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A Fractured and Roiled Identity: the Ideological Challenges for Korea in the 21st Century

“U.S.-Korea Relations in the 21st Century; Challenges and Prospects”

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Introduction

Most analysis of the Korean Peninsula treats military and security issues, and occasionally economic issues, as the determining factors for the future of that nation. Although I certainly recognize the importance of those vital aspects of human society, I feel that there is ample evidence, that issues of identity and ideology in the Republic of Korea, and the DPRK as well, will be also significant issues. Today’s ideological fragmentation and radically divergent interpretations of history and society may cause considerable instability within Korean society in the years to come.¹

In making this claim, I am not suggesting that Korea is necessarily unique in its ideological fragmentation. We can find indications of radically different epistemologies and historical filiations throughout East Asia, and across the globe. Globalization, technology, the expansion of trade and the alienation within society caused by rapid modernization has left its traces across

¹This paper focuses primarily on identity issues with regards to the Republic of Korea, rather than the DPRK.

the globe. The fluidity we find in the ideological realm today recalls much of the uncertainty in the world in the 1920s and 1930s.

That said, Korea, by dint of the rapidity of its transformation from a rural to a highly urban society, is a nation with a higher potential for sudden ideological shifts. Moreover, because the peninsula is divided into two different radically different ideological realms, chaos at the level of perception and identity is a serious concern if the borders between one realm and another are reduced.

We see in the Korean media, and in the Korean population, massive swings in perception in a short period of time. The perception of external threat can shift from Japan to China in a matter of weeks. Similarly, the image of Korea as a rapidly expanding political and economic powerhouse can suddenly be replaced with the impression that Korea is economically threatened, a tiny “shrimp between whales.” Although such shifts in perception can be found in most societies, Korea is distinctive in speed at which they occur.

When I employ the word ideology, I am referring primarily to the philosophical sense of the word, although the political sense is still present.. That is to say this paper refers to “ideology” as a *weltanschauung*, a comprehensive vision of the world reinforced by inherited cultural traditions. The political sense of “ideology” as a set of values and concepts laid down by political and social units to influence the thinking of citizens for specific goals is not absent from this process. The two meanings of the word “ideology” are something more like a continuum ranging from that which is embedded in ancient cultural fabric through that which is explicitly generated *ad hoc* for a specific political purpose.

This paper considers the major themes in the discourse on Korean identity with reference to foreign influences that impact that discourse. The intention of this effort is to find strands that connect sensitivities in the visible domestic and international discourse with invisible tensions within the substratum of Korean identity.

Nationalism and ethnic identity

Nationalism has been essential to motivating and unifying the Republic of Korea ever since its drive for rapid industrialization under Syngman Rhee (1948-1960) and Park Chung Hee (1961-1979). As the nation was emotionally wounded by the Japanese occupation, and ideological confusion of the Korean War, some tool was necessary to pull together groups that had previously fought each other bitterly and deeply resented the government's actions. The somewhat crude form of Korean national identity constructed during that period remains in a vestigial form within the current view of identity in Korea: the assumption that Koreans are a people who are closely unified as an ethnic whole and proud of their uniqueness.

At one level, Korea today embraces a form of internationalism that goes beyond all the previous limits for a "hermit kingdom." One could even argue that some aspects of Korean behavior, such as the drive to expand commercially into every corner of the world, exceed the international perspective held by any other nation.² For that matter, the Korean government has made such efforts as providing simultaneous translation from Korean into some fifteen languages for free in Korea via phone as part of its globalization project. So also the recently opened Incheon International Airport is one of the most pleasant and international airports in the world.

Nevertheless, in the midst of the embrace of globalization and a new image of Koreans as an infinitely open and accessible people, the exclusionist concept of Korean identity remains strong. There is considerable resistance to accepting foreigners even among the most liberal groups. One sign of the lingering need to define a purely Korean sphere is the continued use of the term "*uri nara*" (our nation) to refer to Korea in conversation makes an objective analysis of the nation itself rather difficult. Rare indeed is the Korean who refers to Korea as simply "hanguk." Implicit in this habit is the assumption that an imagined global Korea must maintain a pure Korean ethnic and cultural core at the center.

