

The Native Korean Intellectual Framework of National Culture in the Japanese Colonial Period

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(In lieu of an abstract) The cultural identity of the “nation” (*minjok*; 民族) has been constantly investigated not only by the so-called cultural nationalists but also by proponents of development theory and modernization theory. That is, questions about the characteristics of national culture, how those attributes contribute to modernization and which have a hindering effect have been followed by disputes about the very essence of Korean culture. Questions about this essence and its characteristics have resulted in debates regarding the proper interpretive framework for understanding Korean culture. This is a debate over what should be the primary content of culture theory and corresponding interpretive perspectives.

1. Introduction

The cultural identity of the “nation” (*minjok*; 民族) has been constantly investigated not only by the so-called cultural nationalists but also by proponents of development theory and modernization theory. That is, questions about the characteristics of national culture, how those attributes contribute to modernization and which have a hindering effect have been followed by disputes about the very essence of Korean culture. Questions about this essence and its characteristics have resulted in debates regarding

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the proper interpretive framework for understanding Korean culture. This is a debate over what should be the primary content of culture theory and corresponding interpretive perspectives.

The present study examines how Korean intellectuals understood their national culture under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945) focusing on both its contents and the research methodologies used to discern national culture at the time. In this study I also examine how research of that era influences current cultural debates and contributes to current research on the historical background of culture theory in Korea.¹ Analysis of the correspondence between colonial-era culture theory and the topics and methods of cultural studies today are, of course, neither an easy task nor a question that can be tackled lightly. Even when studying and explaining only current Korean culture, the enduring influence of Japanese colonial era traditions sets premises and conditions under which research is typically carried out across a variety of topics and perspectives.

It should be clearly addressed here, however, that theory of Korean culture did not first emerge in response to Japanese colonial occupation nor was it formulated just by Japanese colonial scholarship. Although, the colonial experience and the cultural policies of colonial rulers created in people an awareness of their own nationhood and culture and encouraged Koreans to advocate for cultural development thereby influencing the ways debates about nation and culture were framed, one needs to be aware that this focus on colonial power can easily distort and even negate the colony's cultural autonomy and the length of its colonial history. It is appropriate to note that the colonized group's awareness of nation and culture theory existed before colonial contact, but became more intensely expressed in reaction to the unique historical conditions of colonial rule. That is, colonial rule was a shock to Korea's pre-existing culture that resulted in the expression of resistance. The image of the colonized Korea invented by colonial forces (Nicholas 1994) was established in chaotic interaction with native traditions that existed before colonial encounter. Accordingly the "colonial situation" (Balandier 1966) in culture meant that native cultural traditions became a form of resistance, and at the same time, their unique

¹ I use the term *native intellectuals* to refer to Korean intellectuals during the period of Japanese colonial rule. This also includes intellectuals who studied abroad in Japan, the United States, China, and other countries before either returning home or remaining overseas.

relationship with colonialism led to a phenomenon of refraction. This situation of rupture and inconsistency was an outcome of the reality that studies and interpretative frameworks of native culture themselves were influenced by colonial forces. A study of the interactive relationship between colonizers and native peoples' self-consciousness (Dirks 1992) is needed not only to understand how colonial policies and the experience of colonization affected the colonizers, but also to reveal the ways new analytical language and cultural explanations shaped unique forms of self-awareness and interpretive frameworks among the colonized.

Political suppression with economic exploitation was not the sole aim of colonial rule. Colonial forces also, or more consciously, categorized knowledge of the colonized with their classificatory system of civilization and barbarism, and developed a framework of "scientific" evidence through their colonial policies in language and education. Colonized people became accustomed to new preferences, thoughts, and culture as they followed the colonizers and absorbed new analytical and interpretive frameworks of "developed" societies. Through this process, the colony's culture and culture theory became the culture and culture theory of the colonizers. Cultural change in the colony extended not only to material life but also to new methods of awareness and description of culture and consciousness (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).

In this context, the present essay attempts to show how frameworks of cultural understanding are created in the conflict between colonialism and nationalism. Because nationalism in Korea has such complex origins, it encompasses many categories. When the term *minjok*, "nation" or "race," first began circulating has not been confirmed. Nevertheless, an emphasis on the Korean peninsula as a place and country, the notion of a Korean nation as "our *Joseon*" or "*gyeore*" (겨레) or "*dongpo*" (同胞 brethren or descendants of the same ethnic ancestor) based on blood and race, and the idea of one single ethnic group and unit based on homogeneous culture, language, and history, have permeated Koreans' consciousness throughout much of history. Unlike Europe's exclusive and aggressive nationalism, with its imperialist tendencies (Gellner 1983), Koreans' national awareness or nationalism was driven by a self-awareness aimed at preservation and defense of their cultural and national self. The concept of the nation as "our *Joseon*" came to be more strongly expressed under the unique historical circumstances of colonial rule and gained traction in the conflict against colonialism. Some critics assess this so-called strong sense of national

identity among the Koreans as belonging to the general category of “aggressive” and “exclusive” nationalisms. However, Korean’s emotional responses to their nation are only a part of their reaction against invading foreign forces throughout history and the Japanese colonial violence in particular. The strong national consciousness among the Koreans is a moral response molded by historical experience. But colonialists have distorted this to define it as Korean “narrow-mindedness.”

2. Japanese Imperial Culture Theory

Japanese imperial cultural policies and interpretations of Korean culture were aimed at achieving colonial domination. Colonialism usually tried to legitimize the exploitation and domination of the colony through modernization programs. These programs operated on principles of enlightening the colonized society and helping the colony reach the same degree of “civilization” as the metropole or creating a “paradise.” Thus the colony’s savage, underdeveloped, unscientific, and uncivilized situation needed to be corrected. Studies of colonial social systems and culture were carried out with the goal of developing the skills and technology to efficiently rule and exploit the colony, as well as simultaneously discredit the culture of the colonized. Colonial forces distorted culture and history to maintain a pretense of legitimacy to physically control Korea. Cultural policy occupied a particularly important position among Japanese colonial policies because it was used to “scientifically” prove the inferiority of Korea in relation to Japan (Gang 1984; Moon 1990).

The colonial government advocated a project of “colonial modernization” to convince Koreans of the inevitability and appropriateness of colonial rule and make them more accommodating. Modernization was not a spontaneous desire or autonomously determined goal of the colonized people, but rather a concept and practice invented and forcibly implemented by colonial rulers to justify colonial domination. Thus, colonial modernization occurred in a context where Korea’s culture and society was both comprehensively denied and forced to undergo self-correction and change at the hands of the colonial rulers.

On the surface, colonial modernization was presented as a paternalistic and humanistic endeavor. The superior group was supposed to be merciful to and sacrifice for the inferior group, so the latter could share the same

standard of living as the former. In this kind of paternalism, the patriarch commands offspring with absolute authority and expects sacrifices and support. The political domination and economic exploitation suffered by the colony were explained as analogous to the ethical relationship between patriarch and family members within a household. Yet no matter how one describes paternalism, sacrifices, and mutual cooperation, the fact that colonialism was economic exploitation dressed up with such political overtures cannot be overlooked (Kim K. 1986).

However, the more serious problem is that colonialism seeks to destroy and distort the culture of the colonized. Colonial culture's policy was to support assimilation despite longstanding cultural differences. This meant correcting a colony's barbaric culture and working toward enlightenment and higher cultural standards. Because the native culture was inferior and backwards, the colonized needed to accept the "higher" culture, and change or "develop" through assimilation. By assimilation, colonial rulers did not mean absorbing the colony's culture but rather thoroughly replacing it with the culture of the metropole. Colonized people were supposed to be educated and guided in adopting the language, customs, religion, belief system, and rituals of the metropolitan culture, as well as standards of justice and fairness, evaluation of human relationships, perspectives on the present and future, standards of aesthetics, and more. The anticipated ultimate effect was that colonial rulers and subjects would live a homogeneous existence, but in practice it meant the loss of the colonized people's culture.

To justify and legitimize cultural destruction, colonial rulers defined the cultural traditions of the colonized as pre-modern and needing improvement. On the premise that cultural differences arose as societies evolved from the pre-modern, the culture of the colonies was viewed as primitive, irrational, pre-logical, non-scientific, and lacking self-sustainability.

