Current Issues in the Study of the March First Movement

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This year marks the seventieth anniversary of Samil Undong (the March First Movement). In commemorating the seventieth anniversary, a series of symposiums were held one after another, sponsored by numerous academic circles of Korean History and news media. The themes of the symposiums varied, the Dong-A Ilbo's symposium was entitled "The March First Movement and National Unification", and the joint symposium by the Choson Ilbo-sa and Han'guk Minjok Undong-sa Yon'guhoe (the Association for the Historical Studies on the Korean National Movement) was entitled "The Contemporary Interpretation of the March First Movement and the Foundation of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea"; the one held by Han'guk Yoksasa Yon'guhoe (The Association for the Study of Korean History) and Yoksasa Munje Yon'guso (The Research Center for the Study of History) with the co-sponsorship of the Hankyore Sunmun was entitled "The March First Movement from a Historical Viewpoint of the National Liberation Movement". The proceedings of these symposiums are being published as independently. Meanwhile, the National History Compilation Committee has published 'Han-muyok Tongup Undong-sa (the History of Korean Independence Movement), vol. 3: the March First Movement'. Through these proceedings and other publications, more than fifty research papers have already been published this year, on the March First Movement alone. The booming research on the March First Movement cannot be attributed solely to special meanings designated to the seventieth

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anniversary. As the themes of the symposiums indicate, it can be best understood as the natural consequence of the rapidly growing concerns for various national issues such as self-reliance, unification, etc., which have led to the research boom on the March First Movement, the heart of modern nationalist movements.

From the research papers presented this year, we can see the stage of the current research on the March First Movement. These papers and the discussion made in the various symposiums virtually exhausted all the possible issues that can be raised in the study of the March First Movement. The limited space here does not allow us to examine all the research papers presented this year. In this paper, we will simply discuss main issues dealt with during the various symposiums. The main focus among the current issues on the March First Movement is in general laid upon (i) the cause of the uprising, (ii) the reevaluation of the status of the 33 representatives, (iii) the role of general public, (iv) the justification of violence vs. the effects of non-violent activities, and (v) the status of the March First Movement in history. We will discuss varying opinions on each issue.

First of all, as for the causes of the March First Movement, there have been two different approaches: (i) one focuses on external factors such as the Doctrine of Self-determination of nations, the Russian Revolution, the growing concerns for the liberation of small nations, and (ii) the other focuses on internal factors such as the harsh colonial rule by Japan, the sudden death of the King Kojong, the rapid spread of people's movement toward the end of 1910's, etc. The colonial rulers put forward the external factors in their immediate account of the uprising. In contrast, it has become a general tendency in the nationalist view of history to weigh more on the internal factors, in an attempt to overcome the colonialist view of history during the 1960's (Hong I-sup, 1969). This tendency seems to continue even today. Recently, however, an interesting view is brought to our attention, that denies the influence of the Doctrine of Self-determination of Nations put forward by the President Wilson of the United States of America, which has been considered as one of the most important among many external factors. This view claims that the leaders of the independence movement at home and abroad had known that Wilson's catch-phrase only applied to the colonies of the losers (e.g., Germany) in the war (the World War I), not to those of the winners including Japan, and thus could not have triggered the March First Movement (Sin Yong-ha, 1989). In this view, independence movement by Korean people had matured through enlightenment movements and the struggle of the 'righteous armies' toward
the end of the Tae-Han Empire, and the leaders, though they knew its mappability to her, actively tried to take advantage of Wilson's proclamation by claiming its application to Korea. This new perspective focuses on subjective conditions rather than objective ones, and particularly emphasizes on the internal capacity of the main body of the independence movement. However, there are other opinions. One indicates that it is not clear how much the leader of the movement knew about the nature of the Doctrine of Self-determination (Ko Chŏng-hyu, 1989). It needs verification through a close examination of the available material on the subject. Another issue raised in relation to this view is that, even if they knew, it is clear that their master plan of the independence movement focused on an eventual appeal to America and peace conferences for the application of the Wilson's Doctrine to Korea. This is in the tradition of the diplomatic strategies carried out by bourgeois Nationalists for the restoration of sovereignty ever since the end of the Tae-Han Empire. Therefore, the basic question lies in how to evaluate such diplomatic efforts in the history of independence movement. This is because it has rendered some criticism that the 33 representatives' strategies had a begging attitude and relied on foreign power.

