Modernity and Tradition in Everyday Life of the 1950s

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Introduction

The antithesis between tradition and modernity has drawn much attention of the Korean social scientists after the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonialism. Like in most of developing societies, modernization theory — first originated in the US and soon spread throughout the world — has understood tradition and modernity as two separate categories exclusive of each other. In this perspective, tradition is considered as a hindrance in the path to modernization, thus, providing a way out for modernization theorists to eschew the contradictions in the theory, which were quickly explained with traditional factors instead of identifying the limitations inherent in the process of modernization itself.

However, in reality, it is nearly impossible to find any society — how simple it may be — with tradition and modernity operating in exclusivity or in a parallel line. Considering that modernization is

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often understood as Westernization in the traditional societies with colonial experiences whereas tradition is defined as the congregate of their own history and culture, their relationship should be interpreted as being complex and contradictory. It would be misleading to think that Western modernity is transplanted unilaterally regardless of indigenous tradition. In such a view, tradition usually is presented as an inferior and dominated terrain. However, it is rare to find a tradition in a society to passively adapt to modernization. Indeed, tradition and modernity mutually interact to produce a peculiar process of modernization in society.

Moreover, modes of interaction between tradition and modernity vary in time. This is why the context is so important in understanding the relationship between modernity and tradition. In this respect, this paper focuses on the Korean society in the 1950s. Characterized by the sudden demise of colonial rule and the beginning of the Cold War followed by dictatorship, the 1950s is normally understood to be a dark period in contemporary Korean history. Nevertheless, the period retains a certain kind of dynamism giving birth to its unique version of modernity. From a general perspective of social change, a decade is not a long period. However, the 1950s was a long enough decade to leave its imprint in the periods that followed. Thus, a poet once described the period as follows.

The period went by without a serious consideration. In some respects, no traces of the period can be found. Nonetheless, the talents of existential consciousness, passion, and bravado that came forth from the sheds and ruins of the war wearing military
uniforms, dyed military uniform, and used clothes sent as relief goods by the Americans did not disappear completely along with the previous generation who have wandered the hills and fields in search of food in the colonial period. On the contrary, they exist in the depths of following periods as a deep trauma that no one can deny (Ko Ŭn 1989: i).

Impacts of the US Military Occupation and the Korean War

The war and the military had a deep impact on the formation of modernity in Korean society after the liberation from Japanese colonialism. In this regard, a poet writes that the 1950s was discovered by the US 8th Army, and was a period of "trenches, smells of powder smokes, explosions of napalm, abuse of civil service identification cards, and the notices of deaths in war from the Central Battle Front (Ko Ŭn 1989: 23)." For Korean society, it was a great misfortune that modernity at this period made its appearance under the influence of the US troops stationed for military purpose after the liberation. However, this was a kind of destiny for the Koreans who failed to achieve independence on their own. Moreover, vulgarity and decadence of so called "Yankee culture" represented by the US military bases, dance hall, and PX goods have become an integral part of the Korean scene. Needless to say, the existences of the US military and hegemonic American culture in occupied territories are not limited to Korea alone but are worldwide phenomena in the 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, the criticism against the presence of the US military in occupied former colonies is well grounded.
The GIs flourished in black market trading PX goods. They got their minds off from the wearisome life of military service in Korea, the so-called far end of the front line. Their trades were not limited to sugar, razors, etc. Over millions of dollars worth of US exports were handled […] They became outlaws. While they paraded their wealth to "gooks (Koreans)" on the one hand, they were taking advantage of the absolute poverty of the Koreans.¹

Korean society has its own reason for skepticism on the influence of the stationed US troops. Having experienced colonial rule, the Koreans had lost most of their traditional values and norms. If not, only those adapted and distorted for colonial rule survived. Thus, the Koreans could hardly establish their own criteria to evaluate and appropriate any exogenous culture into their own system. There hardly existed any standard to measure the degree of a culture’s decadence or vulgarity. Instead, in a reversal, the society adjusted improvisationally to imported values and norms. To give one example, the "over" exposure of women’s bodies or explicit sexual gestures between the opposite sexes prompted embarrassment, perplexity, or sometimes criticism at first. However, they were quickly accepted and spread in some parts of the society like fads.

If the culture of the US troops in Korea was characterized as

¹. Conde 1988(1967): 35-36 The page reference is from the Korean version. In the Japanese version, Conde explains the reason why his English manuscript was not published. In the preface to the Japanese version, he confesses that his series of attempts to publish his manuscript through various publishers including commercial and university presses failed due to McCarthyism and indirect censorship imposed in the form of funding by the Pentagon and CIA to East Asian research institutions in major universities in the US.
arrogant and vulgar, there was yet another aspect of American culture clearly distinguished from these. It came from pro-Western intellectuals and Korean bureaucrats working in the US military government who had a background of studying in the US. Its influence was indirect and limited, for it was transmitted through enlightened Korean intellectuals and elites. It was imbued with another aspect of American culture, namely Puritanism. This culture of intellectuals and elites was limited to institutions like universities and churches centering on the upper and middle class. It was in this context that we find the celebration of occasions such as Christmas or Thanksgiving, college festivals and homecoming, and the flourishing of parties and dance halls in this period. Among these, Christmas and similar events soon became popular among the general public while dance halls remained restricted to a certain class. On the other hand, things like homecoming queens have completely disappeared today. Nevertheless, regardless of their social contexts in which they originated, what was common in all these was the fact that they were introduced from the outside and transplanted in a formal and caricaturistic way.

