

The Cultural Anatomy of Korean Nationalism From imperative to anachronism

Steven D. Capener
Seoul Women's University
sotaebu@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Most foreign observers are struck by the highly palpable nature of Korean nationalist sentiment, especially during times of friction with Japan or during major international sporting events such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup. However, if these observers spend any significant time in Korea, they often become aware that South Korean society is a highly fractious landscape characterized by conflicting ideologies, regional antagonisms, segregation by class, and a number of other societal fault lines. The natural question is what role, if any, this very visible nationalism plays in uniting South Korean society in the absence of any external stimulus and, if it does not, what the reason is. This essay argues that constructing Korean nationalism based largely on a common blood lineage has rendered it ineffectual in ameliorating intra-Korean conflict. In fact, Kang Jung In and Jung Seung Hyun have proposed the concept of the “overdetermination of other theories by nationalism.” This is the idea that ethnic nationalism, by virtue of its near religious status, is used to bestow authenticity, genuineness, or authority on disparate ideologies. The radical left and right attack each other from the position of being the bastion of “real” or “true” Korean-ness representing the *minjok* (ethnic nation). This is also the method used by the governments of both Koreas to demonstrate their legitimacy as the rightful representative of the Korean people. This essay, after discussing the process of the formation of Korean nationalism, first problematizes the sacred and tribal characteristics of modern Korean ethnic nationalisms and posits that the unique process of its formation has resulted in a doctrinaire-like ideology that actually contributes to division, then it poses questions as to nationalism's current function in society.

KEYWORDS: ethnic nationalism, tribalism, collective identity, ethnic unity

논문초록: 대부분의 외국 관찰자들은 특히 일본과 마찰이 있을 때나 올림픽, 월드컵 같은 주요 국제 스포츠 행사가 있을 때 한국의 민족주의적 정서가 매우 뚜렷하게 드러나는 특성때문에 강한 인상을 받는다. 그러나 이러한 관찰자들이 한국에서 상당한 시간을 보낸다면 한국 사회가 상충되는 이념, 지역적 적대감, 계층별 분리 및 기타 여러 사회적 단층으로 특징지어지는 매우 분열적인 모습이라는 것을 종종 깨닫게 된다. 자연스러운 질문은 외부 자극이 없는 상태에서 한국 사회를 통합하는 데 있어 이러한 민족주의가 어떤 역할을 하는지, 그리고 만약 아무 역할을 못 한다면 그 이유는 무엇인지에 대한 것이다. 이 글은 대체로 공통 혈통을 기반으로 한 민족주의의 구축이 남북한 갈등 개선에 효과가 없다고 주장한다. 강정인과 정승현은 '민족주의에 의한 여타 이념의 중층결정'이라는 개념을 제시했다. 이것은 국가주의 또는 민족주의가 종교적 지위에 가깝기 때문에 이질적인 이념에 진정성, 정통성 또는 권위를 부여하는 데 사용된다는 개념이다. 과격한 좌파와 우파는 민족을 대표하는 '진짜' 혹은 '진정한' 민족성의 주인공이라는 입장에서 서로를 공격한다. 이것은 또한 남북한 정부들이 국민의 정당한 대표자로서의 정당성을 입증하기 위해 사용하는 방법이기도 하다. 본 글은 한국 민족주의의 형성 과정을 살펴본 후, 현대 한국 민족주의의 신성하고 종족적인 특성에 대한 문제를 제시하고 독특한 형성 과정이 실제로 분단에 기여하는 교리적 이념으로 귀결되었음을 상정한 다음, 한국 민족주의의 현주소를 알아보자고 한다.

핵심어: 종족주의, 민족주의, 집단 정체성, 민족적 통합성

1. Introduction: Present Day Korea Nationalism

While watching the recently ended 2020 Tokyo Olympics from Seoul, I was once again beset by the same sense of frustration I have felt while viewing the past eight Olympics via Korean broadcasting (sixteen if we include the Winter Games): Korean broadcasters will show only events that are featuring Korean athletes. The games, then, are broadcast piecemeal, jumping back and forth between unrelated events to show the performance of (almost) exclusively Korean players. The finals of a popular track and field event may be about to start, and all three Korean broadcasters would be showing the 50 meter air pistol competition as there was a Korean participating. To add to the frustration, as the games progressed and most Korean participation had ended, two of the three official Olympic broadcasters would not be showing live, prime-time (there is no time difference between Tokyo and Seoul) Olympic coverage. Instead, they would be broadcasting the same entertainment

programs shown every night year-round.