Korea and Japan were not just geographical neighbors, but also had deep historical ties forged through Korea's transfer of culture and civilization to the Japanese in a guardian-like role. Thus, Japan's rule of Korea was a very peculiar colonial relationship. Korea and Japan had a close cultural relationship expressed by the term *dongmunseong* (同文性 same cultural nature) and shared a high standard of civilization. Japan, as a colonial force, was not culturally superior to Korea, nor was Korea a backward region. Historically, Korea occupied a culturally superior position relative to Japan.

Japanese imperialists mobilized legal and historical studies on Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan's Han society based on their shared use of Chinese characters. These studies all became linked to colonialism under the concept of "military preparation masked as scholarship" (*munjangjeok mubi* 文裝的武備). Because this concept first imagined colonized society as the enemy, it could not help but emphasize subtle differences in the culture of the metropole and colony (see Bak 1996 for studies on Japanese colonial investigations of folk customs).

Japan's stance on Korea was not based on a firm sense of difference and superiority, unlike the Western powers in African and Asian colonies. Japanese colonialists used images of similarity and homogeneity in their formation of the primary background for their cultural colonization policy. Whenever they had the opportunity, Japanese tried to use unified culture as an excuse to minimize Korean resistance to absorbing Japanese culture. They propagated that because the Japanese and the Korean shared the same cultural roots, assimilation was not artificial or harmful, but rather could be presented as natural and desirable. Many colonial intellectuals (both Korean and Japanese) mistook this illusion for fact.

Studies of Korea as a colony began as an extension of Japanese culture studies due to geographic proximity and cultural similarity. When surveys of land, culture, or civil law were conducted in Japan, it was not long before such systems were also studied and implemented in Korea. Japan's folklorists intended to study Korean folk customs and oral traditions as an extension of their studies on Japan. Korean culture studies was also used to promote imperial Japan's policy of "expansionism of Japan the homeland" (*naejiyeonjangjuui* 內地延長主義). In the guise of policies labelled as military preparation masked as scholarship, the ruling logics of difference (*chabyeol* 差別) and of sameness (*dongilsil* 同一視) sometimes conflicted with and sometimes supplemented Korean culture theory (Bak 1982).

However, Japanese scholars' and their government's goals for Korean studies did not include a better understanding of Japanese culture through comparative studies. For example, although Akiba Takashi's study of Korean shamanism advocated a position of relative academic rigor, it did not include any comparative references to Japanese shamanistic tradition. Akiba's research sought to examine the nature of Korean culture, not its similarities or relationship with Japanese culture. From the colonialists' perspective, the target of inquiry was solely Korean culture. To these Japanese scholars, Korean shamanism was emblematic of Korea's feminine,

agrarian, irrational, and illogical nature (Kim 1990). Accordingly, they found in shamanism a Korean worldview embracing an emotional way of thinking driven by fate and destiny. As a result Korean folk beliefs were labeled as degenerate and unscientific.

Japanese imperialists made traditional Korean culture into something that was not culture but a barbaric and backwards mode of understanding. The basic view of Korean culture was that it was unscientific, unreasonable, unproductive, emotional, and ultimately lacking in autonomous and progressive qualities. Even a Japanese scholar praised by Korea's intellectuals for his deep love and respect for Korean culture, Yanagi Muneyoshi (Sōetsu), described Korea's unique characteristics through an imagery of sadness, fragility, and subtlety in emotion-laden essays about Korean porcelain. These alluded to the virtues of passivity and obedience, the weakness of Korean culture along with East Asia's traditional femininity, illogical emotions, spirit of sacrifice and patience, and sensibility.

Japanese imperialists also coined the term *saiibi* (似而非) religion (pseudo-religion) as a label for Korea's traditional or native belief systems and folk religions, a term that distinguished between Korean and Japanese folk beliefs. Korean belief systems were evaluated according to the logic and rationality of the colonial rulers and became the target of rectification efforts. Seasonal customs were forbidden and traditional solar terms were replaced by a Western calendar because the former were deemed irrational and uncivilized. Group rites and festivals were banned because they were unproductive and "superstitious." Energetic games like *seokjeon* (mock fight with stone missiles) were banned on the colonialists' pretext that these traditional folk games were "violent." This prohibition was announced also because the colonialists feared these activities invigorated Koreans' lives and stimulated their ethnic identity (for an explanation of Japanese colonial policies, see Myers and Peattie 1984).

At the beginning of Japanese colonial rule, studies of Korean culture flourished and provided resources for colonial policies. In the process, Korean culture was intentionally destroyed in the name of colonial modernization. Following the March First Independence Movement, Governor-General Minami Jirō's cultural policies moderated police rule and formally allowed some Korean cultural activities, but minute and exhaustive policies to distort and destroy Korean culture were developed internally. For example, the rhetoric of *nissen dōsoron* (日鮮同祖論: the theory that Korea and Japan shared common ancestry) and *naisen ittai*

(內鮮一體: Japan and Korea are one body) was put forth, pushing Korea to accept Japanese culture. Cultural integration really meant “spiritual suppression” (Hwang 1990), and was not merely limited to controlling institutions but extended to all aspects of culture including customs, beliefs, rituals, games, and even entertainment.

Thus Japanese imperialists interpreted and defined Korean culture as premodern, submissive, and obedient. The meaning of colonial cultural modernization, then, was to adopt the rational, reasonable, and dominant Japanese culture. This kind of Korean culture theory was not simply a distortion of Korean culture, but rather a cognitive framework of Korean culture or acritical perspective that influenced Koreans’ understandings of Korea. However, by trying to make Koreans believe that assimilation of Korean culture to Japanese culture was desirable, Japanese rule helped Koreans form their own images of Korean culture and nationhood.

3. The Cultural Nationalist Movement or National Cultural Movement under Colonial Rule

The distortion of Korean culture under Japanese colonial rule elicited a wide variety of responses from native intellectuals. Intellectuals’ contact with Social Darwinist ideas through Japan led them to embrace concepts like cultural superiority and societal progress. Because of this, Korean reformers believed that colonization was the result of Korea’s cultural backwardness and inferiority, and therefore advocated the need to accept a more superior Japan. The cultural nationalist movement began as these reformers framed themselves as spokesmen for a way of thinking they considered most logical and productive. In fact, movements calling for Koreans’ critical self-reflection and the acceptance of superior civilized culture from abroad began even before the Japanese annexation of Korea. Such movements, however, were centered around the voluntary and selective adoption of foreign culture to strengthen a pre-existing cultural unit.

By the colonial period, the philosophical position of intellectuals behind the cultural movement had been divided into two camps. More than simply a division between socialist and bourgeois intellectuals, this divergence is seen in the two sides’ differing perspectives on colonial rule. Many intellectuals accepted colonial modernization as a reality and argued

that the Koreans should use it as an opportunity to reform themselves. This amounted to an acceptance of the colonizers' modernizing claims, which were based on a negative view of Korean culture's inherent characteristics.

Assuming that complete independence remained a distant prospect, Ahn Changho believed that Korean autonomy could be achieved effectively through the untiring pursuit of new knowledge and skills. This belief motivated him to establish the Young Korean Academy (*Heungsadan*: 興士團) and devote his energy to reforming national consciousness and promoting practical learning. In terms of their advocacy for self-criticism and active participation in the modernization project, as well as their specific strategies for accomplishing this, there was little difference between Ahn Changho and Yi Gwangsu (Yi Kwangsu). Yi believed, however, that Korea's weakness stemmed from its cultural inferiority, and that it was necessary to completely reform this culture before Korea could become a civilized country like Japan. In other words, Yi's cultural movement made the abandonment of Korea's inferior national culture and assimilation with Japan its primary goal. In this respect it was distinct from Ahn's movement and representative of Yi's anti-nationalist advocacy for cultural change.

Of course, most intellectuals were indecisive or ambiguous in the debate between nationalism and colonial modernization. This might have been due to the fact that many of these intellectuals were educated in Japan. Many who first advocated for cultural nationalism began advocating for the acceptance of modernization after the failure of the March First Movement and the continuation of colonial rule. This stemmed from a perceived gap between the ideals of the independence movement and the realization that the survival of the Korean nation depended on the acquisition of practical skills. Advocacy for national improvement, which was an adaptation of the argument for modernization, eventually appeared in forms of "national reconstruction" (民族改造 *minjok gaejo*) or "remaking consciousness" (意識改造 *uisik gaejo*), "compromise theory" (妥協論 *tahyeomnon*), and "preparation theory" (準備論 *junbiron*). Among these, the twists and turns encountered by Yi Gwangsu and Choe Nameon as they both led the domestic nationalist movement and encouraged national development can be considered representative of the colonial intellectual experience.