American customs were practiced without limit and appropriateness in Korea. Shaking of hands to no end, sending flowers without discretion, vulgarization of awarding honorary doctor degrees, secularization of 'Christmas Eve,' 'Jazz bands' with no cultural vitality, divorce in the name of the pursuit of happiness followed by family breakdown, and the fad of 'noiroje (Nervous Breakdown)' are true "Americanisms" in Korea. (Kim Ha-yae 1959. 67)

Generally speaking, the influence of the US has provided the two
important motifs that have recurred in Korean society, namely money and sex. Indeed, money and sex are two major elements sought after by any society in any period of human history. Therefore, the argument that they were the two important motifs operative in the modernization of Korea in the 1950s may be said to be nonsense. However, money and sex became important elements of modernity in this period in the fact that they both are tinged with an image of exotic origin in the backdrop of war and foreign military. Peculiar to Korean society during the 1950s, money and sex continued to be important motifs afterwards. Although the degree of importance differed according to the periods as they weakened or changed, the society was hardly free from them in the situation where there was no alternative theme.

Placing the highest importance on money slowly became a strong tendency, starting with the opening of the ports to the outside world, and going through the period of colonialism to the time of liberation. In traditional society where moral obligation and temperance were upheld, wealth was one of many factors defining status. However exceptional it may be, even accumulated wealth was legitimatized posthumously through the status system. Accumulation of wealth during the Japanese colonial period was only possible through inheritance in traditional hereditary succession or collusion with colonial power. Whether it would be a traditional way of hereditary succession or a pro-Japanese way with national cause as its price, both have something common. Wealth was something beyond individuals, gained through a special hereditary condition or bought with the price of "betraying the nation." However, the liberation of 1945 made possible the "liberation" of the individual from these
special conditions for accumulation of wealth. No longer needed one to be of a particular status nor subordinated to the colonial power. For the first time, the condition of accumulating wealth according to individual will and ability was, thus, established in principle.

Although a "modern" principle for accumulation of wealth according to individual ability was established, the reality was far from it. It is not that there was no case of individual accumulation of wealth through one's ability and hard work. However, in most cases, wealth was accumulated through close collusion with political power backed by the US relief assistance. Nevertheless, close ties with the US or collusion with the political power differed from the cases of the colonial period in that it was free from the demands of the era not to collaborate with the colonial power. That is to say, accumulation of wealth was not socially constrained, and as a result, the *nouveau riche* emerged to a considerable size. Until the full emergence of a new middle class equipped with education and hard work, the newly rich led the life of extravagance, vanity, and display of wealth that was peculiar to the 1950s — even though it is not comparable to the ostentatious consumption in a mass scale in the 1990s due to the premature state of the mass media and the relative seclusion of the places of consumption.

Meanwhile a culture of prostitution blossomed in the so-called *kijich'on* (military base town) that appeared around the US military bases with the start of US occupation, and especially, the impact of the Korean War was critical. According to some estimation, the war created 390,000 war widows along with the coining of a new word, "UN madam." A study reported that 27% of UN madams were war widows and 95% of women in prostitution got involved due to
war-induced poverty (Öm Hye-sŏb 1955: 209-211).

The case of Korea provides a clear example of what could happen to women driven by poverty and war, just as they had fallen victim to Japanese colonialism as sexual war slaves (military 'comfort women'). Love based on sex and sexual liberation may have been a gospel of modernity. The problem is that as the idea of openly selling sex spread through society, such a mood oriented the values and ethics concerning women and sex. Sexual stimulations and the commodification of sexuality through popular magazines, advertisements like movie previews in the newspapers, and posters in the streets with images of colorful clothes and cosmetics and barely-clad women were mentioned as the results of the "thoughtless appropriation of the Western things." "It is not difficult to find the lament that yanggalbo (prostitutes serving only American soldiers) and prostitutes have become widespread and innocent looking young girls and boys sold pornographies in the back alleys" (Yun Hyŏng-jung 1956: 254).

In this light, one can insist that the experience of modernity centered on money and sex was entirely due to the influence of the US. However, in spite of the US being a critical element in the formation of modernity, it cannot be considered a one-way affair. In fact, there emerged the traeger of Western culture — however incongruous it may be from the perspective of Korea’s own tradition — from a certain region or class. According to a figure, there was no actual change in the class structure or occupation in the 1950s, but it

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2. For example, there is no change in occupation with exception to sales, which increased from 4.5% to 7.6% in the period between 1955 and 1960 (Kim Keong-il 1998: 24-5)
cannot negate the fact that the amount of wealth redistributed to a
certain class increased. It is difficult to provide concrete numbers, but
we can observe quite clearly the ostentatious display of wealth by the
new middle class in this period. From this point of view, we must
pay attention to the modes of modernity that appeared in the daily
lives concomitant with the emergence of a new social class who
supported such modes.