During this Olympic Games, however, through the use of a VPN, I was able to access the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's coverage of the Games. Every day, they provided live streaming coverage of each of the day's events from start to finish, irrespective of whether Canadian athletes were competing or not. It is not only the exclusive nature of the coverage but also the highly jingoistic tint of the content that distinguishes domestic coverage of the Olympics (or any high profile international sporting event for that matter) from that of advanced western countries. During the coverage of the freestyle downhill skiing during the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, I was surprised to hear the Korean announcer say he hoped a certain skier would make a mistake so the Korean athlete could finish in the medals. Coverage is often no more than loud partisan cheerleading, something ethics in most western broadcasting companies proscribe. As far as I can discern, there is no palpable dissatisfaction among the Korean public regarding this exclusive, partisan presentation of major sporting events. The inevitable conclusion I have come to after more than 30 years of watching this type of highly selective coverage of the Olympics in Korea is that such events highlight the extremely solipsistic nature of the Korean perception of itself in the world at large.

The galvanizing nature of these major events derives from the perception that Korea is being confronted by outside forces. The name of the Korean national soccer team is the Taegukki Warriors. They are not just representing Korea in international sporting competitions but are doing battle with the foreign other on behalf of the fatherland. Since the end of the democratization movement around 1996, almost all large scale, mass demonstrations of popular sentiment have been in response to a perceived affront to "the Korean people" by a foreign power, either Japan or the United States. Ironically, no such mass protests have materialized vis-à-vis China in spite of ample provocation.¹ The only exception to this rule might be the mass protests against president Park Geun-hye in 2016, although it is debatable whether this was nationalist or political in nature.

To many outside observers (and not a few Koreans as well), this seems

1 Perhaps the best example would be the group violence perpetrated by a horde of Chinese against Koreans in downtown Seoul during the torch relay in the runup to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and which was met by mostly silence from the Korean press and populace.

ample evidence that nationalism is a powerful force in Korean society. But what does that mean? What kind of nationalism is it? How is it the same or different from the nationalisms of other countries? How does it affect real attitudes and behaviors? What (or whom) does this nationalism include and whom does it exclude? And, perhaps the most intriguing questions of all, why is a country that is so obviously nationalistic still divided after more than 75 years? These are the questions this essay will address.

2. Korean Nationalism: What Is It?

The notion of nationalism as it is understood in the West has some limitations when applied to the Korean situation. The difficulty arises from the fact that in most cases where territories occupied by diverse ethnic populations coalesced into modern nation states, the object of the inevitably attendant nationalism was the state itself as understood in political terms. In many cases in the West such as America or France, the state was comprised of peoples of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. France, the progenitor of modern nationalism, was not working with either an ethnically or a linguistically homogenous population as it struggled to create the idea of a French identity. Eric Hobsbawm (1990, pp. 80-81) has made the claim that “the French language has been essential to the concept of ‘France,’” although in 1789, 50 percent of the French people did not speak it at all, and only 12 to 13 percent spoke it fairly well; even in oil languages zones, it was not usually used except in cities, and even there not always in the outlying districts.

In his book *Peasant into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, Eugen Weber (1976, p. 327) claims that in 1863 just 20% of the French population regarded themselves as French or spoke the French language.

As late as 1863, government figures show that nearly one-fourth of the communes of France (8,381 out of 37,510) contained no one who even spoke French; more than 10 percent of all French schoolchildren spoke no French, and a remarkable 48.2 percent of schoolchildren age seven to thirteen could not write in French. The persistence of regional languages and local patois underscores the variation of subcultures.

In discussing the question of whether ethnic groups and nations are formed by “natural,” “primordial,” “given” communities or are created by interested leaders, elite groups, or political systems, Paul R. Brass (1994, p. 83) makes this observation:

The primordialist argues that he carries with him through life “attachments” derived from place of birth, kinship relations, religion, language, and social practices that are natural for him, “spiritual” in character, and that provide a basis for an easy “affinity” with other peoples from the same background. These “attachments” constitute the “givens” of the human condition and are “rooted in the non-rational foundations of personality.” Some go as far as to argue that such attachments that form the core of ethnicity are biological and genetic in nature. Whatever differences in detail exist among the spokesmen for the primordialist point of view, they tend to unite upon the explicit or implicit argument that ethnicity, properly defined, is based upon descent. Since, however, it is quite obvious that there are very few groups in the world today whose members can lay any serious claim to a known common origin, it is not actual descent that is considered essential to the definition of an ethnic group but rather a belief in a common descent.