The efforts of Japan to marginalize Korean ethnic identity during the colonial period fed the desire of Koreans to imagine an eternal identity that goes back for ten thousand years. The confusion of cultural identity among Koreans forced to adopt Japanese customs lingers behind the assumption that Koreans will intuitively understand the culture and feelings of the group. The concern in Korea has been that Koreans too easily forget their duty to the nation and the assumption among leaders is that there is a resulting need for ethnic nationalism as a glue to

² Oddly in recent efforts of Koreans to enter into commercial adventures throughout the central Asia and elsewhere, there is something reminiscent of the drive of Koreans to settle in Manchuria in the 1930s as a means of achieving self sufficiency.

overcome a lack of social cohesion. That ethnic nationalism requires, at some level, an imagined other culture or identity, such as that of Japan or the United States, that forms an opposite.

Equally important, although rarely discussed, is the impact on South Korea of the Korean War. That brutal conflict, although in its final form evolving into a North-South conflict, originated as a social conflict encompassing the entire peninsula since to the Colonial period. It was an irreconcilable confrontation between political and ideological opposites. The war not only left a high percentage of the population dead or wounded, it destroyed institutions and families on a scale hard to imagine. The confusion we may observe in the identity of Koreans can in part be traced back to the trauma of that experience, one which until relatively recently was not a common topic for treatment in popular media. At the same time, the remarkable dynamism and flexibility to be found in South Korean culture and habits may also derive from the relative newness of institutions in that country.

Korean Identity and Relations with Japan and China

Japan and its complex cultural legacy is a critical element in contemporary Korean identity both as a negative background against which Korea is defined and as a hidden stream of influence on habits and culture that has never ceased, although it is rarely recognized. Korea has an unprecedented degree of cultural impact on Japan today, perhaps the greatest since the Nara Period in the eighth century. Korean films, dramas, music, food and dress are immensely popular in Japan, and even viewed as a threat to Japanese culture by reactionary forces. Nevertheless, there is also a significant amount of Japanese culture that is flowing the other way these days. We see that influence in the new politeness for customers at Korean department stores and the growth of upscale coffee houses for college students in Korean cities. But Japanese influence also creeps in through the cultural basement, the subterranean world of adult comics, filled with violence and sexual humiliation, being translated en masse. Korean elite express deep concerns about what the long-term impact of these writings and images will be. Of course, it is not obvious that such comics will ultimately be destructive, but the worry that Koreans will lose control of their own identity is real, even at the very moment that Korea seems to have such influence in Japan.

For the most part, Koreans, especially young Koreans, are entirely capable of sitting down with Japanese and having friendly exchanges. There has emerged a pan-Asian identity for the youth of Korea and Japan, promoted in many corporate advertising campaigns, that encourages such a perspective. Yet that pan-Asian identity coexists with the animosity stirred up at other levels by such issues as the Japanese claims on the Dokdo Islets. Many youth from Korea and Japan who meet up at high school exchanges or sports events are left blaming politicians and the older generation for the distance between them.

Part of the difficulty in Korean relations with Japan derive from the role Japan played in forming the discourse on ethnicity and nationalism that has been used ever since the colonial period in Korea. Most Koreans would be shocked to learn that such terms as “*minzoku*” (“nation” or “people”) did not exist in Korea until the expression was imported as part and parcel of the powerful discourse on the subject developed in Japan by such scholars as Yanagi Kunio. Thus Japan is inherently difficult for Koreans to take head on because it is intimately linked to the formation of Korea. That is to say, Japan is interlocked with the very mechanisms that Koreans employ to reject its influence. The creation of an identity for Koreans distinct from the imperial identity imposed on Koreans by the Japanese was the key to establishing a Korea which could imagine a separate path for itself.³ And yet many of the intellectual tools used in that process were Japanese.

The central conflicts with Japan highlighted in the mainstream media are the visits of the Japanese prime minister to the Yasukuni Shrine, the distortions of Japan’s conquest of Korea and East Asia and the claims of Japan on the Dokdo Islets (Takeshima in Japanese). Each of these issues reveals much about the insecurities within Korean identity that go beyond the objective history of the conflicts.

The decision of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro to continue pilgrimages to the Shinto shrine Yasukuni is perceived in Korea as the first step towards Japan reasserting itself militarily. Yasukuni has become a sanctuary for the campaign during the 1930s and 1940s to bring all of East Asia under Japanese domination in the *Daitoa kyoeiken* (Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere). Koreans show little interest in details of how exactly the Yasukuni shrine became such a political symbol in Korea. Rather the visits of the prime minister to Yasukuni Shrine suggest a malignant Japanese tradition that is showing through the cracks. The institutionalization of

³ Shin, Gi-Wook. *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006, “Ilmin Chuui and ‘Modernization of the Fatherland’ (pp. 96-113).

