily enter Korean politics. Under this logic, “his coup was portrayed as an effort to achieve ‘modernization of the fatherland’”.\textsuperscript{299}

\textsuperscript{297} Park Jung Hee. Our Nation’s Future Path. Dong Seo Mun Hwa. Republic of Korea. 1969. P. 199
Under Park’s developmentalist nationalism, South Korea thrived economically. During twenty years of his dictatorship, “Korea displayed remarkable economic growth (average annual growth rate of 8.6 percent in GDP from 1960 to 1982) and transformed its economy from agrarian to industrial.” Using the nationalistic narrative to unite Koreans under developmentalism, Park successfully industrialized South Korea, and Korea came to be known as one of “four little dragons,” four Asian countries rapidly modernizing themselves, along with Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. South Korea, which used to be one of the poorest countries after the Korean War, was uprising in international economy, which many referred to as the “The Miracle of the Han.”

Despite Korea’s huge economic success, Park’s nationalism had two limitations; it legitimized Park’s dictatorship and widened the gap between the poor and the rich. Like Yi, Park was an individual full of political ambitions. Two months before the eighth presidential election of South Korea in 1972, Park proclaimed a martial law, claiming that the nation was under the imminent threat of communists. He disbanded the South Korean Congress and established the the National Council for Unification, which assumed the sole right to elect the president. As the committee was under Parks control, he was reelected as the president. He subsequently “established the draconian yusin system in 1972, and he was no doubt an autocratic leader, ruling the country with an iron fist.” Because Park had the full military control in South Korea, few


301 Ibid. P. 104


had the courage to stand up against him. Any pro-communist or anti-developmentalist discourse was deemed anti-nationalist and was severely oppressed by the police and military. Park’s yusin reform was depicted as a ‘save-the-nation movement’ necessitated by changing domestic and international conditions.”

As a result, South Koreans did not fully enjoy the true democracy under Park’s nationalism; South Korea was still under the dictatorship.

Park’s developmentalist nationalism also widened the gap between the lower and upper classes in Korea. Initiating trade with many other foreign countries, Korea’s economy became export-oriented. In order to increase exports, Park implemented the totalitarianistic economic system in which Chaebols (Giant businesses), the only few firms capable of exporting their products to foreign countries, were supported by smaller businesses which lacked the ability to export their products. Trying to ensure Chaebols’ productivity, Park brutally suppressed the labor movement in Korea. Due to his practicality, Park was not fond of discussions or debates regarding labor issues. He thought that the labor discourse only decreased the Chaebols’ productivity. Under his economic policy, the low-wage workers became powerless as Chaebols neglected to follow the labor standards act. Frustrated, the low wage workers called for better working environment and higher wages. The frustration reached its peak when “Jeon Tae Il, a textile worker, immolated himself at the Seoul Peace Market on November 13, 1970, shouting as the flames consumed him, ‘Obey the labor standards act!’ and ‘Don’t mistreat young girls!’”


306 Ibid. P. 371
As demonstrated above, Park’s nationalism and his focus on economic development disregarded labor issues, widening the gap between the lower and upper social classes.
Post Park period – from the 1980s to 90s

Park Chunghee’s regime abruptly ended in 1979 when Kim Jae-gyu, one of Park’s advisors and the head of Korean Counter Intelligence Agency, assassinated Park at a dinner meeting.\(^ {307} \) Although the reason behind his betrayal is still not certain, Kim claimed that he saved the nation from an autocratic leader; Kim employed nationalistic discourse to justify his actions. After the Park and his yusin regime came to an end, Korean yearned for a democratic government and elected Choe Gyu-ha, who tried to establish a new civilian government. His effort was crushed when Chun Doo-hwan, a military general, led another coup against the government, and subsequently became the president in 1980. Citizens of Gwangju city rebelled against the new military regime but were brutally suppressed by Chun, slaughtering 151 civilians and injuring 852.\(^ {308} \) After eight years of presidency, Chun resigned only to abdicate the presidency in favor to Roh Tae-woo, another military official. Until the end of Roh’s presidency in 1993, South Korea was under successive dictatorship, all of whom utilized nationalistic narrative to acquire political legitimacy. They also assumed ethnic nationalism but only to ultimately employ it against the North Korean communist regime. The hostile political attitude continued even after South Koreans established democratic civilian government in 1993, electing Kim Young-sam, a key dissident during the dictatorship, as the president. Only when Kim Dae-jung became the president of South Korea in 1997 did South Korea actually act upon the ethnic nationalism that called for a peaceful reunification.

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The chapter has focused on Yi Syngman and Park Chunghee, the two most influential and long-ruling political leaders in South Korea. As demonstrated above, both leaders have utilized nationalistic discourse to legitimize their dictatorship and their nationalism was designed to correspond to the fluctuating political situations in Korea. Yi was an adaptable politician who was capable of shifting his political stance based on the changing political milieu. Park was a practical leader who, upon seeing the benefits of international trade, initiated the trade with Korea’s former colonizer, Japan. In both presidencies, nationalism was employed to justify the leaders’ political actions. Anti-communism was consistently utilized by the South Korean leaders even after Park’s regime to cultivate hostility between South and North Korea and to legitimize their political dominance as “saving the nation from communism.” As a result, South Korean nationalism has been outwardly ethnic nationalism, but was actually utilized as a political tool legitimizing the leaders’ legitimacy against communism.
Chapter VII. North Korean Ethnic Nationalism:

From the 1940s to 90s

Like its southern counterpart, North Korea and Kim Il-sung has utilized nationalistic narrative to legitimize the separated government after the division. However, unlike the South, North Korea rarely used the term minjok because it faced an ideological dilemma between international socialism and nationalism; Kim’s narrative had to be transnational but at the same time nationalistic. To narrow the gap between the two, Kim established juche ideology which was a mixture of the two; he reigned North Korea since its foundation until his death in 1993. Kim Il-sung’s political influence was unquestionably dominant and his discourse heavily influenced North Korean politics.\(^{309}\) Throughout his regime, his nationalistic discourse shifted.