The Other Side of Modernization and Everyday Life

If food, clothing, and housing are the basic items for human
survival, clothing and housing are the first two elements that
conspicuously represent the modernity of the period. In housing,
modernization came with the changes in residential area and
redevelopment of urban space. From the ashes and ruins of the war,
Western styled schools, churches, and public buildings were erected.
At the same time, shantytowns in the cities built by refugees and
homeless people who had returned were cleared without any relief
for the evicted. On those very spots, colorful new residences in
mixed styles of Korean and Western or entirely Western buildings
appeared. It was at this period when Shinsegae and Midopa
department stores opened in a hurry. In the streets of Myeongdong,
Ch'ungmuro, Úljirö, and Chongno, rows of store buildings appeared,
and markets in Nadaemun (South Gate) and Tongdaemun (East Gate)

3. Some argued that enforced eviction in shantytowns became one of the important
factors resulting in the defeat of Yi Ku-bung from the ruling Liberal Party in the
vice-presidential Election on May 15, 1955, by Chang Myŏn from the Democratic Party
(Pae Song-ryong 1956: 17).
transformed into modern markets with 2-3 story buildings. Even in the banks of Ch'ŏnggyech'on where 'hakkobang gage' (box-shaped stores) existed, it was not hard to find the following 'Western goods.'

Luxury items consisted of cosmetics, accessories, or some repaired used clothes from the PX in the US Army bases or smuggled from Hong Kong. We called all those things yangpum (Western goods) and we were so mesmerized by these shining yangpum that we did not mind the smell of the dirty sewer(Pak Wan-sŏ 1991: 108).

Evicted people — largely composed of the poor, war refugees, and migrants from rural areas — had to find their homes on small hills in the frenzy areas of the city barely reached by electric-cars. "Houses made out of cardboard boxes and cans from the US army bases were built overnight and began to climb the mountains higher and higher reaching the sky" (Pak Wan-sŏ 1991:107). At the same time, "hsaengjutaek (welfare housing)" supposedly built for the poor without housing and "munkwajutaek (cultural housing)" for the middle class were constructed in Western style throughout the city. Whether they were the poor or the middle class, all were mesmerized by the sparks flashing from the electric wires that powered the electric cars racing the streets of Seoul. Flickering neon signs and streetlights lit up the city in splendid colors. Such were also aspects of modernity.

Nevertheless, inequality prevailed among regions just as the distribution of the benefits of modernization did in other sectors. The contrast between the shantytowns and cultural housing was starkly vivid, not to mention the rural areas. Within the same city, poor ghettos and shantytowns hardly received any electricity. The
situation was no better for ordinary residential areas where electricity was supplied on a limited time basis. Dusts from filthy streets and smells from open sewers did not completely disappear. However, it was clear that such dusts, smells, and noises were slowly removed in the process of modernization.

In contrast to this, high and thick fences with iron poles or spikes placed in rows and barbwire in between, surrounded Western styled houses of the middle class or cultural housings. Such a movement of the nouveau riche, once claimed their own castles with high walls were briskly expanding into remaining urban space for conquering another castle, had gained its momentum in the latter half of the 1950s. In the case of Seoul, land price skyrocketed right after the signing of the Armistice Treaty in 1953. Realty price surged formidably in the national level. In Seoul, the value of houses began to draw a rising slope in the latter half of 1958, and by the year 1959, the growth rate accelerated recording "the first realty boom after the liberation." As shown in Table 1, in 1959, the prices of house (property) doubled within a year, and such an increase can also be found in commercial and residential properties.

Table 1 Land Price Change in Seoul (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Price Index (A)</th>
<th>Total Land</th>
<th>Commercial Land</th>
<th>Residential Land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Price Index (B)</td>
<td>Ratio (B/A)</td>
<td>Index (C)</td>
<td>Ratio (C/A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953. 10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955. 3</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>272</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955. 12</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957. 6</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>948</td>
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<td></td>
<td>373</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>460</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>833</td>
<td>1,586</td>
<td>2,534</td>
<td>2,556</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>223</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,061</td>
<td>1,575</td>
<td>3,807</td>
<td>3,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>284</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,132</td>
<td>2,303</td>
<td>2,620</td>
<td>2,603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>304</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>565</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Realty speculation as first appeared in this period, reaching a peak in the 1970s and dwindling after the IMF regime, but seemingly regaining its force recently, is yet another aspect of modernity. Some may argue against saying that land speculation is one of many expressions of modernization, since it is a phenomenon found in the modern period. However, property in the 1950s was subjected to serious speculation as shown in the table above, although it never reached the level of the worst housing shortage in the 1970s. This was possible due to the large sum of money from the US relief assistance and high profits that came out from it. In this respect, speculation in the 1950s was a prelude to the wild speculation of the 1970s and after.

As the economic growth in the 1950s remained stagnant, the US relief assistance concentrated especially in the period between 1954 and 1960 became the important resource for the government’s wealth (Kim Keong-il 1998: 25-6). The benefit largely flowed into the people who provided services and commerce as well as the bureaucrats and
entrepreneurs involved in the management of foreign fund. Such redistribution of wealth made the newly rich grow to a considerable number. However, for the redistribution and management of wealth were done through illegal ways like collusion and embezzlement, it was difficult for the accumulation of wealth in this period to gain social legitimacy.