Yasukuni as a state-sponsored tribute to Japanese imperialism is a matter that concerns people around the world, not only in Korea. But among Korean opinion leaders, who no longer have the same institutional walls to shelter them from Japan and its complex culture now that formal restrictions on the import of Japanese film, journals and programming have been removed, there is much fear of Japan. The possibility of renewed Japanese militarism is profoundly disturbing to Koreans because the barriers between the two nations are so porous. Those aspects of Japan that are considered depraved or unjust threaten to seep into Korea itself, and thus the need is felt to confront them. Although at first glance Korea seems remarkably unified in its opposition to Yasukuni shrine and the visits of the Prime Minister, beneath the surface there is a significant fear that Koreans, who can shift their perceptions so quickly, can be undermined by the Japanese.

The attempts by the Japanese far right to revise high school textbooks so as to minimize the violence perpetrated by the Japanese in China and Korea during the occupation is another perceived threat. If the revision of textbooks means that all Japanese became convinced that the occupation of Korea was legitimate and painless, it could be that the pressure of accepted opinion will threaten the truth so essential to Korean identity: the sufferings of the Koreans. Thus the revision of textbooks is not merely an indication of growing nationalism in Japan, it is a potential threat to Korean identity as it has evolved over the last fifty years. Because Japan is assumed to be in a position to broadly publicize its position internationally, the domestic schoolbook revision has a global significance. The debate is considered by Koreans to be part of a struggle to define Korea as independent and distinct from Japan.

As previously described, Korean identity assumes commonality between all Koreans. Although there are bitter disputes in Korea concerning class and region, there is never any doubt raised about the meaning of “Koreanness.” A collective memory of Japanese colonial policy is central to preserving that shared experience even in the face of increasing social polarization in Korea. The recently passed “Truth Investigation into Pro-Japanese Koreans Law”⁴ that can be used in theory to prosecute those who cooperated with the Japanese, is evidence that the debate over Japan is powerful because it remains a domestic issue and the resentment against those who benefited from the colonial period has not disappeared. Many books by prominent Korean intellectuals dwell on the lack of a “reckoning” or “clean up” after the liberation of Korea which would have punished Japanese collaborators. Japan thus looms big in Korea because of the role

⁴ *Chinil jinsang gyumyeongboep* 친일진상규명법.

it has played in forming classes.⁵ And class issues are directly tied to the impact, real and imagined, of Japan on Korean society.

One indication of the complex role that Japan plays in the domestic discourse of Korean identity is the reporting in the media on Japanese distortions of history and the visits of prime ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine. Korean reporting on these events almost uniformly presents an all-powerful government which represents the Japanese will. The reality in Japan is that the number of public protests against Japanese foreign policy, the war in Iraq, Yasukuni Shrine and textbook revision has reached levels not seen since 1969. It is not surprising that these developments are not covered in the Japanese media, but the question remains why the Korean media never reports on such demonstrations. After all, if Korea's intention is to change Japanese policy, supporting opponents of the government, and highlighting division within Japan, would seem to be the best strategy. The silence on Japanese opposition to government policy suggests that a unified image of Japan remains important to domestic identity. Perhaps the danger is that if Japan were presented in a more complex manner, sympathy for those who fight against the Japanese system might emerge. Such sympathy would undermine a Korean identity built up to some degree on a denial of Japan.

In Japan there remains a strong link between institutions and ideological constructions of Japanese ethnicity. The "nation" (in Japanese "*minzoku*") was established as a compelling and convincing universal narrative for Japanese during the 20th century.⁶ Yet for Korea, because of the split in the government caused by the Korean War, and the deep damage to institutions caused by that brutal conflict, ethnic identity has been the primary adhesive employed to unify the country. Institutions and government agencies have been far weaker in Korea as mechanisms for uniting the state and civil society. The relative weakness of institutions in Korea has permitted astonishing flexibility in Korea. For example, Koreans have been entirely capable of creating new political parties like the "Uridang," out of nowhere. At the same time, Korea also has great trouble motivating and employing its government institutions.