In some of the symposiums, there was an extensive discussion on the effects of the Russian Revolution on the March First Movement. The discussion was brought forth as criticism on the research on the March First Movement carried out by North Korean scholars (Seo Dae-suk, 1989). The criticism is that the claim by North Korean historians that the Russian Revolution put direct effects on the March First Movement is groundless. The effects of the Russian Revolution on the March First Movement should not be overstated of course. However, it is not recommended either that we totally ignore the relevance of the Russian Revolution to the March First Movement. Because we can see a slight bit of feasibility of such claim from Han Yong-un's Chosŏn Tongnip-ui Sŏ (The Letter for the Declaration of Independence of Chosŏn), where he recalls the Russian Revolution and the German Revolution as shocking events. It is assumed then that it was well reported through the news media such as Maeil Sinbo (the Daily News) that the revolutionary atmosphere had been spreading over in Europe around the end of World War One. Meanwhile, it should also be noted that since 1970's the North Korean scholars also have not put too much emphasis on the effects of the Russian Revolution on the March First Movement due to self-reliance ideology (Ch'oe Yŏng-ho, 1989). Therefore, some of the attempts to criticize the North Korean view as emphasizing the effects of the Russian Revolution cannot constitute a valid criticism.
It is very important to understand the international circumstances of that time in relation to the outbreak of the March First Movement. A number of papers presented in the symposiums have made great progress in this area. Particularly interesting is the one that dealt with the relationship between the March First Movement and the U.S. (Ko Chŏng-hyu, 1989). The influence by the U.S. on the outbreak of the March First Movement and her response to it are one of the areas that have been ignored in the research on the March First Movement. It is requested to examine in the future research the change of the status of the U.S. in international politics at that time and the degree to which the nationalists at home and abroad recognized it.

Meanwhile, there had not been too much research done recently on the internal factors on the outbreak of the March First Movement. A lot of issues in this area still remain uncovered, such as the ideology of Japanese colonial rule, the increase of the farm owned by Japanese landholders and the circumstances for the differentiation of peasant classes, whether the class of bourgeois and that of proletariat existed at that time, the stage of popular movement, and the attitudes of intellectuals in the country. Only recently, there had been some improvement on the research on the enterprise of land investigation (Pak Yŏng-sun, 1987, Cho Sŏk-kon, 1986), which invalidates a naive assumption that the March First Movement broke out because farmers were deprived of their land in the enterprise of land investigation.

Let us now take a look at issues surrounding the evaluation of the thirty-three representatives in the March First Movement. This matter has been one of the hottest issues in the study of the movement ever since the liberation of Korea in 1945. Its popularity is represented by the debate between Pak Kyŏng-sik (1970) and Kang Tŏk-sang (1969). The two scholars took this matter again at the symposium held by Chosŏn-sa Yongguhoe (The Association for the Study of Chosŏn History) in commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the March First Movement in 1979. Pak Kyŏng-sik argues that despite their weakness as true leaders, they should be credited for their positive roles in the movement as well. On the other hand, Kang Tŏk-sang opposes that even though he himself does not deny their role entirely, they cannot be credited as leaders of the March First Movement as a popular movement, because their role in the later activities of independence movement practically subsided after the March First, and furthermore, in some ways, they even played a negative role in the independence movement. The different positions taken by the two scholars in fact have to do with the issue of how to evaluate the role of the bourgeois nationalists in
the national liberation movement in 1920's and thereafter. The former regards as of great importance the necessities of the socialists' and the nationalists' respective liberation fronts, and recognizes the role of the nationalists to some degree, whereas the latter views that the bourgeois nationalists rather played a negative role in the independence movement, or at least dropped out of it.

There are three different views on this issue presented in this year's symposiums. One view is that the thirty-three representatives should be recognized as 'true representatives' of the Korean people, and that a historical significance should be given to their coalition over religious differences and sectarianism for the sake of the nation's pressing necessity (Pak Hyŏn-so, 1989). Contrary to this view is the one which refers to the thirty-three, or more inclusively, forty eight representatives as 'upper class bourgeois nationalists', and discredits their roles in the independence movement; that is, due to their vulnerable socio-economic status and their ideological limitation, they were not only unable to amass the public capacity, but also incapable of masterminding the independence movement. According to this view, they consequently could not help relying on foreign power, and characteristically following the principle of non-resistance. This view further maintains that their insistence on the principle of non-resistance rather discouraged the students and the public to take any further action (Chŏng Yŏn-t'a'ae, et al 1989; Pak Ch'an-sŭng, 1989). A similar view was also presented in Kang Sŏng-ŭn (1989), who argues that the thirty-three representatives did not plan any massive demonstration on a national scale nor sought any alliance with students, and that in seeking self-government or independence, their activities were limited in nature as an upward movement proclaimed by only a limited group of people, and they rather assumed a compromising attitude toward the Japanese colonial government, and pitifully sought sympathy from the Western Powers. The third view, a rather eclectic one, is that their principles of 'non-violence' and 'every-individual-from-first-to-last' has both negative and positive aspects, and that as for the nature of the representativeness of the thirty-three signers of the declaration of independence, we should recognize the discrepancy between practical representation (as religious leaders) and nominal representation (as national leaders) (Cho Tong-kŏl, 1989).