\(^{309}\) Especially after the mid-1950s, Kim successfully eliminated all his political rivals in North Korea. There were four major factions before the mid-1950s, Soviet returnees, Yenan Koreans, Southern Communists, and Northern
This chapter of the paper will analyze how Kim believed Korea was a unitary nation based on the bloodline, how he mediated international socialism and nationalism, and how his political stance shifted corresponding to the changing political climate.
Kim Il-sung and International Communism

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, DPRK was established in September, 1948 after ROK’s foundation. Kim Il-sung, who was favored by the Soviets, became the leader under the Soviet military occupation. At the time, socialists in the north were broken into four major factions: Soviet returnees, Yenan Koreans, Southern Communists, and Northern Natives. Kim was amongst the Soviet returnees, an exiled activist who returned to Korea only after the liberation. Thus, he had to establish his political legitimacy over other factions by stressing his earlier career as a leader of guerilla attacks in the northern part of Korea. Bruce Cummings acknowledges his effort saying,

There are ridiculous myths about Kim’s guerrilla resistance in both Koreas today: the North claims that Kim single-handedly defeated the Japanese, and the South claims that Kim is an imposter who stole the name of revered patriot. Nonetheless, this experience is important for an understanding of postwar Korea. The resistance to the Japanese is the main legitimating doctrine of the DPRK; North Koreans trace the origin of the army, the leadership, and their ideology back to this founding moment.

By stressing and even defying his anti-Japanese guerilla attacks, Kim quickly rose as the political leader of North Korea. After he built a regime, “the central party leadership was composed exclusively of individuals who had close personal connections with Kim Il-sung in the pre-

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313 To be more precise, Kim Il-sung was a leader of the Manchurian Guerilla Faction. But amongst the four factions listed above, Kim would be categorized as a Soviet returnee which embraced the Manchurian guerilla groups. After his guerilla activities, Kim went to Moscow and became a Soviet military official.

liberation days or persons who showed unquestionable loyalty to him after the liberation. Like Yi in the South, Kim utilized the anti-Japanese sentiment prevalent in the general population and legitimized his political dominance.

In addition, like Yi, Kim used ideological division between the south and the north to legitimize the separated government. He was not criticized for the division amongst North Koreans as much as Yi was amongst South Koreans because Yi proclaimed the establishment of separate government before Kim did. Kim also had to instill hostility in the general population against South Korea to gain a popular support and acquire political legitimacy for his actions, specifically the Korean War. In his 1955 speech, he argued:

> The problem of reunification might be solved by war, not by peaceful means. If the imperialists unleash war on a worldwide scale, we will have no alternative but to fight … it would be quite possible for us to defeat the US imperialists in Korea by our own strength … We shall sweep the forces of US imperialism from Korea and achieve the reunification of the country.

Rather than defining the hostility against South Korea as anti-liberalism, Kim framed it as a liberation civil war against the imperialistic U.S., the War of National Liberation. Targeting a foreign force, he effectively united North Koreans, and gained their support; his political actions, like initiating the Korean War were legitimized as a result.

One thing to be noted is that unlike Yi, Kim Il-sung did not utilize direct nationalistic narrative; Kim rarely used the term *minjok*, nation, to reinforce the anti-Japanese sentiment, but rather, used the term, country (*gukga*) or people (*inmin*) when he referred to Korea and Koreans. Appealing the civil war to North Koreans to achieve national reunification, Kim referred to it as

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the “Great Liberation War of the Korean People for Freedom and Independence.” He did not use the term nation (*minjok*). This was mainly because his regime assumed communism and gained support from the Soviet Union which outwardly supported the international communism ideal which theoretically rejected nationalism. Although both Lenin and Stalin acknowledged the existence of nations and, in practice, utilized nationalism to encourage people’s revolt against capitalism, pure-Marxist view rejects a society being divided into nations; it wants the working class to acknowledge the division of social classes and revolt against bourgeoisie. Limited by his political alliance with the Soviets, Kim did not directly employ a nationalistic narrative.

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**Juche Ideology in the 1960s and the early 70s**

Kim’s narrative started to change since the 1960s. Joseph Stalin who greatly influenced Kim died in 1953 and the Korean War ended in the same year. The strong bond established between the Soviet Union and North Korea was based on the personal relationship between two country leaders, Stalin and Kim, and the military alliance between the two. After the war, North Korea no longer needed the military assistance from the Soviet Union, and was liberated from Soviet Union’s direct influence. Instead of the Soviet Union, the country that Kim had respected as the communism host country, North Korea became more intimate with China, concluding an alliance treaty with China in 1961.\(^{318}\)

The fluctuating international politics taught Kim that relying blindly on one country can be detrimental to the preservation of North Korean system. He needed something more concrete for North Koreans to unite with. As a result, Kim began implementing more nationalistic narrative in the 1960s to early 1970s. He first distanced himself a little bit from North Korea’s “brother countries,” communist countries. In his speech at the 109\(^{th}\) army unit of the Korean People’s Army in August 25, 1960, he claims