As a journalist and literary figure, Yi Gwangsu was doubtlessly the

most influential Korean intellectual of his day. Through novels like *The Soil* (흙 *heuk*) and *Heartless* (無情 *mujeong*), Yi highlighted the impoverished state of Korea. By illustrating the desperate circumstances of Koreans during the dark early years of colonial rule, Yi became one of the most prominent intellectuals of the era. The most problematic of Yi's writings, however, was his "A Theory of National Reconstruction" (民族改造論 *minjok kaejoron*) (1922).

Yi's essay on "national reconstruction" was divided into several sections such as: "The meaning of national reconstruction," "The national reconstruction movement seen historically," "The Korean reconstruction movement after 1884," "The virtue of national reconstruction," "Is national reconstruction possible?" "How much time will national reconstruction require?" "The components of national reconstruction," and "Methods of reconstruction." Yi's main argument was that Koreans should realize the fact that they are not the core of society and therefore should reform their national quality in order to become a nucleus of society. Under a colonial system, Koreans were, of course, politically, economically, and socially marginalized. However, rather than blaming this on the violence of the colonial system, he blamed the weaknesses of the Korean nation. Yi believed that marginalization was not a result of real suppression but rather the inevitable result of pre-existing national characteristics and that the road to overcoming this was one at which every Korean had to arrive. The passage below shows clearly Yi's opinion that Koreans' disadvantage under the colonial system was due to their national temperament:

Every person must 1) abstain from dishonest words and deeds; 2) abandon empty thoughts and arguments and diligently pursue those things people consider correct or dutiful; 3) become a person who is completely faithful to morality, without wavering or duplicity; 4) renounce indecisiveness, just making do, and other signs of weakness, and become a person who can accomplish correct deeds no matter what obstacles may arise; 5) consider the public good before the private, or, in other words, put others before oneself and serve society through one's life and actions; 6) in addition to basic common knowledge, learn specialized skills or arts one can use to secure one or more careers; 7) establish financial independence through diligent saving; 8) become a person of healthy disposition who keeps one's homes, clothes, and roads in accordance with public hygiene laws. In summary, these things constitute the pursuit of morality (德育 *deokyuk*), physical training (體育 *cheyuk*), knowledge (知育 *jiyuk*), and the accumulation of wealth, as well as the cultivation of a spirit of public service. If we increase the number of Koreans who embody these characteristics, then we can strive for the Korean

race to become one defined by its sincerity, diligence, trustworthiness, courage, social unity, and shared wealth. (Yi 1922: 137)

The passage emphasizes the “non-political” points of Yi’s message. Rather than advocating for increased political power or the formation of political resistance or opposition movements, Yi focused instead on the personal cultivation of an individual’s psychological, logical, and moral nature. Articulating an explicitly apolitical position, Yi stated: “The essence of reconstruction is limited only by Koreans’ national essence and the national life. The purpose, as described above, is solely the cultivation of morality, physical strength, and intelligence, and must be free of politics.”

Yi’s argument for the reformation of Korean consciousness, values, and ethics, as well as daily habits and customs employed concepts that are still in use today. Nevertheless, his argument ignored the context in which reform could be achieved. The Korean customs and consciousness Yi identified as needing reform arose as a response to specific societal, political, and economic conditions, and, in many cases, were the only available response to such conditions. As Yi refused to use any social scientific or positivist analytical approaches in his work, his argument ultimately succumbed to a biased, one-dimensional cultural and ideological determinism.

Yi also ignored humans’ overlapping tendencies by mistakenly defining people according to a single set of characteristics. Koreans were not all uniformly lazy, disrespectful, passive, selfish, wasteful, or scornful of the need to cultivate their minds, bodies, and spirits. Yi also ignored the possibility of Koreans being interested in private and public affairs at the same time, or simultaneously diligent and thrifty while also being indolent and wasteful. Of course, these were not simply characteristics of Koreans but true of all human beings. Such traits are simply more or less prominent depending on the specific social environment people find themselves in.

For this reason one must analyze the conditions that make people’s specific behaviors or tendencies more pronounced. The most important condition in the case of Yi’s writings was the colonial situation, but Yi did not analyze this colonial situation, or even mention the effects of colonization on the behavior and customs of the Korean people. By adopting a non-political position, Yi hoped to appeal to an audience of Koreans, including himself, on the basis of so-called objectivity and impartiality. This appears to be nothing more, however, than the illusion of a colonial

intellectual.

It is natural for colonial regimes to push for the de-politicization of native peoples and their disengagement from the political process. As a result, Yi's apolitical position saw him falling into the trap set by the colonizer. In his writings, Yi perpetuated the fantasy that Koreans bore primary responsibility for their dismal reality and that cooperation with the colonial regime was the only path toward cultural progress and breaking free. Yi's argument meant the whole-hearted acceptance of both colonial assimilationist policy and the theory of colonial modernization.

Yi's suggestions for the "reconstruction" of the Korean people were identical to the message promulgated by Ahn Changho's Young Korean Academy (Kim Y. 1986: 735). However, while the two schools of thought shared some similarities, differences ultimately existed between Yi's position and Ahn's "self-strengthening" theory. Yi's argument was a form of cultural determinism that saw culture as a response to subjective imagination or ideals that applied only in specific situations rather than something defined by everyday life, actions, consciousness, and pre-existing cultural traditions.

Yi's apolitical "theory of reconstruction" represented his own position, but it was also a product of colonial rule. Of course, not all Korean intellectuals assumed a similarly apolitical stance, but in many cases intellectuals did avoid politics and expressed positions that reflected a singular focus on academic pursuits when discussing issues related to the Korean nation and national culture. This showed the degree to which colonization unconsciously shaped the intellectual discourse of the period.

Japanese policies of assimilation and cultural rule following the March First Movement resulted in the rapid atrophy and disintegration of Korean society. While many intellectuals and others who supported the Korean independence movement left home for exile abroad, many of those who remained in Korea gradually began switching their allegiance as a result of appeasement and coercion by the colonial regime. The Korean population at large also grew more accustomed to new ways of life, especially customs associated with Japan. Yi Gwangsu called this process of societal and cultural change a "natural transformation." By calling such a change "natural," however, Yi not only overlooked the violence of the colonial system that produced this transformation, but in further stating that this change "was like the evolutionary changes that unknowingly affect the unenlightened savages," Yi implied that traditional Korean culture was a

form of “savagery” that would give way to Japanese influence in Social Darwinist fashion. Furthermore, his theory implied that Koreans lacked objective perception so that they could not even realize the reality of transformation.

Yi’s writings supported the imperialist logic that saw the belittling of native peoples as a necessary means of achieving modernization and the elevation of these peoples from “savagery” to civilization as the natural order of things. This, of course, meant that the maintenance of Korean-ness was nothing more than clinging to savagery.

Yi’s call to focus on internal culpability while avoiding politics and accepting the colonial reality elicited considerable debate. Of course, independence could not be obtained simply by demand or protest, and it was imperative that individual talents and abilities were cultivated. The complexity of the situation thus amplified the diversity of responses to Yi Gwangsu’s position and his “theory of national reconstruction.” This ambiguity was also seen in the range of responses to the arguments for “preparation” and “appeasement” advocated by Ahn Changho and a few members of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai.

In one respect, the desire to resolve the internal contradictions of one’s society and seek societal reform through the introduction of outside technologies was not just a feature of the colonial period. Even under traditional Confucian society, Koreans were encouraged to seek moral cultivation and virtuously maintain their family. This included a tradition of seeking for the causes of misfortune in individual failures and deep self-reflection on those failures. At the same time, Koreans also had a long history of accepting new cultural forms from China, including technologies and ideas meant to reform Korean society. This resulted at times in a cultural subservience to China. During the Japanese colonial period, however, China lost its former position as a cultural model and instead became a symbol of decline.