Without any opportunity of employment, the majority of people who had not encountered any labor ethics or norms either envied the newly rich and tried to mimic them, or fell into a state of despair and desperation. For intellectuals "huddled up in a dreary coffee shop in a basement filled with cigarette smoke," caught up in "one dimensional melancholy of modern man and puerile and hasty post-war sensitivity, and drinking and intensely crying all night with a sense of friendship that was thought to sum up humanism and words like nihilism, existence, despair, and anxiety," the frustration of self and the abyss of despair prevailed (Ko Ŭn 1989: 24-5). As mentioned already, in a society dominated by money and sex, it is sufficiently understandable that poverty, corruption, decay, and decadence together with unrestrained extravagance, speculation, and vanity prevailed. Extravagant consumption and speculation of the new middle class have left strong imprints in numerous places in the bounded urban space.

If modernity were to be utilized as a symbol of a social position, clothing would be a typical example. As examined above, we see a similar point in housing to a certain degree. However, it is the clothing and the body where conspicuous consumption is best observed. Clothing and fashion were more individualistic and private than housing and at the same time belonged to the most basic level
of expression. In this respect, clothes reflected the difference and distinction among social class, gender, or generation. For example, in gender, unlike men's clothing that started to modernize well before the latter half of the 19th century, traditional clothing still prevailed in women's clothing even after the liberation whereas Western clothes were occasionally found on women working in offices. Popularization of Western clothes for women, like other aspects of modernization, began with the Korean War. Slowly spreading among the youths, adoption of Western clothing went to a new level in the 1950s, bringing about a fad of nambobaji (Mambo pants). The year of 1959 was the golden age for nylon and brocade.

Of course, there still existed a condition where Western clothes were interpreted as a symbol of a specific group of prostitutes called yanggongju (Western princess). In that sense, traditional clothes, hanbok, were considered appropriate for proper and decent women (Pak Wan-sŏ 1991: 108). However, as Western clothes became popular in the late 1950s Western clothes brought along a trend of fads in 2-3 year cycles, and hanbok never regained its former popularity despite the brief period of "reckless and frantic" extravagance of hanbok with the Japanese birodo dress and brocade Chu'gori (Pak Wan-sŏ 1991: 109). Even the Japanese birodo was quickly replaced by the American nylon. By the time of 1956-1958, almost all of the women under the age of 40 were wearing Western clothes welcoming the golden age of Western styles (Sŏk Chu-sŏn 1959).

Cosmetics and hairstyle, which are part of the body, also rode the cyclical trend as they were Westernized. Replacing the traditional use of powder to make one's face white, the Western cosmetic styling that accentuates eyebrows and lips already gained popularity in the
colonial period. What is more impressive is the fad of the permanent wave hairstyle. After a brief period of refuge in Busan in 1950, there was a boom of beauty shops in the cities, and soon the shops spread nationwide, giving the permanent wave look to women in rural areas as well as in cities (Im Hyŏng-sŏn 1959). Such was the introduction of the modern women, wearing high heels and Western clothes with permed hair. As seen by the introduction of the Miss Korea Pageant and fashion shows in this period, the assertion of the woman’s body became a symbol of modernity.

As we have seen, Korean society experienced a rapid transition from tradition to modernity in the area of daily life in a relatively short period after the liberation. However, the change was not a unilinear or one-way affair. Instead it was a complex process where inequality and delay, selection and suppression interacted with each other. At a regional level, the gap between Seoul and the rural villages was even larger than the distance between Seoul and Western cities. A similar distance existed between social classes. The Westernized middle class or intellectuals felt more distanced from the majority of the population who lived in traditional way than from the Westerners. This is also true in the areas of gender and generation.

Such an argument is very reasonable in analyzing the interaction of tradition and modernity in the areas of basic subsistence, i.e. food, clothing, and housing. While clothing vis-à-vis the body was the most easily and rapidly influenced among others in the area of daily life, food was the last to be Westernized beginning with side dishes and then encroaching to the main foods. One reason for this may be the fact that personal preference for food is the most private in nature.
At the same time, the very conservative tendency of the sense of taste is universal in every society. If so, how did other areas of daily life such as leisure or entertainment change? The following excerpt shows that even in these areas Western elements dominated.

Myeongdong was filled with coffee shops, alleys, and bars nicknamed 'Seine,' 'Montparnasse,' 'Latin,' etc. The place was the world of French chansons where people were not miserable refugees nor returned soldiers, but strangers. Its manikins, its modes, its alien languages, and its European images all were infused with the mode of life of the 1950s (Ko Ťun 1989: 309).

Indeed, the Western orientation was especially stronger amongst intellectuals and students. Movie theatres, coffee shops, billiard halls, and mini baseball grounds, Western in appearance flourished during this period. Of course, some of them, if traced to their origin, existed from the colonial period. The only difference was that they expanded regionally, and what was once limited to a particular class was now expanded to the masses.

Aside from this, the number of people going to parks or outdoors for picnics or family outings to spend the holidays increased dramatically in this period. Family outings and picnics were not limited to young people but were also enjoyed by older people, becoming "a social phenomenon that accelerated year by year." Although it would have been hard for the majority of the population to even imagine having leisure time, the middle and upper classes could enjoy their lives. To speak of poverty in the 1950s, according to a survey in May 1957, 90% of the elementary school children in Seoul could not afford to have lunch. In spite of such poverty, there existed hedonism and
affluence overflowing with dance halls, bars, and red-light districts. Such were the contrasting manifestations of modernity.