> It is true that we must unite with the fraternal countries. However, we need not emulate the misdeeds of individual persons in these countries … We Koreans should properly assimilate progressive things of the brother countries to suit our own taste. Only then can we hasten the construction of communism.\(^{319}\)

In the 1950s, Kim made sure that North Korea remained close with other communist countries in an anticipation of a recurring Korean War. However, in the 1960s, his narrative shifts, saying that some of the political leaders of communist countries transgressed and, therefore, North Korea


should make sure that it does not allow the same misfortunes manifest again. This was mainly because in the mid 1960s, North Korea had diplomatic argument even with China regarding the Vietnam War.\(^{320}\) When the Soviets proposed a joint military conference to the communist countries including North Korea and China, Mao Zedong refused to cooperate, claiming that the Soviets are betraying the pure-communist ideals. This created diplomatic tension between the communist countries, even between North Korea and China. Experiencing diplomatic difficulty with his “brother countries,” Kim realized the limitation of international socialism and the need of nationalism to unite North Koreans. When he upheld and venerated the communist ideals in the 1950s opposing the liberalism of South Korea, Kim’s political stance shifted, saying that even the communist countries make mistakes as well.

As a means to ensure North Korea freedom from such transgression, Kim Il-sung established the *juche* ideology, a combination of Marxism-Leninism and Korean national characteristics. In his speech in 1971, he defines *juche* ideology claiming,

Establishing *juche* means, in a nutshell, being the master of revolution and reconstruction in one’s own country. This means holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one’s own brains, believing in one’s own responsibility under all circumstances. And it means adhering to the creative position of opposing dogmatism and applying the universal principles of Marxism-Leninism and the experience of other countries to suit the historical conditions and national peculiarities of one’s own country.\(^{321}\)

In his speech, Kim clearly states that *juche* is the synthesis of Marxism-Leninism and the national uniqueness. Universal Marxism-Leninism was no longer the dominant ideology in North Korea; *juche*, the North Korean version of Marxism-Leninism, became the primary ideology.


Kim began acknowledging the national identity of Koreans. He did use the term *juche* in 1950 as well; it was only after the 1960s that Kim upheld *juche* as the “primary ideological basis for the North Korean system.”

One should also note Kim’s use of the term nation. Kim initially refrained from using phrases with the term “nation” in his speeches, but after he was more liberated from Moscow’s influence, Kim started using the term nation in his speeches. Bong Baik, one of his ideology propagandist, reframed the Korean War as North Korean efforts “to sweep away U.S. imperialism and its agents, and the struggle of the entire Korean people for national unification.” Defining the Korean War as a national unification effort, Bong did not substitute the word “national unification” with other words like “people’s liberation.” This demonstrates the changing political climate within North Korea; with decreasing Soviet influence within their borders, North Koreans began acknowledging that Korea is a nation.

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Kimilsungism: the late 1970s and 1980s

Establishing juche ideology in the 1960s and early 70s, Kim attempted to add a national element to international communism; although he still valued Marxism-Leninism over nationalism. However, his political attitude slowly changed; by the late 1970s, he positioned his juche ideology over Marxism-Leninism. Kim’s son, Kim Jong-il, named his father’s thoughts “Kimilsungism,” elevating it to the status of major ideology such as Stalinism and Maoism.324 The junior Kim, the “prince of North Korea” at the time, placed his father’s ideals over those of other communist leaders because of the international tension North Korea was having with other communist countries, especially China. In 1972, U.S. president Richard Nixon visited China. China’s invitation enraged Kim who berated as “a journey of loser, not a march of victory.”325 Seeing its fellow communist countries compromising their communist ideals, North Korea had to place “Kimilsungism” over Maoism or Stalinism.

North Korean government made sure that the junior Kim was not the only one who praised “Kimilsungism.” Muhammad al Missuri326, another juche propagandist, illustrates Kim’s political shift in his book “Kimilsungism: Theory and Practices,” asserting:

Kimilsungism defends the revolutionary principles of Marxism-Leninism, (and) in many of his writings President Kim Il-sung stated that the revolutionary idea (Kimilsungism) of the Workers’ Party of Korea was the Marxist-Leninist guiding idea … This, however, by no means implies that Kimilsungism is merely the idea evolved by the creative development of Marxism-Leninism. Kimilsungism is distinguished from the preceding

326 Muhammad al Missuri is a juche propagandist who published more than 41 books regarding “Kimilsungism.” Most of his books were published during the 1970s and 80s in Pyong Yang. His books were then translated into 5 different languages. Bringing the foreign author to support his ideals, Kim was able to present himself not just as a dictator but as a true theorist whom even the foreigners support and revere.
revolutionary theories in that it has discovered new fundamental principles of the revolution which Marxism-Leninism failed to find due to its historical limitations and in that it gives full answers to all problems which Marxism-Leninism could not even raise.\(^{327}\)

Muhammad Al Missuri claims that Kimilsungism complements the limitations of Marxisms-Leninism; he positions Kimilsungism on a higher level than Marxism-Leninism. As al Missuri’s book was published and distributed by Pyong Yang publisher, which was controlled by the North Korean government, one can take al Missuri’s account as the political propaganda of Kim Il-sung.