In this situation, the false ideal of “cultural assimilation” proved an increasingly formidable temptation to colonial-era Koreans. This was the idea that the success of colonial cultural rule rested on the equality of Japanese and Koreans and that progress through Japanese culture or Japan would give rise to a shared cultural entity. The rise of such fantasies also contributed to theories about the shared origins of Japanese and Korean culture and their ethnic similarities. In the case of Western empires, the clear racial differences between the colonized and colonizer meant both

presumed the utter impossibility of cultural assimilation. In the case of Korea and Japan, however, the two countries were close ethnically and historically, as well as in terms of ancient cultural interactions. Thus, while the experience of colonization was unpleasant and deeply shameful and dismaying to Koreans who had traditionally felt a sense of ethnic superiority, they could not deny the traditional cultural exchange between the two countries. Not only were the two countries' linguistic structures similar, but the roots of Japanese tradition were also tied to Korean influence. Racially, the Japanese were descendants of people who crossed the sea to Japan from the Korean peninsula. Despite this, Koreans often expressed resistance to colonial rule. While there was Yi Gwangsu's theory of "national reconstruction" and subsequent arguments, intellectuals' fiercely critical response to Choe Namseon's "Bulham culture theory" nonetheless demonstrates this continued resistance.

The self-critical, culturally deterministic perspective of the "Theory of National Reconstruction," as well as its glorification of Japan, has continued to play a critical role in Korea's development even up to the present. The attempt by some intellectuals to identify factors behind national or societal progress based on ethnic consciousness or a fixed cultural trait often corresponded to the demands of ruling regimes, which sought to maintain or strengthen their power over colonized Korea.

Both the modernization movement of the Bak Jeonghui (Park Chung-hee) regime and the consciousness reform movement under Jeon Duhwan (Chun Doo-hwan) emphasized the need to reform negative aspects of Korea and its national culture. It can be said that modernization theories of the 1970s meant the pursuit of Westernization as well as the adoption of Western modernization theory by cultural elites. But the 1970s modernization movements, as best represented by the New Village Movement (*saemaeul undong*), ultimately shared the same essential purpose, ideological basis, theoretical foundation, methods, and proposed results as the colonial-era Rural Revitalization Campaign (農村振興運動 *nongchon jinheung undong*) and New Life Movement (新生活運動 *sinsaenghwal undong*). The individuals behind these later campaigns had grown up and were educated under Japanese colonial rule, so the 1970s modernization movement copied many aspects of the Japanese modernization program.

4. Culture as a National History and as a History of Ideas

Native intellectuals pursued a nationalist culture theory as an alternative to the imperialist colonial culture theory. Advocating for the establishment of a national cultural identity, autonomy, and superiority or a position of self-criticism toward national culture also provided the political groundwork to argue for the preservation or reform of national consciousness and spiritual culture systems.

During this period, the culture studies of Korean intellectuals were produced in reaction to Japanese colonialism. These studies either resisted colonialism and its distorted portrayals of Korean culture or accepted colonial rule and sought self-improvement based on Japanese perspectives. Although the Korean intellectuals mentioned above were not so clearly divided into two camps, many were implicitly or explicitly influenced by the colonial order. As in the case of the so-called collaborator intellectuals, there were many cases where, aside from timing differences, the duality characteristic of colonial intellectuals is seen. Intellectuals' development was conditioned by the metropole, so even the form and vocabulary of anti-colonial discourse ultimately sprang from the same arguments as in those created by colonial forces.

Even so, the work of colonial-era native intellectuals was meaningful in its attempt to directly research issues of nation and culture, as well as uncover Korea's cultural identity through a reinterpretation of its history. This scholarship had an especially strong impact on cultural understandings of national history while opposing Japanese narratives of Korean culture and history. It is also worth noting that this scholarship devoted significant interest to myths, legends, and other traditional folklore as evidence of the origins and uniqueness of Korean culture.

Under colonial rule, national culture theory was most important in the context of historical awareness and the result was a tenacious historical consciousness among Koreans. Intellectuals tried to find the similarities and differences between Korean and Japanese culture through the examination of national history. For the most part, they emphasized the length of history and cultural superiority of Korea as well as the different roots of Korean and Japanese culture.

During the late 1920s to early 1930s the most shocking and intense controversy about national culture was raised by Choe Namseon's "Theory

of Bulham Culture” (不咸文化論 *Bulham munhwaron*) (1928). From early on Choe worked toward expanding nationalist historiography and cultural nationalism. He resisted *nissen dōsoron* and *mansen ittai* (滿鮮一體 the idea that Korea and Manchuria were one body). He especially resisted Dangun (Tangun) Annihilation Policy (檀君抹殺政策 *Dangun malsal jeongchaek*), which included the “Theory to reject Dangun as a historical figure” (檀君否認論 *Dangun buinnon*) and “Theory of Buddhist fabrication of Dangun” (檀君僧造論 *Dangunseungjoron*), a series of colonial cultural policies aimed at annihilating Korean culture. If Yi Gwangsu was representative of those who participated in society through literature, then Choe Namseon was representative of those who participated in social life through scholarship. Choe organized the Society for Promoting Korean Books (廣文會 *Gwangmunhoe*) and recorded national culture by publishing his research and writings. As one of the drafters of the March First Declaration, he was also a nationalist leader.

After the March First Movement, as the colonial government’s distortion and destruction of Korean nationhood and culture became noticeable, he came forward to write cultural histories of the Korean nation. His theory of Bulham culture broadened interest in Korea’s cultural origins to include an emphasis on the historical longevity of Korean national culture. It traced the origins of nation and national culture to the sacred site of Mt. Baekdu (Mt. Bulham). Of course, it also held that Japanese culture originated from the continent. In his theory of Bulham culture, the core of Korean thought and culture was the idea of “*bak*” (밝: light: 光明 *gwangmyeong*); this was also called the “Dangun theory.” Proponents of the theory believed that by tracing and analyzing the origins and dissemination of language, religion, belief systems, ethnicity, and key cultural factors forming the core of Dangun theory to beliefs in the sun and heavenly gods, one could see how an East Asian cultural circle had spread from a center at Mt. Baekdu and Dangun to Japan, Okinawa, China, Mongolia, Central Asia, as far as the Balkan Peninsula. Therefore, Mt. Bulham became a sacred cradle of “light theory,” as embodied by Dangun. The proposition that the Korean peninsula and its northern region was a central part of the world was a main tenet of the Bulham theory. This argued that Japan’s sun deity was the same as Korea’s Dangun, and implied that Japanese culture was based on Korean culture. While Japanese theories of *nissen dōsoron* (Japan and Korea share common ancestors) and *naisen ittai* (Japan and Korea are one body) insisted that

Korean culture originated in Japan, Choe argued that Japanese history and culture were peripheral developments of the Gojoseon dynasty's Bulham culture.

Despite Choe's emphasis on the superiority of Korean culture and opposition to the doctrine of *nissen dōsoron* (Im and Janelli 1989), it was his claim that the idea that Korean and Japanese culture had the same roots caused the greatest controversy. This was because his argument could be used to support the Japanese colonizers' argument for cultural assimilation and *naisen ittai*, which sought to deny Korea's cultural distinctness and advocate for the acceptance of Japanese culture. Choe indirectly validated the idea of *nissen dōsoron*, thereby classifying Dangun as a deity of Shintoism and inadvertently allowing his logic to be used against him.

Choe Namseon's academic position involved a conscious isolation from political reality through a study of Korean culture. Thus while Choe opened a new field of Korean culture studies, its contribution to colonial intellectual development was criticized for lacking a sense of responsibility and being collaborationist. There is a well-known anecdote regarding how Jeong Inbo (courtesy name Widang) visited Choe Namseon's home in funerary attire, spread a straw mat in the yard, and performed the ritual weeping of mourning. In this way Jeong declared the symbolic death of Choe Namseon as a leader of the nationalist cultural movement and subsequently broke off relations with Choe. After Liberation, Jeong famously defended him syllogistically. That is, Jeong argued that although Choe fell short as a patriot, his honor as a scholar could be reaffirmed. His argument that Korea and Japan shared the same cultural roots was, on one hand, partly used for the Japanese colonial assimilation policy; and to some extent it worked to neutralize resistance to the Japanization of Koreans. On the other hand, however, it should be acknowledged that his arguments for the superiority of Korean culture attempted to overcome colonial culture theory.