Attitudes Toward Tradition and the Use of Tradition

I have examined so far the complex features of Korean modernity unique to the period of the 1950s, formed through interactions of external/internal and American/indigenous factors. Then how was tradition understood in this period? The attitude toward tradition, formed naturally in the minds of the Koreans who had experienced 35 years of Japanese colonial rule that consistently implemented policies abasing and devalorizing indigenous Korean history and culture, is antithetical. On the one side, the Koreans identified themselves with tradition. In other words, the Koreans had strong attachment and affection toward tradition that has been degraded by the Japanese colonialism. On the opposite side, the Koreans identified with the logics of colonial ruler and had distaste, contempt, and a sense of inferiority toward tradition.4

However, the transition from colonial rule to US military rule after liberation brought a change in the attitude of Koreans. To a certain extent, if the importance of tradition was heightened due to the oppression of Japanese colonialism, such urgency and necessity to emphasize tradition would disappear with the fading influence of

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4. This dualism is also found in modernity. From one side, modernity was praised as something positive in contrast to inferior tradition. While on the other side, modernity with its inevitability of being associated with Japanese colonialism was strongly rejected and resisted by the colonized mass as much as their strong affection toward national tradition.
Japanese colonialism. As a result, affection toward tradition decreased while the vestige of colonialism survived. In this sense, a tendency of contempt and incredulity toward tradition tended to develop into a strong sense of repulsion and negation. Despite the investigative report of the UNESCO delegation saying "there is not one step of progress in the effort to improve the lives of the Koreans due to the strong presence of convention in Korea" being a biased observation, intellectuals willingly accepted it with a sense of inferiority and shame (Pae Sŏng-ryong 1954: 54).

Especially, the indifference and criticism against Korean tradition that existed in the minds of intellectuals reflected a perception that what is Korean is old and evil, while what is Western is new and good. Against the backdrop of such a dichotomy, there existed the reality of the 1950s still ruled by age-old tradition and thoughts. They found the possibility of overcoming evil practices of tradition to build democracy as in the West. From this, an internal motive for modernization manifested. A scholar who insisted that the rule of tradition must be replaced with the rule of reason since tradition holds "too many anti-democratic elements," argued for the absolute need of "love for science" through "scientification of thoughts and life," in order to be liberated from the bondage of tradition and superstition. Only then, he added, will the lives of the Koreans attain modernity (Pae Sŏng-ryong 1956: 27-8). He further expected that all ills of his time could be remedied through "methodology and science of the West." In other words, the Western ideas and methods were actively accepted as means to overcome the degenerated and corrupt society.

If it was the tragedy of the Chinese intellectuals to have no choice
but to call for complete Westernization in order to resist an undemocratic regime during the 1920s (Yi Sŏng-gyu 1994: 32), the care of for the Korean intellectuals in the 1950s was quite similar. Of course, not every intellectual opposed the dictatorship of the ruling party and the government. In fact, a substantial number of intellectuals tended to surrender in despair to the stubborn tradition. Nevertheless, a meager amount of critical intellectuals facing the dilemma resisted the status quo. Many intellectuals critical of the corruption-ridden social reality anticipated overcoming it through applying Western science and ideas.

Whatever their efforts were, however, they could not notice the world trend of growing skepticism toward rationalism, reason, and science of modernity that had lasted for hundreds of years, after the two World Wars. Moreover, these intellectuals did not have a firm grasp of the emergence of the Third World that appeared on the world scene at this period. As a result, they failed to understand the challenges and criticism against Western universalism, Eurocentrism, and modernization. In other words, paying almost no attention to their own tradition to which they belonged, these intellectuals fully immersed themselves in the ideal image of the West or criticized their reality based on such an image.

Then what was the attitude of the political power toward tradition? A hasty answer would be that the dictatorial power shared the inclination toward the West, as the majority of intellectuals did. Regrettably Westernization by the political power did not accompany the appreciation of indigenous tradition. As one scholar mentioned that "the question of how democracy and Korean traditional values were related never crossed Syngman Rhee's mind, but instead he
repeatedly argued for American democracy" (Chin Tŏk-gyu 1990: 19). The political power attempted to fit the reality in Korea into the Western standards set by the US.

However it is not the case that indigenous tradition had no effect whatsoever to the ruling power. Within some limits, the state power actively mobilized tradition. Putting aside the fact that An Ho-sang, the first minister of Education, proclaimed "chauvinistic nationalism" that revived the totalitarian tradition of Japanese colonialism, Paek Nak-jun, a pro-American and the second minister of Education, resurrected civic and moral classes that were remnants of Japanese colonialism under the name of "moral education," while calling for "democratic education" (Han Jun-sang and Chŏng Mi-suk 1989: 346-7).