While there were nascent nationalist movements in Korea in the late 19th century, the Independence Club for example, the rigid class structure which had existed for hundreds of years meant that any such movements were extremely limited to a very small group of elites. There have been arguments made that the *Donghak* (Eastern Learning) uprisings had nationalist elements to them; however, such micro analysis is beyond the scope of this essay. It was the writings of Shin Chae-ho in the 1910s that gave Korean nationalism its first clearly articulated character, one which was decidedly primordialist or, what Anthony Smith describes as “perennialist.” Shin’s version of Korean nationalism was based almost entirely on blood and territory. In his *Doksasillon* (A New History of Korea), which was serialized in the *Daehan maeil shinbo* (The Daehan Daily Press), Shin posits Dangun as the actual progenitor of *hanminjok* (the Korean people) thereby linking identity to membership in a shared ethnic community based on a common (pure) bloodline and hereditary territory.

In a sense, Shin had no choice but to use the primordialist or perennialist

approach to constructing Korean national identity due to the fact that it was clearly going to be Japanese agency that gave birth to Korea as a nation in the modern sense of the word.

Before beginning the discussion of the nature of contemporary nationalism in Korea (North and South), it might prove helpful to examine some of the characteristics of the process of the formation of Korean nationalism in the early 20th century.

What is interesting and perhaps unique about the genesis and development of Korean nationalism is that it was simultaneously formed in opposition to Japanese imperial encroachment and enabled by the modernizing effects of Japanese colonial policy. This complicated situation gave birth to two somewhat different types of nationalism in the 1910s and 20s. As mentioned before, one was that of Shin Chae-ho whose assertions about a unified Korean identity were based solely on blood and shared territory without any real consideration of culture. In his essay on ancient Korean history titled *Doksasillon*, Shin argues that Korean history began with Dangun, the mythical progenitor of the Buyeo tribe some four thousand plus years ago. Shin makes some circumstantial arguments as to why the three kingdoms were, in fact, all connected by a common lineage and then goes on to assert that while there were some six tribes who inhabited different regions of the peninsula at various stages, only the Buyeo tribe are the rightful heirs of Dangun's line and are the forebearers of the Korean nation. "The Buyeo tribe are the true descendants of our divine progenitor Dangun and have been the rightful masters of this land for four thousand years" (Shin, 2018, p. 12). Interestingly, Shin frequently uses the third person pronoun "our" in discussing Dangun and the Buyeo tribe thereby strengthening the sense of identification between the reader and the notion of a common ethnic heritage. Shin makes very little mention of shared culture or language as the basis of common identity; the link is found almost entirely in shared lineage and territory. He does make the rather weak argument that Silla and Goguryeo were likely both descendants of the Buyeo by pointing out that both territories had similar place names. This is one of the only references to a shared language, although he does not mention which language this was. For instance, Shin (2018) states that since both Silla and Goguryeo had a Taebaek mountain range and a Gyeryong mountain, they must have gotten these names from each other (p. 48). It is not clear whether Shin was aware of the debt he owed to Japanese nationalists who had already performed a similar task in

Japan by centering Japanese collective identity in an equally mist-shrouded “pure” ethnic line. What is more, he made liberal use of the term “*minjok*” (ethnic nation) which had been given its meaning largely through its prior use by the architects of Japanese Meiji nationalism. Gi-Wook Shin (2006) explains the conceptual debt that Shin and other nationalists owed to Japan as follows:

As Schmid (2002) shows, the Japanese influenced Korean nationalist thinking by producing knowledge of and about Korea as well as providing the conceptual vocabulary of modernity such as *munmyoeng kaewha* (civilization and enlightenment) social Darwinism, *minjok*, and *tongyang* (the Orient). Also, in denouncing colonial racism and the assimilation policy, Korean nationalists employed the logic and language that Japanese colonialists used. Robinson points out, “The search for and documentation of the unique and immutable core—the racial origins—of the Korean people appears similar to the Japanese obsession with the nation essence (*kokutai*) in the 1930s and earlier inquiries of the National Studies School (*kokugaku*) during the Tokugawa period” (p. 55).