Even in the early stages of colonial rule, Bak Eunsik wrote *A Painful History of Korea* (*Hanguk Tongsa* 1915), laying out national history and resisting Japanese colonial aggression. However, after the March First Movement the prospect of winning independence seemed grim and the movement struggled to find and preserve national culture, as many intellectuals like Yi Gwangsu and Choe Namseon came to adopt ambivalent positions. Works like Shin Chaeho's *Early History of Korea* (*Joseon Sanggosa* 1931) and Jeong Inbo's *Five Thousand Years of Korea's Spirit* (*Ocheonnyeon*

Joseon ui Eol 1935) are especially representative of the writers who tried to find the nation through historical writing. These works sought to identify a national spirit and coherent national subjectivity revealed over the course of a Korean history, which they established as being five thousand years in length.

As an ultranationalist, Shin Chaeho strongly emphasized the sovereignty and autonomy of Korean history. By recording Korean national origins and history, the native intellectuals of the colonial period strove to solidify a national identity and spirit that was being lost and distorted under Japanese colonial culture policy. Therefore, the opportunity arose for nationalism to be practiced concretely. Cultural nationalism was not simply an emphasis on the existence of a Korean culture, but rather an emphasis on the excellence of Korean national culture and the principle that Korea was a nation with culture, that is, a cultural nation.

Here the argument of national culture theory was not simply writing the history of a nation but rather an emphasis on the sovereign spirit of a nation through historical writing. Shin's *Early History of Korea* addressed a variety of topics on ancient Korean society and culture, such as the process of developing relationships with neighboring nations like the Xiongnu, Mongols, and Xianbei; methods of expression through language and writing; the importance of religion and belief systems; scholarship, technology, and art; food, clothing, and shelter; commerce, economic systems, and organizations; changing population sizes; political systems and schools of thought; the process of class conflict; the evolution of local governance; and the fragmentation and fractionalization of ethnic groups. These topics remain the foundation of today's cultural studies.

Shin Chaeho saw history as a conflict between the self (我) and non-self (非我) and sharply criticized Korean intellectuals' abandonment of their own language, mindset, and expressions to write their history from the perspective of others. Reexamining materials and methodologically addressing national migration theory, Shin attempted to explain national history within the context of struggle in northeast Asia between the self and non-self, i.e., other nations or different cultures. Shin sought to analyze the nation and national culture through the dynamic relationships between heterogeneous elements while overcoming the inclination to see Korean culture as static by demonstrating its inherent autonomy and vitality.

In *Five Thousand Years of Korea's Spirit*, Jeong Inbo wrote that "although

I am not a historian, upon reading just one or two pages of the Japanese-written history books, I found it so difficult to suppress my rage at their cunning distortion that I began to write the book as an attempt to properly find Korea's spirit." Through his breadth of knowledge and use of many textual sources, Jeong interpreted the origins and early history of Korea from the perspective of the Korean nation as his primary subject. This contrasted with the colonial historical view or the official Japanese view as well as the positivist historical school.

Jeong cared deeply about spiritual issues. The term "spirit" (*eo*) was extremely important in his view of culture. For him, Korea had a spiritual essence which was unique and superior to that of Japan. Rather than a "vestige" (殘在 *janjae*), this "spirit" was something that flowed through the hearts and minds of Korean people along with the course of history. According to Jeong, history is only an external expression of deeply embedded culture while "spirit" provides an unchanging cultural foundation to this history. Jeong ultimately regarded history and culture in the same light. For him, culture was the driving "spirit" that provided the essence, impetus, and dynamism of history. In other words, culture as history, or the history of ideas, is a spirit or culture expressed through time. Furthermore, it could never be separated from the nation. Jeong clarified his point that the nation is not a political unit or state but rather a cultural unit.

This view encouraged later study of culture from the perspective of a history of ideas and examination of culture's unchanging aspects. At the same time, it laid the foundation for a nationalist understanding of culture. With the context of colonization in mind, Jeong sought to discover a national spirit or national cultural identity, but he did not advocate a Korean culture that existed merely in opposition to Japanese colonialism.

Ultimately, the intellectuals of the time wrote histories of the Korean nation and pointed out its excellence and progressivism. In ancient history in particular, the primary agenda was not just proving the origins of the nation but rather proving that Korea was a country with a history longer than Japan's. These studies utilized mythology, legends, and linguistic analysis, and resisted the colonialist historical view limited by skewed, positivist claims and source interpretations. With eyes that looked at Korean history in an affirmative light, these intellectuals used a methodology that incorporated knowledge passed down among the common people as well as historical sources to counter colonialist historical views, a

phenomenon which would have a great impact on the methodologies of future cultural studies.

It is noteworthy that rather than viewing Korea as occupying an intermediate position in the spread of the so-called northeast Asian culture (including China), with Japan as a final stop, Korean intellectuals saw the area surrounding Mt. Baekdu as the birthplace and center of the northeast Asian cultural sphere. This idea shared similarities with the theories of evolutionism, diffusionism, and cultural circle (*Kultur Kreise*) popular in Europe at the time.

This perspective, which views central and northeast Asia including Siberia as a unified cultural sphere with origins that can be approached through an analysis of the historical process and background of Korean and Japanese culture, still occupies a primary space in Korea's folklore studies, especially in the fields of comparative folklore studies and historical folklore studies. When describing Korean culture's origins, its original forms, or its dissemination process, comparative studies of China, Korea, and Japan—or even Mongolia, Siberia, and Central Asia if one takes a broader view—have become the foundation of empirical tradition.

Attention to the origins and evolution of culture, cultural zone or circle, and the diffusion of shared cultural elements later led to a debate over whether Korean culture was similar to or different from Japanese culture. For example, in the 1970s there was controversy about the northern or southern, as well as the continental or maritime origins, of Korean culture. The roots of this debate were closely tied to the idea of whether Japanese culture had southern-maritime foundations or was tied to a northern-continental culture that traveled through Northeast Asia. Archaeological artifacts and some customs have been used to support both sides. Those that argue for the southern origins of Korean culture attacked the northern origins theory by pointing out its closed worldview and inability to shake off its subservience to the continent or China, while advocates of northern origins attacked southern origins proponents for damaging the base of national culture and for their pro-Japanese actions. But culture does not exist as a pure entity on its own, free of mutual exchange with other societies. Cultural institutions and practices were transmitted together across both land and sea, with regional differences in their dissemination leading to the development of local characteristics. The existence of this heated debate over Korea's cultural origins testifies to the strong concern over Korean culture's purity or, more strictly speaking, the purity of Korean

national culture.

5. Folklore-based Cultural Research

In addition to historical research, Korean intellectuals also devoted tremendous effort to the discovery and classification of Korean national culture. Claiming that official records were the product of a literati class subservient to Chinese culture, these researchers tried to collect and record elements of Korean culture they saw in the daily lives of common people. Choe Namseon, Yi Neunghwa, Song Seokha, Son Jintae, and others classified various aspects of “folklore” (民俗 *minsok*) and played an important role in recording it. In addition to his “Bulham culture theory,” Choe Namseon also published “Records on Shamanism” (1927) in the nineteenth issue of *Gyemyeong* (開明) magazine, and helped record and disseminate rapidly disappearing folk customs and institutions by serializing “Korean Common Knowledge” in the newspaper *Maeil sinbo* (每日申報) in 1937.² Yi Neunghwa also wrote texts on religion and spirituality such as *Investigations of Korean Shamanistic Customs* (1927), *History of Korean Buddhism*, and *History of Korean Daoism*, as well as studies of women’s culture, including *Investigations into Korean Women’s Customs* and *A History of Korean Women Entertainers* (*haeobwa* 解語花). Choe Namseon’s “Records on Shamanism” and Yi Neunghwa’s *Investigations of Korean Shamanistic Customs* were both reactions to the research of Akiba Takashi. Although both Choe and Yi relied much more heavily on textual documents than field study for their sources, their work sought to uncover Korea’s national essence within these folk traditions and customs and was meaningful in terms of pioneering new genres of national culture.