After elevating the status of his ideology, Kim started utilizing a nationalistic narrative. On March 1982, the junior Kim made a speech celebrating Kim Il-sung’s seventieth birthday, in which he asserted:

> Koreans must know well Korean history, geography, economics, culture and the custom of the Korean nation, and in particular our Party’s policy, its revolutionary history and revolutionary traditions. Only then will they be able to establish juche and become true Korean patriots, the Korean Communists.\(^{328}\)

The junior Kim’s stress on national history, geography, and culture resembles the discourse of the cultural nationalists who highlighted the importance of genuine Korean culture, and rediscovered the Korean history. In contrast to his earlier political stance, Kim began embracing more nationalistic component to his juche ideology.

As previously demonstrated, by the late 1970s and 1980s, Kim started to utilize more nationalistic narratives. Seeing the Soviet’s declining international power, Kim realized the need of developing his own strategy of governing the country. He soon recognized the power of nationalism and the political narratives of Kim Il-sung, the junior Kim, and his political

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propagandists began to assume nationalistic political stance.
Joseon *Minjok Jeil Ju Ui* and ethnic nationalism in the 1990s

The pinnacle of North Korean nationalism was after the 1990s when the Soviet Union was dismantled and China normalized diplomatic relationship with South Korea. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow normalized relations with South Korea in September 1990 and so did China in 1992, infuriating the North.\(^{329}\) North Korean media referred to South Korea’s promise of financial support to the former Soviet union, and characterized the offer as “political prostitution.”\(^{330}\) Seeing its fraternal country betraying its own belief, Kim realized the importance of an independent political stance and proclaimed “Joseon *Minjok Jeil Ju Ui*” (A theory of Korean nation as number one) and “*Uri Shik Sa Hoi Ju Ui*” (Socialism of our style) in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.\(^{331}\)

Under the political slogan of “Socialism of our style,” nationalism, once denounced by the earlier North Korean government, was reevaluated. In his speech in August 1991, Kim Il-sung redefined nationalism, claiming:

> Nationalism was initially a progressive ideology that protected the will of people … However, after capitalism was developed, bourgeoisie subsequently became the ruling class and utilized nationalism to preserve its privilege … actions of those who slack off from work … calling themselves as nationalists are just pretension … For unitary nation like Korea, the true nationalism is patriotism … one that encourages common prosperity of nation (*minjok*). Therefore, Koreans should unite and fight against bourgeoisie.\(^{332}\)

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By stating that nationalism itself is a progressive ideology that is often manipulated by the capitalists, the senior Kim officially gave himself the justification to utilize nationalistic discourse. Similarly, Kim redefined minjok (nation) as well,

*Minjok* is a social grouping of people who shared history … although class ideology is important, the more important thing is to realize the will of minjok. Social class is just a part of minjok and no individual from any class can benefit oneself if he betrays the common will of minjok. Class can exist only when minjok exists, and only when the will of minjok is guaranteed of realization can the benefit of individuals from different classes can be realized.

The Senior Kim, who refrained from using the term *minjok* early in his political career, now prioritized *minjok* over class ideology. He argued that the *minjok* issue is more important than that of the class division between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. North Korea in the early 1990s officially became more nationalistic than communistic.

Kim Il-sung died in 1993; his son, Kim Jong-il succeeded his political leadership. The junior Kim has made numerous public appearances since the 1980s, supporting his father’s political stance, proving himself as the rightful and apparent heir. After he assumed the political leadership in 1993, Kim Jong-il began employing ethnic nationalistic narratives. In his 1998 speech, “Let Us Unify the Country Independently and Peacefully Through the Great Unity of the Entire Nation,” the Junior Kim argues:

The Korean nation is a homogeneous nation that inherited the same blood and lived in the same territory speaking the same language for thousands of years. All Koreans in the north, and abroad belong to the same nation with the blood and soul of Korean nation and are linked inseparably with the same national interests and a common historical psychology and sentiment.

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In Kim Jong-il’s reference to the nation, Marxist-Leninist perspective is nowhere to be found. Kim Jong-il emphasizes the homogeneity of the bloodline, and defines Korean nation based on the shared ethnic ancestry. Comparing Kim Jong-il’s discourse with that of his father in early 1950s, one would be able to observe the clear political shift from international socialism to ethnic nationalism.
North Korean nationalism – struggle against international socialism

As mentioned, North Korean nationalism has been cultivated through successive steps struggling with the international communism. One should note that the political shift was triggered by North Korea’s international relations, especially one with the Soviet Union. Under the immense Soviet influence in his early presidency, Kim rarely used the term minjok, or nation in the 1940s. After Stalin’s death, Kim Il-sung was more free from Soviet influence, allowing him to attempt a balance between Marxism-Leninism and nationalism, juche ideology in the 1960s and early 70s. In the late 1970s and 80s when the Soviet Union began to crumble due to excessive national spending on the Cold War, North Korea regime proclaimed Kimilsungism and elevated it to a higher status similar to that of Stalinism and Maoism. This allowed the North Korean government to utilize nationalistic discourse more than before. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, Kim fully acknowledged nationalism as a key component of guiding ideology in North Korea. Kim Jong-il, his son, employed ethnic nationalistic narrative in the later 1990s. The DPRK-Soviet relationship and the development of nationalism serve as an evidence that demonstrates how political leaders implement nationalism corresponding to fluctuating political climate.