In contrast to Shin and similar nationalists like Choe Nam-seon who focused on blood lineage as the source of Korean identity, other architects of identity such as Yi Gwang-su were focusing on cultural and civilizational markers in positing “Korean-ness.” Yi, the “father” of the modern Korean novel, used literary journals as well as his own literature in an attempt to spread a message of civilization. Five years after the publication of his seminal novel *Mujeong* (The Heartless), he published his treatise “Theory of the Reconstruction of the Korean People” (*minjok-gaejo-ron*) in the literary journal *Gaebyeok* (Daybreak). His thesis was radical: the Korean people required a spiritual and psychological rebirth. Put another way, his essay was a diagnosis of the civilizational backwardness of the Korean people and a prescription for their reconstitution. “Only after Koreans have gained the capacity as a people to conduct a civilized way of life will they have the ability to control their own fate and have the qualifications and capacity to live according to their own intentions.”²

2 This was published in the May issue of *Gaebyeok* (p. 19) in 1922.

Yi then goes on to give a long list of prescriptions and proscriptions that the Korean people must follow in order to achieve this desired level of “civilization.” The list of proscriptions included things like lying, indolence, uncleanliness, and cowardice. The prescriptions included having a skill with which to support themselves, becoming educated (to a degree), and being honest and upright in dealings with others.

In fact, Yi had already foreshadowed this didactic tendency in his novel *Mujeong*. The protagonist Yi Hyeong-sik and his traveling partners Byeong-uk, Yeong-chaе, and Hyeong-seon have given a musical performance to raise money for poor villagers struck by a flood. In discussing the plight of these people, Yi Gwang-su makes his idea of nationalism known through the dialogue between Hyeong-sik and Byeong-uk.

Those people must be given strength. They must be given knowledge. And they must be given the basis for a stable life.

“Science! Science” Hyeong-sik repeated to himself as he sat in his room after returning to the inn. The three others stared at him.

“More than anything else, the people of Joseon must be given science. They must be given knowledge... After what you all saw today, what do you think?”

“Of course there are places without civilization”...

“What, then, should we do for these people?... Shall we save them?” said Hyeong-sik as he looked at Byeong-uk.

“We must give them strength. We must give them civilization!”

“How do we do that?”

“We teach them. We lead them.”

“How?”

“With education...” (Yi, 2005, pp. 461-462)

Here, Yi makes it clear that his notion of national (re) construction is based on the “civilization and enlightenment” approach that was dominant in Meiji Japan. What is more, he is echoing Ernst Gellner’s assertion that nationalist movements are the exclusive purview of the elite and are carried out through education. His diction is noteworthy: it is the elite (Hyeong-sik and his friends) who are going “to give” these things—science, education, civilization—to the commoners. Yi is not satisfied with sharing the same blood lineage; the

basis of a better Korea will be “enlightenment and civilization,” and he will be the missionary of this new vision preaching his message through his writing. This is the main difference between Yi’s and Shin’s approaches to helping in the construction of a collectivist national identity. Yi was a disciple of the emancipating power of modernity (*geundaeseong*) and its symbols permeate *Mujeong*. Hyeong-sik is a private tutor teaching English to Hyeon-seon, the daughter of a rich protestant elder. Hyeon-seon is preparing to go abroad to continue her studies at the University of Chicago. Hyeong-sik and company are on the train bound for Busan when the flood hits, cutting them off from their destination. In this way, education and technology are prominently featured throughout *Mujeong*, dangled there tantalizingly by Yi as the promise for a better tomorrow for those who can understand them: “Science and knowledge!” as Hyeong-sik repeatedly cries.

Yi Gwang-su, like other cultural nationalists writing in the 1920s, championed a cosmopolitan restructuring of the Korean national character which he considered to be flawed, blaming its shortcomings on the neo-Confucian ideology that had controlled Korean social life for centuries. Initially, Yi, in direct contrast to Shin Chae-ho, held up western countries such as England as models to be emulated (Shin, 2006, pp. 46-47). The difference between Yi’s and Shin’s nationalist stances is easily discernible in their disparate views of admiral Yi Sun-sin as depicted in their eponymous novels about the admiral. Shin’s treatment of Yi Sun-sin in his work paints the admiral as a patriotic hero sent to deliver a downtrodden but worthy people from the predations of the evil Japanese. He portrays the Korean people writ large as an extension of Yi’s heroism and patriotism. On the other hand, Yi Gwang-su’s novel, written some 24 years after Shin’s, while extolling the virtues of admiral Yi, uses the Imjin War of 1592 to illustrate the shortcomings of the Korean people (Lee, 2020, p. 170). For Shin, the Korean people, being of the same blood and land, were sufficiently imbued with the qualities of a proud nation, all they needed was a hero like Yi Sun-sin to appear and lead them to liberation. For Yi, the Korean people were the cause of their own downfall and had no hope of liberation without undergoing a transformation of morals, ethics, and civilization in general, and this based on a western model (Lee, 2007, pp. 69-70).