Son Jintae and Song Seokha both studied in Japan, and as a result of being introduced to social anthropology and anthropological methods imported from Great Britain, began conducting social surveys to collect information on folk customs. Although their methods bore little resemblance to current practices of conducting long-term field work, their

² The table of contents for “Korean Common Knowledge” lists the following sections, among others: 1) National Territory; 2) Seasons; 3) Customs; 4) Games; 5) Rituals; 6) Faith; 7) Shamanism; 8) Divination; 9) Festivals; 10) Mythology; 11) Ghosts and Monsters; 12) Worship; 13) Fortune-telling; 14) Cleromancy; 15) Foresight; 16) Weather Prediction.

efforts to record the folk practices that were common in the lives of ordinary people are significant in the history of studies of Korean folk customs.

The growth of interest in folk customs was partially due to the rise of folk studies in Japan. Through his interest in and romanticization of “culture of the countryside” (郷土), Yanagita Kunio sought to find the Japanese spiritual essence that had been lost in the process of modernization by looking to the once-scorned but simple traditional lives of peasants. Yanagita’s attempt to return from urbanization and Westernization to the “locality” or “village” was both a cultural reaction and an effort that provided a cultural foundation for Japanese ethnic nationalism. Son Jintae and Song Seokha were directly influenced by Yanagita’s school of folk custom studies (Kim 1985). By the 1930s in addition to the study of written documents, Son Jintae was also traveling and conducting “folk surveys” to collect materials on folk customs while pursuing studies on Korean shamanism that contested the findings of Akiba (Yu 1990: 20). Song Seokha introduced the folk studies movement that was popular at the time in Japan and, together with Son Jintae and Jeong Inseop, created the Korean Folk Studies Association (*Joseon minsok hakhoe*) in 1934, which helped disseminate key terms and concepts from ethnology and anthropology throughout Korea.

The categories of folk customs these researchers focused on were identical to the categories of Korean society and culture found in surveys conducted by the Privy Council of the Government-General of Korea. The outline of Korean customs promulgated by the Government-General of Korea contained sixteen fields, including food and clothing, coming-of-age, rites of marriage, funerals, and ancestor worship, religion, occupations, academic studies, etiquette, music, song, dance, medicine, surnames, genealogies, forms of recreation, everyday life in the home, shamanism and divination, superstition and proverbs, and annual holidays and festivities, and others (Bak H. 1980). These fields still form the basic research categories of Korean folk studies even to the present.

Son Jintae published seventy-seven different works that analyzed a wide range of topics in Korean folk studies relating to Korea’s cultural characteristics. His writings were compiled and published after Liberation as *A Study of Tales of the Korean People* (1947) and *A Study of Korean National Culture* (1948). Beginning with studies of the relationship between race and culture, the series of his publications included scholarship on

legends, mythology, folk sayings, children's songs, shamanistic songs and practices, views on souls, sorcery and taboos, sanctuaries, Korean traditional totem poles (*jangseung*), seasonal customs, marriage types, domestic architecture, profanity, mock fights with stone missiles (*seokjeon*), Korean traditional floor-heating system (*ondol*), and sweet potato cultivation. Among these were thirty-six studies of shamanistic songs and practices, sanctuaries, *jangseung* (Korean totem poles), sorcery, taboos, and other religious and spiritual practices (Yu 1990: 31). A key term for Son in his writings was "the heart (心 *maeum*) of Korea." If Jeong Inbo's focus was the "eol" of Korea, as embodied in its spirit, world view, thoughts, values, and consciousness, Son Jintae's focus can be seen as the emotions, psychology, character, and senses. Son sought to understand the emotional system that gave meaning to Koreans' lives by examining what they liked and disliked, what they found attractive and repulsive, preferences he believed were most apparent through Korean folk customs. Son saw research into these folk customs as a way of comprehending Korea's unique emotional world and the preservation of these folk customs as a means of preserving the Korean people's emotions and character traits (For more on Son, see Yi Pilyoung 1985; Yu Giseon 1990).

Song Seokha is often considered an unorthodox folk studies scholar (Kim 1963). Yet Song's collection and recording of Korean folk customs through individual field surveys (Im 1963; Kim 1994) was, in many ways, the most systematic and professional of its time (Jang 1991). He specialized in mythology, folk tales, primitive art, and primitive religion (Song 1934) while also developing an interest in areas such as spirituality, shamanism, mythology, folk songs, and mask dances. Song contributed to several academic publications including "Learning Lamp" (*Hakdeung*) and also published reports of his findings as well as explanatory articles through the journal *Korean Folk Studies* (*Joseon minsokhak*). Later, Song's work was compiled and published under the title *Investigations into Korean Folk Customs* (*Hanguk minsokgo* 1963).

These efforts to discover national culture within folk customs were deeply meaningful in that they tried to break free from the historical and cultural paradigms created by powerful elites and social heroes. Unlike previous historical and cultural research based on state-level and official sources, the research of these scholars was based on non-official sources in the world of common people. By bringing previously peripheralized areas of study into the center of national culture, they tried to transform the field

of study. In one respect this was also a form of resistance and a challenging response to the official records-based historical writing and analysis conducted by some colonial-era intellectuals under the banner of “positivism.” The Japanese regime tried to distort Korea’s history and destroy its folk customs in the name of modernization theory. Colonial officials labeled folk religions as superstitions and declared that newly emerging folk religious movements were deceptive and anti-social “cults” that polluted the minds of the people. They also tried to “purify” Korean seasonal customs, festivals, and collective games by claiming that these were too uneconomical, violent, and threatening to local stability. By assigning policemen to oversee these activities, colonial officials tried to control cultural traditions and thought as part of the social order.

Because of the unofficial nature of folk customs, legends, unofficial histories, and traditions passed down among common people, these were by no means consistent or precise. Because they were declared inaccurate by political authorities at the time, however, they became a counter-symbol of purity. In the context of colonial-era denunciations of such customs, they further became revered as the essence of national culture. Because folk customs during the colonial era were denounced as unofficial and thus marginalized, they became valued as a means of cultural resistance against the official power of the colonial state.

While research on national culture was pursued as a means of resisting colonial distortion of Korean culture, it was not simply an emotional response to imperial provocations. Son Jintae advocated for ethnographic research that did not simply reflect a “sentimentalism” derived from popular nationalism, but was instead based on scientific consciousness and methods (Son 1927, 1928). Son saw this research as a means of cultural introspection that would set the foundation for a new national culture by examining its origins. In this respect, he chose the systematic survey and comparative analytical methods of anthropology as a means of helping Koreans accurately understand their own culture. By doing so he shifted people’s attention away from a culture and history created by elites and toward folk customs that arose from the masses (Son 1948).

These scholarly activities led to the formation of a nationalistic study of Korean ethnic culture known as “Korean studies” (朝鮮學 *joseonhak*) at the time and “national studies” (國學 *gukhak*) today. The national studies movement of these scholars divided the field into several specific specialties, including arts and literature, beliefs and rituals, and customs

and conventions. There was also a major focus on artistic genres like music and visual arts, as mythology, folk sayings, riddles, traditional stories, and other genres of oral literature formed the core of Korean culture. Scholars saw folk customs as historical materials that contained the worldview and philosophy of the masses and a place where these were continually developed and passed down. At the same time, one branch of folk studies scholarship argued that culture was a mental system represented by the mental and performative practices embodied in folk spirituality and rituals. This claimed culture as the so-called “spirit of the age” (時代精神 *sidae jeongsin*) or the intellectual values and trends that predominate in a certain era. The third claim of these scholars was that ordinary life was a form of culture. These scholars thus saw seasonal customs as an important genre of cultural expression and practice.

If one pauses to consider this idea, the “people” or “folk” (*min*) who form the basis of folk studies may seem like a type of class-based categorization, but the term *masses* (*minjung*) was not officially used by these scholars. The term *folk studies* (*minsokhak*) was also used interchangeably with *indigenous custom studies* (土俗學 *tosokhak*) and *anthropology* (人類學 *illyubak*). Within Son Jintae’s writings, anthropology was understood as transcending the boundaries of culture in the search for common human characteristics or a comparative study of different ethnic groups, while indigenous custom studies or folk studies used anthropological approaches and methods to investigate the special characteristics of a particular ethnic group within a certain geographical boundary. It seems that such a definition of *minsokhak* was borrowed from the folk studies then being developed in Japan.