It is in this period when Sado kangryŏng (Teachers' Way), Kyowŏn yulli kangryŏng (Teachers' Ethics Program) or Kungmin yulli kangryŏng (Nation's Ethics Program) were announced and enforced.5 Though the enactment of an ethics program by social class or occupation is prevalent in other parts of the world, the Korean case tended to support traditional values like loyalty, filial piety, or anti-communism ideology for the political purpose of maintaining the dictatorial

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5 Sado kangryŏng was proclaimed in October 1954 by the Korean Cultural Association. Made up of 3 articles and 32 clauses dealing with disciplines, conduct codes, and respect for teachers, it was all too traditional in character. Kyowŏn yulli kangryŏng, passed and promulgated by the Korean Association of Teachers in November 1958, consisted of 5 articles and 26 clauses dealing with student, family, society, teacher, and cultivation. Once saturated with a comment saying that "a golden age of ethics program has arrived in Korean culture," the Nation's Ethics Program was drafted in 10 paragraphs but never promulgated. However, its content and aim were almost identical with the Charter of National Education promulgated 10 years later in 1968. See Sŏuldal'ae Kyoyuk yon'guso (1981 72-73) and Sisanggyo (No. 73 1959: 204) for detail
regime. In this sense, morality and ethics were politically mobilized to simply gloss over the caricatured image of the decadent ruling class.

Regarding the popular cry "morality has fallen to the ground," the people would be seen as the cause of "fallen morality" and the state power as the judge to save morality. However, in reality, it was the very opposite. Morality and ethics were mobilized as a mean for dictatorial power to conceal and avoid the responsibility of corruption, and the mobilization was done through the use of tradition. In an impending policy of the ruling party, there is a statement saying "it is a fact that we witnessed a democratic development after the liberation. However, feudalism is still deeply rooted in every part of the Korean life and thinking" (Paek Un-sŏn 1990: 116). Be that as it may, it would be more correct to say that most of the responsibility of that statement goes to the party itself.

The use of tradition by the government is not limited to this period. It was done in the previous colonial period and the following period in the 1970s. However, the elements of tradition to be "invented" differ according to the periods since the invention is closely related to political intentions. Then what was the intention at this period? As mentioned before, President Syngman Rhee was a person ingrained in the American lifestyle and thoughts, having been

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6 For this reason, following the colonial power, the ruling power in this period also highly valued Confucian tradition while the Pak Ch'ŏng-hui regime in the 1970s chose national heroes like Ch'ungmugong (General Yi Sun-sin) who defeated the Japanese invasion in the Chosŏn Dynasty instead. North Korea restored the tomb of Tan'gun, the national ancestor of Korea, who is the founder of Old Chosŏn believed to be the first nation of Korea, for a different reason after the death of Kim Il-sŏng during the 1990s.
educated in the US and have lived in the US for a long time. Moreover, as in the period of the US military occupation, among the officials and supporters of the Syngman Rhee regime, the US-educated pro-Western intellectuals formed the mainstream. With these facts in mind, we can better understand the prevalence of Western modernity that characterizes this period.

Nevertheless, on the whole, such an inclination toward the US shown by the ruling power could threaten the legitimacy of the power and alienate the support of the people by creating a distance from the people who still favored tradition. Hence, there arose a need to construct a national identity and organize various events like reenactments of the civil examination, poem reciting contests, archery contests, and others, to display the resurrection of tradition to the public. Generally, elevating the state as something sacred or creating a national belief system to consolidate national power or designating national rites, a sacred person, or place can be easily found in newly born countries as a part of an endeavor to construct national identity. In the case of Korea, the Tan'gun calendar together with the adoption of the national flag and anthem as a part of creating national legitimacy was adopted, and laws regarding national holidays were legislated. Of course, all these were not integrated yet into a systemic ideology or a state organization as in the 1970s, but remained as one-time events.

As examined so far, whether it would be from intellectuals or the

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7. The laws related to national holidays were promulgated on October 1, 1949. Accordingly, it is worth paying attention to the fact that the first national holiday to be adopted was Kaech’önjol (the National Foundation Day) celebrating the anniversary of Tan’gun’s founding of his nation.
state power, it is difficult to derive an alternative view of modernity that was formed in a close interaction between indigenous tradition and Western modernity. Even if Western modernity had spread in a short period of time, it remained ideal since it was not based on the concrete reality of Korean society. Moreover, in the sense that it was appropriated out of its original context, it became superficial and vulgar. On the other hand, as the possibility for tradition to develop through interaction with exterior factors was closed, it survived as the relics of the former period continuing to exercise its influence. Although it may seem contradictory, the coexistence of fossilized tradition and imported modernity were in fact two sides of one coin forming the structure of Korean society.

Renewed Awareness Toward Tradition

In this section, I will point out that a renewed awareness toward tradition began to sprout from a number of intellectuals in the latter half of the 1950s. There are several reasons why such renewed attention is given to tradition. Seen from broad perspective, with the growing skepticism of Western civilization as a result of two World Wars as a backdrop, an interest toward the East and Eastern thoughts began to gain currency in the West. However, only a few intellectuals embraced such a trend in the West, hardly having any influence on fellow intellectuals. Then, it would be reasonable to focus our attention on the internal factor for the renewed awareness toward tradition.

As I have already mentioned about the state's use of tradition, the political power tried to proclaim itself as the guardian of tradition to
gain legitimacy. It was in this context that the areas of national culture like language, history, and traditional performing arts achieved recognizable progress under the direct or indirect support of the government as a popular slogan of the time suggests, "Protect our homeland, Nurture our culture."\(^8\) Especially, the "renewed interest toward our culture" came to the fore in the latter half of 1957. Encouraged by such a mood, one-day events or art festivals were held, consisting of an archery contest, kite flying, a ssir yum (wrestling) contest, and other events led by the central or local government.