To sum up, Shin Chae-ho was satisfied that consanguine “Korean-ness” was sufficient to establish a collective identity while Yi Gwang-su saw

the country to be in need of a civilizational rebirth to bring it in line with the cultural standards of advanced western countries. Ironically, both men owed a debt to Japan: Shin's nationalism based on ethnic purity was a carbon copy of the Japanese construction of a "pure" national lineage deriving from the Yamato clan of antiquity, and Yi's cosmopolitan notion of nation had its ideational underpinning in the "enlightenment and civilization" discourse of late Meiji thinkers like Fukuzawa Yukichi.

Fukuzawa Yukichi, Meiji Japan's most prolific interpreter of Western values and practices, offered a concise interpretation of what "civilization and enlightenment" entailed. The strength and progress of the great Western nations, he argued, rested on science; and scientific accomplishment, in turn, required a spirit of free inquiry among the general populace. Thus, it followed that liberal and progressive values were not simply moral and political ideas; they were also part and parcel of creating a 'rich country, strong military' capable of assuring national independence.³

Such discourse formed the corpus of Yi's thinking until the mid-thirties at which point his writings on the nation began to veer toward the solipsistic and jingoistic rhetoric of the militarized fascism that had replaced the relative liberalism of Showa democracy in Japan. Of course, this coincided with Yi's wholesale embrace of the Japanese imperial project in Northeast Asia.

Yi Gwang-su's changed view of nation best exemplifies the general shift in the Korean nationalist movement from the early 1920s to the 1930s. In his early works... Yi held Korea's past responsible for the current national misfortune of colonization and sought to create a new Korea through the construction of a new nationality (*minjokseong*). However, a decade later in "*Joseon-minjongnon*" (A Theory of the Korean Nation), as well as other essays on nation, he presented a radically different view of the Korean nation. Here, he stressed not only pride in Korean heritage, but also presented a highly racialized view of nation... In "Basic Morality of Old Koreans," ... he lashed out at individualism and liberalism calling for

3 <https://www.japanpitt.pitt.edu/glossary/civilization-and-enlightenment>

urijuui (we-ism), *danchejuui* (groupism), and *jeonchejuui* (totalitarianism) (Shin, 2006, p. 48).

In time, this racialized, romanticized view of Korean-ness became the dominant, and in fact, the only iteration of collective Korean identity.

3. Post-colonial Korean Nationalism

3.1 Syngman Rhee's *Ilminjuui*

According to Kang Jung In and Jung Seung Hyun (2013, p. 3), Korean nationalism developed in three phases: first, through the sense of crisis brought on by the encroachment of foreign powers in the late 19th century; second, in response to Japanese imperialism, and; third, as a reaction to the failure to create a unified country after liberation and to the Korean War and the solidification of division. Kang and Jung go on to say that the sense of crisis and frustration experienced through this process resulted in a “tribal” nationalism that became a kind of national religion in both the South and the North.

Syngman Rhee, with the support of the U.S., stepped into the leadership role on the south side of the divided peninsula after liberation in 1945, while Kim Il Sung did the same in the North with Soviet backing. At this point, the two Korea's were entering into a struggle for the proprietorship of the national identity, one which would last until the present day. Both sides not only claimed to be the repository of the true Korea, both politically and spiritually, but they also accused the other side of having betrayed the people and the nation: the North by siding with the evil of Soviet communism and the South by becoming a patron of the American imperialists. Both sides went to great lengths to “out Korean” the other side, predictably upping the reliance on the rhetoric of a pure Korean blood and an unbroken lineage back to Dangun. In the South, this took the form of Syngman Rhee's *ilminjuui* (One People Principle). Rhee's *ilminjuui* was, much like Kim Il Sung's *juche*, devoid of any substantial content; it was essentially a string of adjective phrases that acted more like slogans than a cohesive political philosophy: “anti-communism,” “unification of the father land,” “solidarity of the country,” and the like. Just

as Kim Il Sung was doing in the North, Rhee reified the Dangun legend in appealing to the notion that Koreans were one inseparable body and that he was their leader.