The social marginalization of Koreans under Japanese rule meant they were unable to politically and culturally influence elite culture. Also, because Korean traditions were denounced and distorted by colonialism and colonial historical narratives, traditional Korean culture in general was not given a legitimate place in society. For this reason, the term *folk customs* was likely used to distinguish the customs of the ordinary people who were not part of the new elite trying to assimilate into Japanese culture or the former aristocratic *yangban* who traditionally revered Chinese culture. Scholars at the time refused to define the agents of folk customs. They simply referred to them as “Korean customs” or the “habits of Korean people” while seeking the source of their materials among common people. Thus, it may be appropriate to view this terminology as a way of

identifying the basic culture of the marginalized and alienated Korean populace.

Yet by treating the agent of Korean culture as one unified entity, this scholarship also ignored the dynamic relations between or among different cultural groups or sub-cultures within the national community. It also assumed that Korean folk custom was one singular unit being passively swept away by the onslaught of colonial modernization. This was a primary weakness of the method, which lacked social scientific perspectives in the study of Korean folk customs. Researchers encountered problems when trying to explain the political, economic, and social functions and roles of an item of folk customs or the question of under what specific political, economic, and social conditions it emerged.

While some scholars claim that Son Jintae and Song Seokha were influenced by the structural-functionalist approach Akiba Takashi adopted from Bronislaw Malinowski (Han 1988; Itō 1988), it is difficult to identify concrete evidence that these scholars used structural-functionalism or social anthropological methods in their interpretation of a folk custom. Rather, their work seems more influenced by the school of diffusion, especially in their efforts to trace historical patterns of cultural diffusion through the comparative study of cultures. Son and Song focused primarily on collecting, classifying, and recording folk customs as evidence of Korean cultural characteristics distinct from Japan and China rather than analyzing folk customs within the context of social systems, patterns of daily life, modes of thought, or an holistic socio-cultural system. Instead of analyzing folk customs in the context of contemporary practices, the work of these scholars resembled more the piecemeal collection of samples. This “butterfly” collection of cultural samples absent social context then set a model followed by subsequent Korean folklorists.

The exact relationship between colonialism and these scholars’ comparative approaches or the recording of folk customs is unclear. In comparison with the strongly articulated nationalism of Choe Namseon’s writings, the ideological angle of folk studies’ scholars’ analyses seems less certain. This is because their writings focused more on content, or the recording and explanation of specific folk customs. Son Jintae (1927, 1928) warned against the influence of patriotic feeling on scholarly research while stressing the need to adopt scientific approaches. In 1934, Song Seokha emphasized the urgency of recording disappearing folk customs while leaving his ideological or political position unstated. Of course, it is

vital for scholars to adopt a neutral, scientific approach to their research in order to avoid the distortion of facts that inevitably results from taking a specific ideological perspective. Yet this explicit assertion of scientific exactness or scholarly objectivity also signals a detachment from the realities of the present, a detachment colonial-era native scholars might have tried to demonstrate through their professed lack of interest or deliberately apolitical position on colonial policy. It is also possible, however, that silence was one of the few methods of resistance available to Korean intellectuals within the unique context of colonial rule (Scott 1990). Under these restrictive conditions, their research represented a strategic opportunity to conduct nationalistic cultural research.

Reading these anthropologists' publications, it is clear that they believed Korean folk customs were cultural vestiges passed down from antiquity. The association of folk customs with a more ancient period had two possible interpretations: it could indicate the historical superiority of these customs by tracing them to the source of Korean culture, or it could serve as evidence of their backwardness and irrelevance from the perspective of the present. From the perspective of colonial modernization theory, the antiquity of Korean folk customs was seen as a sign of the backwardness of Korean traditional culture. In their arguments about folk studies, Song Seokha and Son Jintae essentially agreed with Japanese scholars in this regard. By explaining folk customs as methods of seeking emotional and psychological comfort through prayers for good fortune and fertility, and the casting out of demons, Song and Son also neglected to examine these practices in terms of their own autonomous logic and their key political and social functions. Such conclusions at first seem to repeat the negative evaluations of Korean folk customs perpetuated by Japanese colonial scholars. But by collecting and recording the folk customs which were coming under increasing attack by colonial authorities, Korean scholars also displayed their own form of ideological resistance to colonial rule. As a result, colonial-era research into Korean culture must be understood in the context of conflict and competition over interpretations of culture theories between native intellectuals and Japanese rulers.

While Japanese authorities pursued folk customs surveys as a way of strengthening their colonial rule, Korean intellectuals carried out the collection and analysis of folk customs as a means of educating Koreans and awakening them to their cultural roots and identity. The attention native intellectuals devoted to Korea's traditional folk customs and

institutions was also a form of cultural resistance to colonial rule. As was the case with Choe Namseon, these intellectuals sought to assert the superiority of Korean culture by proving that it provided the roots for Japanese culture. Such a position metaphorically critiqued Japan's rule of Korea as a function of military might rather than inherent cultural power.

Despite the questions that may be raised about the relationship between their scholarship and colonial discourse, the work of Korean scholars, especially in an anthropological orientation to the field of folk studies, had a pioneering effect on the development of that field. Son Jintae's research was closely related methodologically to the fields of comparative folklore studies and historical folklore studies. Operating from both narrow and broad definitions of anthropological concepts, Son compared different forms of folklore by region and ethnic group. He also analyzed changes in these practices over historical periods and examined the relationship between the origins and spread of specific folk practices. In the process, Son focused on how these factors were shaped by cross-cultural contact and interactions.

Of course, as previously stated, colonial-era Korean scholars focused on identifying and classifying folklore and this influenced the establishment of a methodological tradition of collection through recording more akin to the humanities than to anthropological analysis of how folklore was part of a "culture" that had specific meaning and function in the context of social life. In this tradition, folklore scholars were mainly faithful to the literal definition of the term "folklore" as oral traditions of the folk passed down over time, which they classified into sub-fields of specialization such as mythology, legends, folk sayings, songs, shamanic narratives, ritual addresses, theatrical dialogues, idioms, and riddles while focusing on observing and recording traditional seasonal festivities, rituals and rites, and customs. As a result, their research, unintentionally perhaps, failed to go beyond their customary methods to analyze how these items of folklore were implemented in symbolic systems and political and social relationships.

6. The Legacies of Colonial-era Cultural Research

The culture theory of colonial-era Korean intellectuals can be positioned between the twin discourses of modernization theory and ethnic

nationalism. Colonial modernization theory was interwoven with assimilationist discourse, both of which stressed the inferiority of Korean culture. National reconstruction theory, acceptance of the colonial situation, or advocacy for the need to “prepare” for Korean independence were all predicated on the implicit assumption of Korean inferiority and backwardness (or primitivism, as some scholars described) as the primary factors behind Korea’s colonization. Nationalist historians, on the other hand, assumed a position of explicit anti-colonialism. Rather than focusing on more recent history, these scholars looked to antiquity to recover an unadulterated history of the nation that could be used to overcome the colonial reality. Folklorists also sought to unearth a marginalized and forgotten national essence through their study of folk customs.

Because both nationalists and proponents of colonial modernization took for granted the “ethnic nation” as a unified and homogeneous entity, they failed to notice the dynamic relationships between different elements of this “ethnic nation” and the resulting effects of these productive interactions on Korean ethnicity, society, and culture. Instead, their cultural debates either sought to recover the vitality of an ancient national history to serve the needs of a present era or find remaining traditional customs that could be used to culturally express the heart and soul of the Korean people in response to alarming colonial policies of cultural and national genocide.

However, this scholarly interest in the legacies of a forgotten past instead of the present could also implicitly affirm, or be co-opted by, a colonial cultural policy that strove to prove the backwardness of Korean culture. The lack of a clear ideological position, as well as the focus on recording “facts” and warnings against allowing patriotic emotion to interfere with research methodology, also resonated with the “scholarly objectivity” discourse of Japanese practitioners of Korea-related research. While Korean scholars’ folklore studies may have sprung from a desire to better understand indigenous traditions before creating new forms of Korean culture, such scholars considered their understanding and self-introspection separately from their impartial understanding of Korean culture and the search for positive meaning within it. In addition, these studies of Korean culture could also be used to focus on the latter’s narrow-mindedness and other negative characteristics, which in turn could be mobilized to serve the needs of colonial modernization theory. Thus, while Korean folklorists could see their work as a form of resistance to deepening

colonial rule, their scholarship nonetheless reflected the traits of an academic discourse shaped by the colonizers (Kim 1990: 227).