Korean identity is also bound up with its relationship with China. Both countries have influence in each others cultures and Korea's traditional role as a tributary state of the Chinese empire inspires among Koreans both a familiarity with the Chinese presence and wariness about

⁵ See Suh, Jung-seok's book *Hanguk hyeondaesa* (Ungjin, Seoul, 2005).

⁶Doak, Kevin. 1997. "What is a Nation and Who Belongs? National Narratives and Ethnic Imagination in Twentieth-Century Japan." *American Historical Review* 102: 283-309.

China's ultimate role in determining Korea's future. Koreans identity is subject to the powerful gravitational pull of both the United States and China, often in unpredictable combinations.

Even in spite of occasional dissatisfaction with China over such issues as Chinese claims on Goguryo, the importance of China in Korean culture is increasing exponentially. Many Korean businessmen feel there is no particular incentive to travel to the United States because China offers far more opportunities and is a much more hospitable environment.⁷ Some 39% of all foreign students in China are Korean,⁸ and among those with high proficiency in Chinese, Koreans are the overwhelming majority.

Chinese has increased dramatically in importance as a foreign language, now second only to English; courses in Chinese for elementary school children, and even toddlers, are increasingly popular in Seoul. China represents an economic competitor, but it also forms a compelling new world where young Koreans can discover themselves, and many find a degree of freedom in their stays in China that they do not feel at home. The impact is internal as well: the City of Incheon had a rather run-down Chinatown fifteen years ago which is now one of the most vibrant neighborhoods, drawing in Koreans from the region.

The largest issue involving Korea and China today that actually appears in the mainstream media is the historical debate over the ancient kingdom of Goguryo. On occasion, Chinese claims on this ancient kingdom that included much of the Korean peninsula have become a source of tremendous tension between the two nations. The Center for the Study of Borderland History and Geography at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has conducted a research project into the historical legacy of the region since 2002 under the general rubric of "The Northeast Asia Project" (Dongbei gongcheng). The conclusion of that research was that the ancient kingdoms of Goguryo (32 B.C.-668 A.D.) and Balhae (698 - 926 A.D.) were in fact "Chinese" kingdoms.⁹ As few written records remain from Goguryo, and none from Balhae, the Chinese research is to a large degree speculative. Moreover, the question of whether these ancient states were "Chinese" or "Korean" seems rather arbitrary to American scholars since the nation states of "China" and "Korea" did not exist at the time. But the political implications of

⁷The visa difficulties presented by American immigration policy have contributed significantly to this trend.

⁸See Chosun Ilbo,
<http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200512/200512050022.html>

⁹For the most recent report (in Chinese) of the Northeast Asia Project, see
<http://www.cass.net.cn/file/190001015217.html>.

the research are transparent: creating a historical basis for Chinese claims to Chinese territory Korea may contest at some future date and possibly claims on all or part of the territory that makes up the DPRK today. Granted the large number of ethnic Koreans living in China and the growing influence of Korean firms in Northeast China, the Chinese efforts can also be interpreted as a defensive response to perceived growing Korean influence in China. There are important natural resources in those regions with large Korean populations. Thus establishing unambiguously that the territory is Chinese remains an important domestic political task. Moreover, the increase in trade and investment in North Korea by China may be another reason that Chinese wish to reinforce their historical position in the region. The general region, previously known as Manchuria, has been contested since the sixteenth century because of its resources, its strategic position and the ambiguities of its territorial status.

The history of Goguryeo has also become a critical part of the redefinition of Korean identity within the Republic of Korea. This ancient kingdom offers an image of Korea as self-confident and expansive nation that plays a central role in the geopolitical order of Northeast Asia. For this reason, the defense of Goguryeo by Korea not only symbolizes the Korean resistance against perceived Chinese hegemony, it also promotes a new identity for Korea as a major power in the region. Goguryeo, after all, had the military power to confront and defeat the Chinese troops of the Han Dynasty.

One of the most popular television dramas in Korea today is MBC's show "Ju Mong" (script by Choi Wan-gu), a fictionalized drama relating the rise to fame of the legendary founder of Goguryeo Ju Mong (ruled 37 B.C.-19 B.C.). The show presents a Korea that is at the center of international politics in Northeast Asia for the general audience, most likely as part of an attempt to create a more positive self-image. The webpage dedicated to the drama "Ju Mong" presents vivid scenes of aggressive and self-confident Koreans who assert their will without hesitation, along with cruel Chinese military officers who massacre innocent Koreans.¹⁰ It may be ultimately impossible to determine whether Ju Mong represents a surging desire within Korean society for a new self-image or an effort by a limited number of people to influence Koreans in general. The subtle relationship between Korean identity and the actual physical borders of Korea are both articulated within this series.