After being appointed the Minister of Education by Syngman Rhee, Ahn Ho-sang, under the umbrella of *ilminjuui* and while emphasizing the ideas of “one people and one nation,” introduced the concept of *hongik ingan*⁴, the fundamental precept of Dangun, into the elementary education system, and in order to educate students from this fundamental platform, he established the Student National Defense Corp (Park, 2015, p. 6).

According to Park Eui-kyung (2015, pp. 7-8), Rhee’s *ilminjuui* posited that the “singleness and unity of the People” was what gave it life, and the aim of *ilminjuui* was, in fact, the formation of a single, unitary ethnic body. This was the beginning of the full-fledged transformation of Korean nationalism into a kind of religious doctrine, one to which a lack of proper devotion would be seen as no less than heresy.

3.2 Park Chung-Hee’s Developmental Nationalism

After taking power in a military coup in May of 1961, Park Chung-hee immediately began what I have called the “remaking of Korean society.” As I have stated elsewhere, Park’s military junta government instituted a number of means of control and surveillance of the populace including fingerprinting and the mandatory issuance of Resident Registration cards while the militarization of society was furthered through the institution of the ROK Homeland Reserve Corp and the ROK Civil Defense Corps.

These were all means of creating a mass identity that was embodied by ethnic membership in the Korean nation-state (very clearly delimited to the South Korean nation). Added to this ideological basis, Confucian orthodoxy operated as a type of societal super-ego that demanded behavior consistent with patriarchal and hierarchal norms. The result

4 *Hongik ingan*, which means maximizing human benefit, was said to be the founding ideology of Dangun in establishing the nation.

was a populace that was inured to following the strictures of vertically structured hierarchies and to sublimating individuality to membership in a mass identity. Pak justified such sacrifice of individual rights and identity by emphasizing that people preferred oppression and totalitarianism to hunger and poverty (Yi, 2014, p. 50). According to Shin Gi-Wook (2006, p. 107), “In the name of the nation, national unity, and modernization of the fatherland, the Park regime suppressed all other collective identities and competing voices” (Capener, 2018, p. 5).

According to Park Eui-kyung (2015, p. 9), in the early stages of Park’s rule, his regime began using terminology like “Spirit of the people,” “Soul of the People,” and “vital force of the people,” thereby characterizing the *minjok* as a corpus endowed with a spirit and a soul and given a status far superior to that of the individual in society. In addition, Park doubled down on the Dangun rhetoric that underpinned Syngman Rhee’s *ilminjuui*. Park began his inaugural speech after being elected president in 1963 with the following lines: “Five thousand years ago our sacred progenitor Dangun established the national foundation of our blessed land” (Sin, 1970, p. 285).

As I have stated elsewhere, what Park was attempting to do was create a mass identity that was embodied by ethnic membership in the Korean nation-state. In this way, identity was given by society in the form of group affiliation and the individual became the least significant element in that society (Capener, 2018, p. 5). The implications of this for social control are obvious, and the result of extensive state intervention in engineering this mass identity was a pervasive and powerful group think of the kind described by George Orwell in his work *1984* which he referred to as doublethink.

This photograph depicts the moment every day in Seoul during the Park regime when the entire city would come to a stop as the national anthem played. For the duration of the song, all Koreans become immersed in the group identity where the subject – object dichotomy disappears: all individuals meld into one mass ethnic subjectivity and this itself is the nation. This was the essence of the “pure Korean” or “pure ethnicity” nationalism that came to be known as *danil-minjokjuui* (One-pure-people-principle). It was at this point that Korean nationalism took on the characteristics of tribalism and “became an ideology that carried a much larger and weightier political symbolism than any other” (Kang & Jung, 2013, p. 4).

Photo 1: People during the lowering of Korea's national flag



4. How Is Korean Nationalism Unique?

It may not be completely accurate to say that Korean nationalism has characteristics that make it unique. In fact, other East Asian race based nationalisms may share some of these characteristics. Yet, this “uniqueness” is certainly palpable when comparing Korean and western nationalisms, and it is also useful when discussing how the division of the peninsula has affected the development of nationalism in the North and South.

In discussing the *sinseonghwa* (sanctification) of nationalism in Korea, Kang Jung In and Jung Seung Hyun (2013, p. 4) have proposed the concept of the “overdetermination of other ideologies by nationalism.” According to these authors, the four cornerstones of Korean political thought have been conservatism, neo-liberalism, nationalism, and radicalism (or extreme progressivism). Among the three, it has been incontrovertible that nationalism is the source of all legitimacy and therefore it “overdetermines” the other three ideologies.