By focusing on the origins of specific folklore, their patterns of dissemination or comparative traits, scholars neglected to give proper analytical weight to the larger context in which these folk customs were enacted. Colonial-era scholars also ignored the dynamic cultural interactions between elites and non-elites and their differing traditions while failing to note the cultural autonomy produced by such conflicts and divisions. As a result, colonial-era scholars saw culture as static, with the implication that long-standing traditions of Korean culture and folklore were destined to disappear along with the spread of civilization. Because their scholarship operated on the pretense of Korean culture's static-ness, passivity, primitiveness, and antiquity, it had few differences from the colonial modernization theory that advocated replacement of tradition with modernity.

However, it is imperative not to overlook the significance of "rescue anthropology" methods which saw folklore as the repository of Korean spirit and urgently sought to collect and record disappearing cultural practices. It would also be unfair to criticize native intellectuals for being ideologically inflexible and thereby liable to co-optation by the colonial regime, or condemn the entire body of scholarship on Korean ethnic culture for its limits and potentially negative influences. Under colonial rule Korean identity was unclear, and native Korean intellectuals could not avoid taking ambivalent or vague positions. This was a direct result of the colonial situation.

In one respect, the nationalist cultural theories of colonial-era intellectuals sought to strengthen the nation and solidify state authority. They sought not only to refute the logic of scholars loyal to the Japanese regime, but also channel their anger against colonization into a form of nationalist resistance which in turn became the foundation for an emotional current of Korean supremacist thinking. Following the liberation of Korea in 1945, many political regimes sought to harness this powerful emotion for their own purposes.

The project of colonial modernization also survived after 1945 in modified form as modernization led by the central state. The powerful elites who led this program were either those who had been educated under Japanese colonial rule or a new generation that had received their education in the United States. These elite functioned domestically as

agents of state power and internationally as agents and brokers of Western, especially American, power. The modernization movement they led during 1970s was a copy of the colonial modernization program. By enshrining Japan as a model of modernization and disparaging their own cultural tradition for its alleged errors, these new elites were seemingly indistinguishable from the colonial intellectuals who preceded them in advocating for cultural reform.

7. Conclusion

Though it may also be a result of the relatively brief history of social sciences in Korea, the alternative theory of national culture created by Korean intellectuals to resist colonial rule has contributed to establishing a humanistic tradition in contemporary cultural research that focuses on spirituality and performance arts as the central elements of culture. This tendency led to the differentiation of “culture” as an independent category from ordinary society and politics, with cultural history and cultural development policy also operating on this premise.

The idea that culture represents the spiritual essence of a particular ethnic group was a position shared by Korean intellectuals since Shin Chaeho and Jeong Inbo. A perspective which viewed history as a product of this essence naturally understood history as a form of cultural history. Within such a context the emphasis on the uniqueness of this history was also a way to narrate the uniqueness of a nation’s culture. In this context, even today many people of older generations often regard cultural anthropology as a subcategory of history or moral philosophy.³

Nationalist intellectuals have a strong ideological tendency to see folklore as the heart of culture. But there is not yet a clear answer as to what the “folk” in folklore means. If folk is used to refer to the non-ruling class, then the members of the ruling class are excluded from the definition of ethnic cultural tradition, which leads to questions about the relationship between their culture and national culture. A straightforward answer to this paradox cannot be clearly given. Further inquiry and discussion are needed to answer the question of whether essential differences between

³ Establishing anthropology as a synthesis of humanities and social scientific approaches requires inevitably to correct such false categorizations.

ruling culture and non-ruling culture exist within an ethnic community. In today's open mass society, the extent to which meaningful differences exist between the cultures of the powerful and the powerless can be debated. Culture diffuses beyond economic boundaries. Diverse cultural tendencies within a single society will sometimes manifest as sub-cultures that mutually compete for power, but this only refers in a limited sense to class-specific ways of accessing the predominant culture.

Scholars saw folklore as the shared possession of ethnic group members. Folklorists also widely disseminated the argument that folk rituals, recreation, festivals, and performances were used to promote ethnic solidarity or pray for bountiful harvests in addition to maintaining group distinctness and identity. Folk customs were thus seen as symbols of a united ethnic identity that transcended the limits of social class.

Colonial-era cultural ethnic studies focused primarily on philology, linguistic classification, and the observation and collection of folk customs deprived of context. Accordingly, the field was too general and lacking in the use of social scientific methods. The traditions underpinning contemporary folklore studies, the origins of which can be traced to this period, have not been able to transition to an anthropology-based cultural research. Instead, the field retains a humanistic approach to folklore based on descriptive, category-based observation. Since the 1980s the application of anthropological theories of structural functionalism to folklore analysis and classification has become increasingly mainstream, although continued fascination with and interest in original forms and purity survive as original form theory (*wonhyeongnon*), cultural foundation theory (*giwonlon*), or basic culture theory (*gicheung munhwaron*).

In conclusion, it should be re-emphasized that colonial-era intellectuals' understanding of Korean culture was the result of many twists and turns. Colonialism in its most basic form is a practice built on a logic that repudiates the political and cultural existence of indigenous colonized peoples, though the characteristics and intensity of specific colonial policies are also in constant flux. From the beginning of the colonial-era, Korean intellectuals were marginalized and ostracized, and the choice given to them was either to accept colonialism or risk being excluded from intellectual life. Because of this, native scholars' positions were fundamentally different from those of Japanese scholars. As colonial policies changed immediately following the March First Movement and again in the late 1930s, native intellectuals' consciousness of their era and situation changed

as well. This process of change was reflected in the diversity of Korean intellectuals and their stances.

After the March First Movement, Japanese authorities implemented a new policy of “cultural rule.” On the surface this was portrayed as a softening of the previously strained relationship between Koreans and the ruling Japanese, but in reality it entailed a policy of cultural genocide carried out under the guise of cultural assimilation. The colonial government mobilized Japanese intellectuals to launch comprehensive, large-scale surveys of Korean ideology, spiritual consciousness, geomancy, society, marketplaces, villages, family relations, common law, and other social systems. This was not only used as basic source material for more effectively governing Korea, but also as evidence of Korean culture’s uncivilized backwardness and justification for its replacement by Japanese culture.

Native Korean intellectuals’ living under a violent colonial system either advocated for the acceptance of colonial modernization theory or sought the development of an oppositional nationalism and spiritual conception of national culture based on Korean ethnic nation-centered historical research. Another group of scholars also displayed a strategically superficial disinterest in politics or accommodation with colonial power.

Korean intellectuals’ research had several different defining features. First, they strengthened and politicized traditional interest in the “ethnic nation”; saw history as a narrative of the ethnic nation; and viewed folklore as a single, unified unit not separated by class. Second, they searched for the impetus behind Korea’s autonomous history and contributed significantly to the growing interest in Korean ethnic culture. Third, by focusing on a unified ethnic nation, proponents of national reconstruction and nationalists alike all contributed to a simplistic understanding of culture as a singular and monolithic entity. By doing so they ignored the dynamic diversity of culture and the processes of continuous cultural reproduction and reinvention. This led to a careless disregard for the inherent vitality of Korean ethnic culture. Fourth, by emphasizing the primitive and ancient qualities of Korean culture, both historians and folklorists simultaneously reinforced a narrative of cultural backwardness and static-ness. This overlooked the contemporary aspects of culture and its links to political, economic, and social conditions. Scholars also failed to link culture to its functions within this social context, resulting in superficial descriptions of cultural phenomenon. Instead of focusing on the logic and rationale behind folklore and folk customs, scholars centered their analysis instead

on their psychological and emotive characteristics, thereby limiting the applicability of folklore to contemporary circumstances.

Were proponents of national culture theory Japanese sympathizers because their methods and assumptions shared so much with Japanese colonial researchers of Korean culture? Here we should note that it would have been difficult for a truly anti-colonial nationalism to emerge within a context of strict censorship of the press and publishing industry. Silence and compromise or deliberate disinterest are common political phenomena created by the unique situation of colonial rule. The ambiguity of native intellectuals represented the essence of the “colonial situation,” and their perspective and methods of approaching cultural research should be (re) interpreted in the context of their struggle with colonial authority.

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