There is no controversy over the idea that the thirty three signers played a key role in triggering the March First Movement. The controversy arises, however, on such issues as the motivation for their involvement in the movement, their strategic plans, and whether or not they had positive
effects on the public. There is no question that any biased view should be disregarded, and any substantial claim on these issues requires a thorough investigation based on historical material. Meanwhile, as for the evaluation of the bourgeois nationalists both at home and abroad including the thirty–three signers, it is important to uncover a variety of positions that existed among them, as well as on overall the evaluation of them. The historical significance of their activities can be clearly understood when the different positions taken among them are clarified in connection with various lines of the bourgeois nationalists’ activities that had existed since the last days of Tae–han Empire. In this respect, it is noteworthy that an attempt has been made to compare the positions taken between Ch’oe Nam–sŏn and Han Yong–un (Kang Sŏng–ŭn, 1989), as well as an attempt to connect the upper class bourgeois nationalists’ activities in the March First Movement with various lines of the Bourgeois nationalists’ groups toward the end of Tae–han Empire (Pak Ch’ăn–sŭng, 1989).

Another issue raised surrounding the thirty–three representatives on what socio–economic class they represented. One view is that the thirty–three or more inclusively the forty eight leaders can be divided into three distinctive groups: subordinated capitalists, upper class national capitalists, and lower class national capitalists (An P’yŏng–chik, 1969). Recently, however, more generally accepted is the one views that they represented the Bourgeois class, referring to them as the upper class bourgeois nationalists. The question that arises with regard this view is whether the bourgeois class existed in the Korca of 1910’s. This question was a theme of discussion in one of the symposiums. The currently predominant view is that they were small capitalists who did not conform to the Japanese colonial government or immature bourgeoisie (Im Kyŏng–sŏk, 1989). It seems that there will be a controversy on how far they were advanced from the level of manufacture, i.e. small–scale handcraft manufacturing (see Kwŏn T’a’e–ŏk, 1989). This issue has to do with the formative period of the class of bourgeois nationalists.

In this year’s symposiums, a few papers took the position that it is not realistic to assume that there was a class of bourgeois nationalists at that time, and that the thirty–three representatives should be considered as ‘idealistic bourgeois nationalist’.

So far, we have discussed the issues surrounding the cause of the March First Movement and the various roles of the thirty–three representatives. Now, let us turn to the problem of the characteristics of the people’s demonstration in the March First Movement; that is, how much the demonstration was influenced by and at the same time independent of the
thirty-three representatives. There has not been too much of controversy about this issue yet. We can summarize the views presented in this year’s symposium as follows.

The thirty-three signers exercised some degree of influence on even later independence movement after March First through the Declaration of Independence and their personal connections. However, people were not impressed by the ideology of the Declaration, but the fact remains they declared the independence of the country. In terms of organizational their connections did not reach religious sub-organizations in provincial areas.

Furthermore, it goes without saying that they could not lead the combative movement. Therefore, it is generally agreed that the thirty-three signers cannot be viewed as leaders of the independence movement. Now let us look at the characteristics of the public. The public at that time can be divided into three socio-economic classes: farmers, laborers, and petty bourgeois. The public had not have the capabilities of any movement of their own in terms of their organization and ideological foundation. Unlike the thirty-three signers, however, they had strengthened their will that the sovereign independence of our country should be achieved through the nation’s self-reliance and one’s own ability. Furthermore, they joined the independence movement at first under the guidance of students and local intellectuals, but then toward the end of March, they themselves began to figure as a main body involved in various activities for independence (Chŏng Yŏn-t'ae, et al 1989).

The roles played by the public in the March First Movement varied considerably, depending on individual local areas. The distinctiveness in the history of individual cities and provinces naturally brought distinctive characteristics to the movement. Therefore, in order to figure out how much role the public played in the movement, especially in provincial areas, where the participation of the public notably stood out, it keenly requires thorough case-studies of the movement in local areas. Unfortunately, there have thus far been no more than ten or so case-studies done all together. It is regretful that such case-studies have been ignored, and it is particularly so because most of the participants in the movement have now passed away. It should still be emphasized that case-studies be more actively done through field investigation and excavation of historical records.