Put another way, from their inception, the differences between the various ideologies—the Right (conservative), the nationalists, the neo-liberal nationalists, the progressives (proletariat or socialist oriented)—created conflicts and led to strife. The result was that in attempting to demonstrate

the legitimacy of their particular stances, each ideology ultimately asked the same question, “Who is the real nationalist?” and fought over who was the rightful holder of the crowns of “authenticity” and “legitimacy” (Kang & Jung, 2013, p. 7).

This means that all major political ideologies, no matter how opposed they may be to each other, all became hyphenated “-isms.” It was not difficult to see the prefix “The people’s ...” attached to the rhetoric of these disparate ideologies, especially those of the far right and far left. Whatever came after the nationalist prefix was subordinate to, and drew its authority from its identification with the *minjok*. The result of this was inevitably an all-out struggle for proprietorship of the Korean identity, the right to define who was a “true Korean.”

This struggle is still most obvious in the competing claims of authority over the national identity by the regimes in the North and South. It is probably best showcased in the intractable ideological conflict between the left and the right in South Korean politics. Each of these camp’s nationalisms have been characterized by what Park Eui-kyung (2015, pp. 14, 18) calls “unification nationalism” and “economic development nationalism” respectively. At the risk of overgeneralizing, both camps insist that their approach is best for the nation and that the efforts of the other camp are detrimental to the interest of the people and are therefore “anti-Korean.” The result is that the contest for the proprietorship of “authentic” Korean identity is not limited to the South-North conflict but operates in much the same way between competing ideologies in the South.

And this brings us to the great irony of Korean nationalism, one which makes it unique among the nationalisms of the world. It is precisely this over-determinism of Korean nationalism, the splicing of it onto competing ideologies in order to bestow legitimacy, that makes *minjokjuui* ultimately a *dividing* force in Korean society.⁵ The idea that there is one, very narrowly defined notion of Korean-ness that is delineated by pure blood first and then dedication to a particular ideology, geography, class or any other number of group classifications means that the conditions of membership in the

5 My italics for emphasis.

collective identity are constantly being policed for inauthenticity, illegitimacy, and impurity and provides the rhetorical basis for portraying the other as the enemy (of the true people). This impurity, illegitimacy, and lack of authenticity, as judged by a particular group, are what have justified the violence perpetrated by certain groups against others, particularly that of the state (both North and South) toward its citizens and that of both sides in the Korean War toward their own citizens and those of their adversary.⁶ This begs the question of why a national identity based on a common blood lineage which should be inclusive of all Koreans who meet this (very simple) criteria has, far from being a mediating factor, actually exacerbated national division. Kim Yung-Myung (2016, p. 228) states that when it comes to a country composed of a single ethnicity, Korea is the only one that fought a war with itself and is still acrimoniously divided.

5. Conclusion

This essay has not significantly addressed the question of what *minjokjuui* actually is. Kim Yung-Myung (2016, p. 220) has postulated that, in fact, in Korea there is a strong emotion connected to Korean ethnicity but that the sense of nationalism itself is weak. I have not really distinguished between these two categories in this essay as I believe they are both related to the most important concept under discussion: Korean collective identity and how this sense of identity operates in Korea in terms of behavioral norms and value formation.⁷

In the best-selling book *Anti-Japanese Tribalism*, Lee Young-hoon et al. (2019, p. 11) makes the assertion that South Korean society is characterized as “low trust” and this in comparison to multicultural (multiethnic) societies such as the United States. “Compared to international standards, Korea is a low trust society. One social worker lamented that Korea is first in the world

6 I believe I have already demonstrated that *minjokjuui* is the mechanism by which one authenticates one’s Korean-ness and which defines what that Korean-ness is. Therefore, I am using the term *minjokjuui* in a macro sense that inevitably contains some problems related to the scope and definition of the concept. For instance, see Kim Yung-Myung (2016, p. 220).

7 Kim’s essay provides a comprehensive treatment of the categorization and delineation of Korean nationalism.

in civil suits.” This begs the question as to why the clearly powerful and widespread emotional identification with a common ethnic identity does not translate into greater social cohesion.