Another characteristic of North Korean nationalism is the deification of its political leaders, the Kim family. The “Kim cult” was bred within the nationalistic discourse since the 1960s when Kim Il-sung started to propagate the “Kimilsungism,” deifying himself and his heir. This allowed the junior Kim, Kim Jong-il, to successfully inherit the throne. Choi Young Eun, a South Korean scholar who studies North Korean politics claims that “North Korea assumes anti-religion political system outwardly, but in real context, secularization is nowhere to be seen and
it relies heavily on deification of its leader.”  

She claims that North Korea has successfully blocked foreign influences and oversaw the political discourses amongst North Koreans, maintaining the isolated theocratic political system. She further asserts that since its foundation, North Korea faced international isolation even from its fellow communism countries and to manage such crises, it deified Kim family and legitimized the generational succession. As a result, the politics in North Korea has been “religionized.” The “religionization” process of North Korean politics has always accompanied the nationalistic discourse, portraying the Kim family as messiah protecting the Korean nation from the Western imperialism.

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336 Ibid
337 Ibid. P. 51
338 Ibid
The two nationalisms in the two Koreas

In the previous chapter, we have observed how nationalism developed distinctly in each Korea. In the 1990s, both Koreas have assumed ethnic nationalism but are under different political system. South Korea has established a civil democratic government while the North has reinforced dictatorship to the point where it became a classic dynasty of generational succession. This section will be dedicated to pinpoint the key findings in analyzing two Koreas.

Firstly, unlike what the general Korean population assumes, Korea has not always assumed ethnic nationalism. As demonstrated in the earlier section of this chapter, the North Korean government employed ethnic nationalistic narrative only by the late 1990s. South Korea has always utilized ethnic nationalism since its establishment in 1940s, but it was only a political tool of the dictators to legitimize their political dominance.

Secondly, political leaders and institutions have extensively and consistently utilized nationalism to acquire political legitimacy in the fluctuating political climate. South Korean presidents like Yi and Park aggressively utilized ethnic nationalistic discourse that reinforced the anti-communist sentiment of the general population to legitimize their regime. Four out of ten presidents of South Korea proclaimed martial law under the name of protecting the nation against the communists. The martial law only proved to be a political tool to oust their political rivals. Similarly, Kim Il-sung has instilled anti-imperial sentiment in the North Korean population, legitimizing the Korean war.

Thirdly, nationalism under dictatorship, a dictatorial nationalism, inherently impedes the reunification of two Koreas. The general Korean population currently assumes that Korea is a unitary nation stemming from a single ethnic lineage. Seeing the devastating aftermath of the Korean War, the majority of Koreans support peaceful reunification. However, dictators of both
Koreas historically refrained from the peace talks. Some of them, like Yi, focused on violent methods of reunification, provoking hostility towards each other. Others outwardly claimed that peaceful reunification should be achieved but it was only a political pretense. Since the dictators did not want to concede their political power, they were afraid of reunification of two Koreas which would diminish their political power.
Chapter VIII. Conclusion

Throughout the thesis, we have observed modern Korean history through the lens of nationalism. Over the past two centuries, Korea has undergone enormous political changes. The Joseon monarchy fell to Japanese rule. Even after Koreans regained independence, they were divided into two countries by the two great international powers, the U.S. and the Soviets, and subsequently engaged in a civil war, resulting millions of casualties on both sides. As the political climate has changed, Korean nationalism evolved; in return, the political milieu has often changed to accommodate changes in the national vision.

Observing and analyzing the course of Korean nationalism and Korean politics, we can reach four conclusions. (1) Korean nationalism is based on the ‘idea’ of the Korean nation. This idea is a cultural construct, one that has been susceptible to changes in political climate of a nation. (2) The competition between the two Koreas for political legitimacy has intensified the nationalistic discourse, creating two drastically different historical perspectives. (3) South and North Korean nationalisms are each ethnic nationalism; each, moreover, claims to represent the
aspirations of all Koreans. The core characteristics of the two, however, are vastly different one another. South Korean nationalism is focused on national prosperity, while the North is focused on national purity. (4) Because the seemingly-same ethnic nationalisms of two Koreas are actually vastly different, nationalism hinders reunification of the two Koreas rather than encouraging it.

Nationalism is a powerful force that defines, combines, and divides people. Nationalists define their societies as collectives rooted in some combination of the following characteristics: ethnicity, cultural heritage, citizenship, or shared historical backgrounds. Based on their ideas of what nation is and the value that unifies members of a nation, nationalists strengthen their unity and reject the members of other nations. Liah Greenfeld defines nationalism as an “umbrella term under which are subsumed the related phenomena of national identity (or nationality) and consciousness, and collectivities based on them – nations.”\(^{339}\) She elaborates her argument saying,

The specificity of nationalism, that which distinguishes nationality from other types of identity, derives from the fact nationalism locates the source of individual identity within a ‘people,’ which is seen as the bearer of sovereignty, the central object of loyalty, and the basis of collective solidarity … The only foundation of nationalism as such, the only condition, that is, without which no nationalism is possible, is an idea; nationalism is a particular perspective or a style of thought. The idea which lies at the core of nationalism is the idea of the ‘nation.’\(^{340}\)

Greenfeld believes that to embrace nationalism is to claim that sovereignty and political legitimacy lie exclusively with the nation. She also claims that the fundamental source of nationalism is an “idea” of a nation. Nations do not exist unless their members believe that they do: a nation has no existence – for example, in ethnic characteristics or institutions – that is


\(^{340}\) Ibid. P. 3 -4
independent of people’s minds. In order for nationals to define themselves as a nation, there must be some factor that they have in common. Ethnic nationalists believe that ethnicity is that common factor. Civic nationalists, on the other hand, believe that shared values bring the nation together. But in both cases, the actual national identity exists in the minds of members – even when the characteristic that defines common membership, such as race, is a feature of the natural world, outside human minds.