The next issue that captures our interests from this year’s symposiums is on how to evaluate the doctrine of non-violence as a strategy of the movement. First of all, there have been two opposing views on the doctrine put forward by the thirty-three signers. One view is that such a doctrine came from the concept of the principle of non-resistance, and that it played a
negative role by discouraging more aggressive movement of the public (Chosŏn Chônsa, 1980) The other view is that the non-violence doctrine did not have to do with the concept of a non-resistance principle, and that it was rather the utmost strategy available in the situation where it was impossible to equip themselves with arms (Pak Sŏng-su, 1969, Pak Kyŏng-sik, 1976, Sin Yong-ha, 1983). Recently, it is suggested that the non-violence doctrine was adopted by the thirty-three signers as their strategy of petitioning for the self-determination of the country to foreign powers (Pak Ch’an-sŭng, 1989).

In relation to the principle of non-violence proclaimed by the thirty-three representatives, it is interesting to examine the causes for the development of violent demonstrations during the process of the March First Movement. There are two recent views on this issue. One view is that the violent demonstrations were initiated as resistance against the Japanese harsh colonial oppression (Yosio Harakuchi, 1986). The other view is that in some areas the demonstrating crowd were equipped with rudimentary arms, and attempted an offensive struggle, and that this can be attributed to the uplifted strike-consciousness of people against the Japanese rule (Chong Yŏn-t’ae, et al. 1989). The key question is whether the people’s violent struggles were self-defensive resistance against the military oppression, or manifested any characteristics of some rudimentary but active armed struggle. The researchers should deal with this question cautiously, without any pre-conception against violent struggle or non-violent struggle. In this matter, there have been some pieces of evidence that the Japanese rulers manipulated some documents, and thus it requires a critical review of those documents.

Finally, one of the most debated issues in recent studies of the March First Movement is on its historical significance and where it stands in the modern history of Korea (see for the summary of the symposium the supplement of ‘the Study of the March First National Liberation Movement’, edited by Han’guk Yŏksa Yŏng’uhoe and Yŏksa Munje Yŏng’uso 1989). There are three views suggested with regard to this issue. The first view is that there were two separate lines of nationalist movements before the March First Movement—the bourgeois nationalist movement and the popular nationalist movement, and that starting from the March First Movement, the popular nationalist movement took the initiative of the nationalist
movement (Ch'ŏng Ch'ang-yŏl). This view further maintains that even in the nationalist movement toward the end of the Tae-han Empire, the one initiated by the public was more real and historically significant. The second view is that until the March First Movement, the nationalist movement, had been largely initiated by the bourgeois nationalists, within which two underlying currents co-existed, one led by the bourgeois class of landowners and the other by the public, and that the March First Movement should be regarded as being led by the coalition of the two forces. According to this view, the two currents of nationalists movement were in a competitive relationship with each other before the March First Movement, and even though the March First Movement temporarily brought them together, they split again after the uprising, and the latter took command of the movement afterwards (Pak Ch'ŏn-sŭng, 1989). Differing from the two given above is the view that regards the March First Movement purely as initiated by the public. In this view, after the March First Movement, the earlier bourgeois nationalist movement died out, and the national movement entered the stage initiated under the Marx–Leninism (Chosŏn Chŏnsa, 1980). The three views seem to offer contrary opinions in many ways, as described. However, one thing that is common to all three views is that the March First Movement became a turning point in the modern history of Korea. The differences lie in the question 'in what ways the March First Movement is a turning point?' This question cannot be addressed in relation to the study of the March First Movement alone, because it has a significant impact on how to evaluate the overall history of modern times. Consequently, this issue does not limit itself to what are the historical facts, but is closely tied with which historical view or theory is taken in interpreting uncovered facts. For example, the first view raises an objection to the view that presupposes a general or universal law of historical development and attempts to fit the history of Korea into that universal law. There is no question that the question of the universality and specificity of a history is a fundamental problem to be addressed in any historical research. It is expected that this issue will give rise to a considerable controversy for a while in the study of the modern history of Korea. For this issue cannot be disregarded in dealing with a series of events in our modern times such as Kapsin Chŏngbyŏn (Reformist Revolution in 1884), Tonghak Nongmin Chŏnjaeng (Tonghak Peasant war), Kabo Kyoŭngjang (Political Reform in 1894),
Tongnip Hyŏphoe (Independence Club Movement), Chagang Undong (Enlightenment Movement for self-strengthening), Uibyŏng Chŏnjaeng (Battle of the Righteous Armies), and the March First Movement

In conclusion, we have surveyed a number of key issues raised in recent studies of the March First Movement. One thing that we can notice from this survey is that a full scale investigation on the March First Movement has now begun. We can see that the issues are clearly raised and the level of discussion has made a great progress. One thing that still remains lacked is the arguments based on concrete facts. In order to step up the level of discussion, it is necessary to uncover new historical facts, let alone theoretical arguments based on the achievement made in previous researches. We look forward to future research in this respect.

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