Nevertheless, the revival of tradition by the state power had its limitation. The significant progresses in national culture like language, history, or the arts were in fact made not by the active planning and support of the state, but was more like the state embracing the demands and the need of the scholars and artists who had preserved the Korean language, national history, and traditional performing arts since the colonial periods. The state's involvement in leisure or entertainment ended with one-time exhibitive events imbued with a strong intention to project the ruling power as the national "protector of tradition" to the people. Therefore, tradition at a particular moment of the past was put on display like taxidermized items, metaphorically...

\(^8\) The following are some examples: the enforcement of Han'gul match'umtop (the Korean Grammar Act); the publication of the 30-year project Urinal kôngyǒn (the Grand Korean Dictionary, 1957); the publication of Chosŏn wango sillok (the Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty, 1955-1956) in a series by the National History Compilation Committee; the publication of Han'guksa (History of Korea, 1959) in 7 volumes by the Chin-Tan Society; the establishment of Kugag-yangwŏn (the National Music Conservatory) in auspice of Kugagwŏn (the National Music Institute) in 1955, the opening of a folk cultural theatre Wŏn'gaksa in 1958, and the performances of national plays like Sŏnhwagongu, Hŭnboga, or Opera Ch'unhyangyŏn.
cally speaking, and was never presented as something constructed historically in people's everyday lives.

As the renewed interest toward traditional culture grew, some intellectuals felt a need to reexamine the implication of Korean tradition and Koreanness in its own context. What they confronted was the reality where shallow and vulgar Westernization was rapidly spread out in society, while corruptions of the ruling power were rampant under the name of "Western democracy." Consequently, although "they have not quite understood what tradition is" they felt the need to "contextualize the system of foreign ideas" or "promote a habit of thinking Korean" in the awareness that "there existed something clearly Korean that would be not swept away by the West" (Yun Se-wŏn and et al. 1958: 280, 288). In this context, I will examine the arguments of Kim Sŏng-sik and An Pyŏng-mu, the representative scholars who stimulated such a renewed interest toward tradition in this period.

Kim Sŏng-sik deals with the problem of tradition in relation to nationalism, which he continuously sought. Pointing out that one of the characteristics of Korean nationalism is its "untraditional aspect," he argues, "When people all over the world worship their past tradition, it is only the Koreans who disregard tradition." Unlike other countries where the esprit of tradition leads or influences the present, he asserts, the reality of Korea is that the current government, the Syngman Rhee regime, interprets and exploits tradition. Korean nationalism is strongly authoritative and often self-serving, he continues, considering the fact that nationalism became something approved by the political power. Furthermore, he adds that since Korea is "liberated" from tradition, it has lost
communication with the coming generations of the nation. This is because tradition is "the accumulation of the nation's past and at the same time, what binds the present and connects to the future" (Kim Sŏng-sik 1958: 66).

An Pyŏng-mu also strongly criticizes the tendency of Korean intellectuals to ignore their own tradition completely, and to rely on Western thoughts to approach their own problems. Moreover, he points out the contradiction of "the government arresting oppositions accusing them of betraying democracy while it is heavily engaged in the very opposite [that is, undemocratic] activities." He insists that this was caused by blindly importing American style democracy and "not finding oneself or not asserting oneself, in other words losing one's voice and face." From this perspective, he laments over the fact that "a very few are interested in seeking our heritage, in other words, finding ourselves and efforts to show about us." He argues that such loss of self and tradition is especially serious among the leading class in Seoul. For him, "the soul of the Koreans is in minjung (ordinary people)" and "pure Korean faces not yet polluted" can only be found in the rural area. Accordingly, he calls for a negation of the quasi-self and petitions the revival of traditional heritage like folk songs and farmer's music (An Pyŏng-mu 1959: 231-7).

Although they have different approaches, one from the perspective

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9. Kim deplores the fact that while statues of General MacArthur were erected in Inch'ŏn Park and Seoul pan'gong hoekwan (Seoul Hall of Anti-Communism) and even a statue of Lt. General Van Fleet was proposed, there is no statue or memorial hall for "national martyrs." In this respect, he asserts, it is self-serving in that it only valorizes the people in power (Kim Sŏng-sik 1958: 57-59).
of nationalism and the other from minjung, both of them demand an interest toward tradition and its application to the present, evoking the deplorable reality of the 1950s dominated by Western ideas. In fact, even if their arguments were exceptional at the first half of the 1950s, such awareness soon spread by the time of the late 1950s. In addition, the awareness reappeared in the 1960s and the 1970s under the name of tradition based on nation and minjung whatever the two scholars’ original intentions were.