The fact that all nationalisms are cultural constructs helps us understand why they can adapt to new political circumstances. As we have observed, Koreans have utilized nationalism since the 19th century, but as the political situations changed in Korea, the value that Koreans shared changed as well, forcing the nature of nationalism to evolve along with it. The earliest form of Korean nationalism was the nationalism of self-preservation, like Heunseon Daewongun’s Soeguk Jeong Chaek, the Donghak Peasant Movement, Koreans’ reaction against the first Sino-Japanese War, and the March Movement. These nationalistic movements were provoked by the foreign threats. While the definition of Korean nation was not yet fully developed (meaning that the people have not yet solely assumed the sovereignty of the nation as we can see from the top-down characteristics of Soeguk Jeong Chaek), these movements were efforts to protect Korean national sovereignty against what was deemed to be non-Korean influences.

This form of nationalism changed into the cultural nationalism when the Japanese colonial government implemented its imperial cultural policy. The new policy outwardly relaxed many of the restrictions imposed on Koreans, but had a hidden intention of effacing Korean culture in the name of Naeson Ilchae, the Japanese government’s claim that Japan and Korea are essentially the same. In reaction, Korean cultural nationalists such as Yi Kwang-su argued
that Koreans should restore their cultural heritage and set about restoring, rediscovering, and even inventing Korean culture, such as history, religion, and language. The Japanese surpressed this cultural nationalism in the 1930s.

In the 1940s, Korean nationalism took another form -- as ethnic nationalism. Not long after Korea regained its independence in 1945, the country was divided by the two great international powers, the U.S. and the Soviets. Since then, South Korea and North Korea have both adopted ethnic nationalism. Being divided for the first time in 1100 years, Koreans on both sides sought reunification and used the notion of a common ethnicity as justification. Even though both Koreas acknowledged a shares ethnicity, however, the nationalisms of the two countries differ. The two states have different ideas of what “true Koreans” are.

Although nationalism is a cultural construct, many Korean ethnic nationalists in the present like Kim Chang-soon believe that a pure Korean bloodline has been preserved throughout Korean history and that ethnic nationalism is not just a modern phenomenon or idea. They believe that the purity of Korean lineage is an empirical fact, granting Koreans a “naturally legitimate” reason to be Koreans.\(^{341}\) In addition, some regard Korean ethnicity as a divine heritage from a distant past. As a result, they believe that latest form of Korean nationalism, ethnic nationalism, is a natural, pre-modern, and unchanged phenomenon.

Secondly, because of the competition between the two governments for political legitimacy, North and South Korea have different perspectives of what legitimate pre-modern Korean history is. The political legitimacy competition between the two states has intensified nationalistic discourse. We might assume that emphasizing the shared (if imagined) ethnic heritage the two Koreas would help dampen the hostility between the two Koreas. Instead, the

two Koreas have competed over historical legitimacy. Both governments acknowledge that since Goryeo dynasty, Korea had been a unified kingdom, and that Goryeo and Joseon eras strengthened national unity and characteristics at the core of Korean identity. However, the two governments have different perspective on which kingdom held the true political legitimacy before the Goryeo era. In other words, it is controversial which kingdom cultivated the national characteristics. While the North is more focused on the Northern kingdoms such as Goguryeo and the subsequent Balhae, South Korea focuses more on the Southern kingdoms like Silla.\(^{342}\) The times of division such as the Three Dynasties era and Silla/Balhae era is especially controversial between the North and the South as each government portrays its regional kingdom to be responsible for cultivating the core national characteristics.\(^{343}\) The two governments, in short, have different historical perspectives because political legitimacy would be granted to the state that is the heir of the kingdom responsible for cultivation of national awareness. In the end, because nationalism is a cultural construct, an idea, not a fact, governments compete for the political legitimacy and develop two different historical perspectives.

Observing the historical evolution of Korean nationalism, we can analyze the current nationalisms of two Koreas and compare the two. The transformation process of Korean nationalism, especially since the Japanese colonization era, is very interesting because it is rare for one nationalism, the cultural nationalism in the 1920s and 30s, to diverge into two ethnic nationalisms which are seemingly very similar to one another but in fact are not. In his article “Center and Periphery,” sociologist Edward Shils defines center as “the center of the order of


\(^{343}\) Ibid. P. 189 -192
symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society.” Applying his theory to nationalism, we could suppose that the center of a nation would be its ideals. A person would be considered legitimate member of the nation if he or she shares value that are revered by other nationals. Therefore in order to understand the nature of the two nationalisms, it is crucial to see who is considered as a legitimate member of the nation. Hence, one should understand the values that South Koreans and North Koreans uphold.

In South Korea, one can see that South Koreans’ core values are prosperity and democracy. In his presidential inauguration speech in 2008, Lee Myung-bak claimed that, We have recovered our lost territories, and risked our lives to do so. We all tried to make the best out of given situations. Now, we have achieved industrialization and democratization in the shortest amount of time in the world. We alone can take credit for this.