A strong sense of common identity was clearly necessary to prevent Korean culture from being assimilated into that of Japan during the colonial period. However, what is its role in present society? If this powerful identification with the *minjok* does not now contribute to social harmony, what then is its *raison d'être*? Is it, in its current iteration, a positive force in a country that is becoming more and more ethnically diverse? Kang and Jung (2013, p. 27) have asserted that, due to economic intermarriage; increasing contact with non-Koreans through travel, work for foreign firms, and study abroad; non-Korean labor immigration; and an increasing individualism, *minjokjuui* has weakened in recent years. However, conversely Park Eui-kyung summarizes the current state of Korean *minjokjuui* thusly: “For much of our modern history the *minjok* (ethnic nation), the nation, and the people have been one large indistinguishable concept, and Korean *minjokjuui* has overpowered all other ideologies, operating fluidly with the system as the highest possible national ideology.”

Gi-Wook Shin (2006, p. 136) succinctly frames the paradox of Korean ethnic nationalism as follows: “How can we explain the contentious politics of national representation in Korea? Why couldn’t a strong sense of ethnic identity prevent the peninsula from tensions and conflict? Contrary to conventional wisdom, ethnic unity—or more precisely the perception of ethnic homogeneity—has not produced the peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas, but has provoked half a century of intense conflict and tension.”

Questions rather than solutions or explanations are, admittedly, a less than ideal way to end an essay. However, this paradoxical nature of Korean ethnic nationalism has received very little scholarly attention. The answers to these questions will be the objective of subsequent research.

References

- Brass, Paul R. (1994). Elite competition and nation formation. In John Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith (Eds.), *Nationalism* (pp. 83-89). Oxford University Press.
- Capener, Steven D. (2018). Kim Sung Ok’s literary response to Pak Chung Hee’s Re-making of

- Korean society. *Acta Koreana*, 21(1), 309-331.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. (1992). *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kang, Jung In and Seung Hyun Jung. (2013). Hanguk hyeondae jeongchiui yinyeomjeok jihyeong: Minjokjuui sinseonghwa [The topography of Korea's modern political ideology: The sanctification of nationalism]. *Korea and International Politics*, 29(4), 1-31.
- Kim, Yung-Myung. (2016). Hanguk minjokjuui jaengjeom: Gaenyeomgwa gwaje [Controversial issues in Korean nationalism: Concepts and tasks]. *Collected Writings on Korean Political Diplomacy History*, 38(1), 217-246.
- Lee, Kyung Jae. (2020). Isunsin seosae natanan myeongin insik: Sinchaeh ouisunsinjeongwa igwangsui isunsineul jungsimeuro [Cognizance of the Myeong in discourse on Yi Sun Shin—With a focus on Shin Chae Ho's The Tale of Yi Sun Shin and Yi Gwang Su's Yi Sun Shin]. *Journal of Humanities*, 77(1), 167-202.
- Lee, Min Woong. (2007). Yeoksa soseore geuryeojin isunsin [Yi Sun-sin as depicted in historical novels]. *The Citizens' Forum on Korean History*, 64-84.
- Lee, Young-hoon, An-ki Joung, Nak-nyeon Kim, Yong-sam Kim, Ik-jong Ju, and Woo-yeon Lee. (2019). *Banil jongjokjuui: Daehanminguk wigiui geunwon* [Anti-Japanese tribalism: The root of Korea's crisis]. Mirae.
- Park, Eui-kyung. (2015). Hanguk minjokjuui du eolgul: Gukgaroui tonghapgwa minjogui tongil [The two faces of nationalism: The unification of the people and the unification of the country]. *The Review of Korean and Asian Political Thoughts*, 14(1), 1-26.
- Shin, Chae-ho. (2018). *Doksaillon* [A new history of Korea]. Bookk.
- Shin, Gi-Wook. (2006). *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*. Stanford University Press.
- Sin, Pöm-sik (Ed.). (1970). *Major Speeches by Korea's Pak Chöng-hüi*. Hollym Corporation.
- Yi, Gwang-su. (2005). *Mujeong* [The heartless]. Moonji Publishing.
- Weber, Eugene. (1976). *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*. Stanford University Press.

Professional Profile

Steven D. Capener is a full professor of literary translation and literature in the English Language & Literature Department of Seoul Women's University in Seoul, Korea. He holds a Ph.D. in sport philosophy and a Ph.D. in modern Korean literature. He has published extensively on colonial and post-war era Korean literature with a critical focus on the formation of unitary Korean identity. He has translated many Korean authors, including Yi

Sang and Yang Gwija, and his translation of Yi Hyoseok's 1941 novel *Endless Blue Sky* was published in London. He currently serves on the editorial board of four literature/cultural studies journals.