10. In 1959, Ch’ong’guk munhwa tanch’ye yŏnhaphoe (the National Association of Cultural Organizations) designated October as the Month of Culture, and it became official with a resolution of the Council of Ministers. In celebration, the Chosun Ilbo featured a series of scholars’ discussion under the title of “Rediscovery of Our Culture” in a total of 9 articles starting from October 1, 1959, “Shilla kayo-ui munha-jo ok ususŏng (Literary Superiorty of Shilla’s Kayo),” “Minjok munhwa-wa oerae munhwa (National Culture and Foreign Culture),” “Sŏgu munhwa-ui yŏnghyang (The Influence of Western Culture),” etc. The Tong’a Ilbo also published a series titled “Un-munhwa-ui panghyang (The Direction of Our Culture)” featuring conversations between Pak Chong-hong and Sin Il-ch’ol in a total of 5 articles at the end of the year, continuing till January 1960. Representing the intellectual world, Ssanggye, the most influential journal at the time, began to show interest on this topic from early on. Not including the articles occasionally appearing in the latter half of the 1950s, Ssanggye published special issues like “Tong’yang-ui chaebalgŏn (Rediscovery of the Orient)” (August 1957), “Uiri munhwa-ui yusan (Heritage of Our Culture)” (November 1958), and “Minjoksong-ui pansŏng (Reflection on National Characters)” (August 1959) specifically dealing with the issue.

11. Related to An Pyŏng-ju’s concept of minjung, one can point out that it was revived in the college campuses by the following generation in the forms of traditional festivals including folk songs or p’ansori, which are mixed with anti-government activities. See Kenneth Wells (1995) for more information on the Minjung movements in the 1970s. Kim Song-sik’s emphasis on nationalism tended to reinforce or was absorbed into Korean democracy during the Pak Chŏng-hui regime though his position is totally different.
Concluding Remarks

Recent interest toward modernity in Korean social sciences starts from the questions of what modernity is and how it is related to tradition. As the English word modernity is translated in various ways like 쿤대성, 현대성, and so on, the term modernity has been used to imply diverse meanings for the purposes of individual scholars without clear explanation of what modernity is and why it has become an issue to us.

I understand modernity as the reflection and re-examination of the modernization process through which Korea has passed for a century. In this sense, it suggests critical inquiries against modernization, a process of seeking modernity. Of course, it is certain that this critical discourse was formed with an assumption that modernization must be achieved. However, it is also true that the concept implies criticism against accumulative development and an enlightenment view of modernity.

Accordingly, modernity can be defined as the whole of the interaction between accumulated time (tradition) and expanded space (the West). Rather than trans-historical, modernity is specifically related to phenomena observed after the formation of capitalism. In this sense, we can either approach modernity in a macroscopic perspective dealing with a wide time span, or in a narrow perspective examining the modes of modernity manifested in particular periods of, say, 10, 50, or 100 years. Regardless of the range, if the concerned period shows peculiar features distinguishing it from the periods before and after, we would be able to analyze
the modes of modernity in that period.

Based on such an argument, I have attempted to describe the modes of modernity unique to Korean society in the 1950s. I have analyzed this period because it has its peculiar modes: it is different from the previous period, the notorious 1940s, frequently characterized with the wartime mobilization of colonialism, the revival of radicalism, and rising popular protests, or from the period that follows, often depicted by military coup d'etat, modernization, and reconstruction. By examining the modes of modernity in the 1950s that began with war and the military, I have shown that the modernity of this period began with the occupation of a foreign army and relief assistance, consisting not only of the unilateral transplantation of Western modernity but also of interaction with internal factors. Moreover, I argued that the transition to modernity is not a unilinear process but a complex and contested terrain between tradition and modernity.

I have tried to map out the interaction of tradition and modernity, of the indigenous and foreign, especially how the intellectuals and the ruling power at the time understood the problem of tradition and mobilized it for their purposes. The pro-Western attitude of the ruling power and its supporting intellectuals can be explained with the background of the US relief fund and assistance that were pulled into Korea in this period. The irony is that the inclination toward the West was also found among those intellectuals who were relatively critical of the government. Instead of searching for a way to criticize the US hegemony, they rather clung to a modernization theory that was always justified by the remains of tradition and the unsettled past.
In this way tradition was pushed aside by the disinterest and disregard of the intellectuals. Although it assumed the mobilization and voluntary cooperation of the intellectuals, the ruling group, compared with the decade that follows, recognized the utility of tradition, however confined it may be. Accordingly, a revival of tradition occurred as a part of establishing a national identity for political purposes, whereas the renewed appreciation of tradition that appeared among the significant few intellectuals in the latter half of this period served as a steppingstone for what was to come in the next period.
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<Abstract>

Modernity and Tradition in Everyday Life of the 1950s

Kim Keong-il

On the basis of defining modernity as a whole, interacting with accumulated time (tradition) and the influence of extended space (the West), this paper analyzes the very unique characteristics of modernity in Korean society during the 1950s. From this, I will explicate that the transition toward modernity, rather than a unilateral grand narrative conquering away tradition, is a continuation of a series of much more complicated and contested experiences according to region, class, gender, or generation. Based on such an assumption, this paper focuses on the interactions between tradition and modernity, and the East and the West. Under the Cold War, the discourse of modernization had an overwhelming influence upon the intellectuals relatively critical of the discourse, let alone the political powers and the intellectuals who have supported it. Modernization functioned as an imaginary source of modernism in this period, even though orientations and implications were diverse. On the other hand, the interaction of tradition and modernity was not a one-way affair, even though tradition was ignored or disregarded. Within the limit, the ruling group recognized the usefulness of tradition and selectively appropriated tradition. Consequently, as a part of constructing a national identity for a newly born country, the myth of tradition was
invented. The renewed awareness among a few intellectuals toward tradition along with the call for its succession in the present time in the late 1950s was a preview of the resurrection of tradition that would come in a more clear form in the following period.