Similarly, Park Geun-hye, the latest South Korean president, claimed in her presidential inauguration speech that

The Republic of Korea is what it is right now because of our blood and sweat. The strong persistence, spirit, and potential (Jeo Ryuk) of our nation allowed us to achieve industrialization and democratization at the same time. We have made the history of great achievement.

As demonstrated in both presidents’ speeches, South Koreans take pride in that their nation has simultaneously acquired democratization and industrialization in the shortest amount of time compared to any other countries in the world. These two values, democracy and prosperity, are not just trophies for South Koreans but the values of what a true South Korean is.

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Under the military dictatorship in the 1980s, South Koreans fought for democracy. Clashing with an oppressive government, many innocent civilians were killed or hurt. Therefore, the democratic values that were fought for in bloody revolts against the oppressive dictatorial governments are upheld in South Korea. In addition, under the developmental nationalism since the 1960s, South Korea has achieved rapid economic success. In the process, the ideal South Korean was portrayed as hard-working, persistent, and future-oriented nationals. Lee Myung-bak claimed that

I will make Republic of Korea an economically advanced country that will positively influence the world. This is the sincere wish coming from the upper generation, hope of the current generation, and promise to the later generation … Now we move forward to achieve our goal of the era, economic advancement of Republic of Korea. Let us write another page in our history mythical achievements like “the Miracle of the Han.”

Again, Park Geun-hye shared a similar ambition in her speech, saying

Pioneering a new path is not an easy task. But I believe in every member of our nation, the Republic of Korea. I believe in our dynamic national strength, spirit, and potential (Jeo Ryeok). Now I want to start a new era of hope where we can enjoy the second “Miracle of the Han”

It is striking that two presidents employ such similar narratives. Mentioning the “Miracle of Han,” the period when Korea achieved the most economic advancement, both presidents stress the importance of economic development and mark it as the core value of Koreans. Park elaborates that the national spirit lies in the economic advancement of South Korea, a clear demonstration of developmental nationalism. She defines the national attribute to be the persistence and hardworking nature of the nationals which made rapid economic advancement


possible. As illustrated in the speeches of the two latest South Korean presidents, prosperity and
democracy are the main focus of South Korean nationalism.

In contrast, North Korean nationalism stresses the nation’s racial purity and legitimizes
the dictatorship of the Kim family. As demonstrated in the earlier chapter, the North Korean
government faced difficulty employing nationalistic narrative outwardly because nationalism
conflicted with international socialism, which in theory transcends the national borders. But as
international political situations changed, North Korea slowly started to utilize nationalism, and
since the 1990s, after the death of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, the second generation of Kim
family, fully adopted the concept minjok (nation), and utilized nationalism.

North Korean nationalism can be characterized as resistance to the “tainted.” It rejects
the influence of the U.S., capitalism, and influx of other nationals. North Koreans consider
themselves as the “pure communists” with “untainted lineage.” Their political legitimacy
under the Juche ideology is undergirded by its single trait, resistance to tainted foreign threats
whether it be the “Yankee capitalists” or the “Corrupt Soviets.” Their claim to political
legitimacy is so tightly intertwined with the resistance of others that without it, North Korean
government can hardly define national characteristics of a Korean, failing to acquire the political
legitimacy. A similar logic is applied even between the two Koreas. North Koreans claim to be
the purest form of Koreans. Unlike their South counterparts, they believe that by minimizing
international interactions they have preserved their ethnic integrity. Assuming that they are
ethnically untainted, North Koreans consider themselves as the better version of Koreans.

350 Ibid
351 Ibid
South Koreans are considered second-class Koreans.

North Korean nationalism also legitimizes the dictatorship of the Kim family. As it gradually adopted nationalism, the North Korean government used nationalist discourse to legitimize the dictatorship of Kim Il-sung. National existence was so closely connected to Kim Il-sung himself that being loyal to the supreme leader was being a patriot. Kim banned all religious activities in North Korea and placed himself as a semi-god. The deification effect was so strong that all members of his family were considered to be mythical beings. This allowed North Korea to be the first Communist country ever to become a hereditary monarchy. Nationalism was extensively utilized to convince North Koreans that Kim Jong-il’s succession was not only justified but natural. They were educated to believe that dictatorship and the succession should be allowed because Kim family fights off foreign threats such as the neo-imperialism of the United States. From some North Koreans’ point of view, they do not passively accept dictatorship but rather willingly sacrifice democracy as a cost of protecting the sovereignty of the nation, making themselves noble patriots. This idea is so powerful that North Korean nationalism can be considered almost as a cult. As a result, continuing their version of nationalism, the North Korean government maintains its political legitimacy. The cultural nationalism shared by both Northerners and Southerners, though seemingly similar in nature because of its stress on ethnicity, has now diverged into two distinct nationalisms based on two robust and radically different definitions of nation.

What do these differences suggest for the possibility of peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula? Many Koreans believe that the nationalisms of the two Koreas are essentially the same because both focus on ethnicity and that this will hasten reunification. They believe that ideology is the dividing force but that nationalism is a unifying force. For
nationalism to unify, however, the core values of the nation must be in harmony. As demonstrated above, however, the two Korean nationalisms are drastically different. Nationalism serves as a dividing force rather than a unifying one. Although both focus on ethnicity and reunification, South Korea has undertaken developmental and democratic nationalism while North Korea has assumed purist and dictatorial nationalism. The two nationalisms clash with one another more than they harmonize, creating four issues; (1) democracy v. dictatorship, (2) prosperity v. purity, (3) issue of different social class systems, and (4) stratification of nationals.

The first issue is the conflict between the democratic nature of South Korean nationalism and dictatorial nature of North Korean nationalism. The two systems cannot stand together if the two nations are reunified. Either South Korea agrees to the dictatorship of the North or Kim Jong-eun, the current leader of North Korea who succeeded the throne from his father, Kim Jong-il, relinquishes his throne. South Koreans are very unlikely to be persuaded to compromise the democratic nation they have so tirelessly fought for during past few decades. Similarly, it is highly unlikely that Kim will give up his power when he has the nuclear warhead. Therefore, neither option seems to be possible at this stage.

Another issue is the conflict between prosperity and purity. Some may believe that this is an easier task to be solved but this researcher believe that the second issue is just as hard as the first one. The apprehension of the North Korean diplomat expressed during the Korean Conference in 2008 demonstrates this.

Mono-ethnicity [tanilsong] is something that our nation and no other on earth can pride itself on… There is no suppressing the nation’s shame and anger at the talk of ‘multi-ethnic, multi-racial society’ … which would dilute even the bloodline of our people.

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Because South Korea is actively interacting with other countries and has more influx of foreigners, the North Korean government worries that the ethnic integrity and purity of Koreans may have been already compromised in South Korea. This apprehension may be partly legitimate because South Korea is becoming more “multi-cultural” (This is an official South Korean government term referring to different colored Korean citizens). During her recent presidential election Park Geun-hye had a meeting with multi-cultural families and immigrants, saying

I have a dream that I want to share with multi-cultural families and immigrants. 100% Republic of Korea. A Korea where everyone can harmonize and unite as one. It does not matter where you originally come from. You are all legitimate Koreans. I hope you would have the dignity to consider yourself as 100% Korean national and try hard to make a better Korea.  

Although the ethnic nationalism within South Korea still produces xenophobic reactions against different colored citizens, more South Koreans are accepting the change. Many Koreans understand that the current national prosperity is a result of international trade, and that acceptance of others leads to a more successful trade. This acceptance can be possible because the South Korea’s core value and spirit is oriented toward national prosperity, not just to the pure bloodline.

The South Korean government also worries that reunifying with North Korea, the poorer counterpart, may possibly harm the national prosperity which South Koreans have worked so hard for. South Korean government has been approaching the reunification issue recently with much more caution. Lee Myung-bak claimed that Koreans need to be “practical” about the

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353 Park, Geun-hye. Speech in a Multi-Cultural Center. 7 Oct 2012
reunification issue, saying

Reunification of Koreas is the sincere prayer of 70 million Koreans (of both North and South). The relationship between the two Koreas should be more productive. We should approach it with practicality rather than ideology. It is our goal to make both North and South Koreans happy and build the foundation for reunification.354

While South Korean former governments thought reunification ought to happen as quickly as possible, Lee believes that Koreans should be more prepared for the reunification, weighing whether it would be beneficial to the south, especially economically.

The third issue is the difference in social class systems of the two Koreas today. Nationalism has influenced the modern Korean history, and South and North Korean social class system vastly differ from one another. As we have examined in the earlier chapters, Yangbans have perpetuated their influence in South Korea even in the present days. Yangbans, the social elites of Joseon, have maintained their economic dominance even throughout the Japanese colonial era, and many became Japanese collaborators. While many Japanese collaborators have been cleared off in North Korea, they have managed to preserve their social and economic dominance in Yi Syngman’s South Korean government, becoming the high government officials. This group of upper class then became even wealthier during the Park Chung Hee’s developmentalistic regime; based on their economic dominance and aid of the government which supported the wealthy more than the poor, many accrued more wealth. The Yangban class of Joseon has perpetuated within the current South Korean government and its social class system.

In contrast, North Korea established a completely different class system. Despite its outward communist propaganda, North Korea is socially stratified based on the “Kim cult.” After its establishment, North Korean government actively cleared off Japanese collaborators and

seized their properties. This wealth was then at the disposal of Kim Il-sung who distributed it to his followers, especially during the faction disputes in the 1950s. As a result, the Kim followers became the high government officials or the party members. Aided by the North Korean nationalism, the “Kim cult” has legitimized this “invisible social class system.”

As demonstrated above, South and North Korea has completely different social class system. Unfortunately, in many cases, the two upper classes of the two Koreas benefit from the division of Korea because the two Koreas’ upper class do now wish to risk their social and economic dominance that may be dismantled by the reunification. As a result, they utilize nationalistic and belligerent narratives to intensify the tension between the two Koreas. As a result, the different social class systems of the two Koreas deter the peaceful talks for the reunification or reconciliation.

The last and most interesting issue is the stratification of the nations. Since Korea was divided into two, North and South Koreans each began to cherish the worth of their citizenship and to place it higher than their counterparts across the border. Based on their own yardsticks, North and South Koreans each claim to represent all Koreans because the citizens each nation believe they are the better version of Koreans. North Koreans cherish national purity and believe they deserve respect as the purer form of a Korean ethnicity. South Koreans, on the other hand, cherish national prosperity; as a result, they believe that they are the better representatives of the nation because their perseverance led to such extraordinary economic success.

Although they each believe in a common Korean ethnicity and each believe that ethnicity to be the foundation of Korean nationalism, South and North Korea each have drastically different visions of the values that ought to lie at the core of a common Korean identity. Any attempt to unify the two Koreas will fail unless we realize that the Korean
peninsula is divided, not unified, by nationalism.
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