¹⁰The website for the drama "Chu Mong" featuring photographs and descriptions is <http://www.joomong.co.kr>.

Anti-Americanism and hidden tensions within Korean identity

The United States has been such an overwhelming influence on Korean identity since 1945 that its impact defies simplistic generalization. In fact, if a Korean critical of America wrote a paper on the topic of American influence on Korean identity, the paper would probably cite numerous American scholarly journals.¹¹ That is to say that the very discourse on identity in Korea is carried out in terms associated with the United States. Those who condemn the United States in the strongest terms often have close ties to the United States at some level.

Koreans with the financial means increasingly send their children to the United States to study at an increasingly young age, and that includes those critical of American values and policies. American English retains a mythic stature in Korea and American films, books, media reports, songs and concepts saturate all aspects of contemporary Korean daily life. Yet profound resentment against the United States lurks just beneath the surface, threatening to reveal itself at any moment. Although American scholars who speak Korean can live for years in Seoul without ever encountering it, other Americans, particularly those associated with the military, have a considerably different experience. Within contemporary Korea, the United States has the negative associations of an overbearing state which makes demeaning unilateral demands of Koreans and promotes the crassest form of commercialism and as such symbolizes such negative aspects of Korean society itself.

That said, the term “anti-Americanism” is so overused that it requires some serious qualifications. First, if we were to substitute the words “Bush administration” or “American government” for “anti-American” we would most likely find an equally high level of “anti-Americanism” in Japan or in the United States itself. Part of the Korean response is clearly aimed at the self-destructive and unilateral policies that a failed American political system is making. The recent attempt to legalize terrorism, for example, evokes a high level of disgust even among the most sympathetic with America’s position. Nevertheless, Korean interactions with Americans often reveal a passive-aggressive pattern of behavior. In other words, Koreans will often behave in an unnecessarily confrontational or unenthusiastic manner not only in discussions with Americans about controversial issues, but even in cases where cooperation with the United States is in the best interests of the Republic of Korea. The lack of enthusiasm,

¹¹There is a notable parallel to the reading of Japanese socialist writings by anti-government intellectuals in Korea between the 1920s and 1970s.

or follow-up, concerning proposals for cooperation has discouraged greater exchanges between the United States and the Republic of Korea.

American influence in Korea can be divided into two types: 1) explicit habits, institutions, and concepts imported into Korea over the last hundred years and 2) behavior patterns within Korean society associated with an “American” perspective. Much of the anti-American discourse in the second case has as much to do with domestic culture and politics as it does with the United States. Those who embrace a pro-American globalist perspective are imagined to be, as the popular saying goes “even more pro-American than the Americans.” Such Koreans are compared to the pro-Japanese Koreans of the 1930s and 1940s who supposedly put their own interests above that of Korea and sold out the nation for personal benefit. Therefore the negative image of the United States in Korea is a mix of the resentment over the American military presence and perceived unfair demands from Washington with discontent with new approaches to human relations, society, business and government associated with American influence. Although such behavior is more likely part of a global trend that is transforming all societies, including that of the United States, association with the United States is a convenient way of identifying this phenomenon. .

Conclusion: The Essence of Korean identity today

Korean perceptions of the international order, and Korea’s place within it, are subject to radical and spontaneous shifts which can be quite disconcerting. Korea is both one of the most open and democratic societies in the world and a cultural and political space in which, because of the rapidity of social transformation, institutions seem overly fluid and instable. The rate of change in perception seems only to accelerate in recent years, so much so generalizations about Korea from ten years ago appear almost irrelevant. Compared with the United States, Koreans in their twenties or thirties live in a radically different environment than their parents did. Their schooling, their assumptions about career priorities and their concepts of self and society are so far apart that dialog can be quite difficult.

Koreans live in an online world defined by their ties to a small group of like-minded friends. At the same time, they pour out in massive assemblies, such as the celebrations at the 2002 World Cup, the candlelight vigils for two schoolgirls killed by an American armored vehicle or demonstrations against Japanese claims on the Dokdo Islets. A fluid reality weaves

together personal experience, imagined historical patterns and Korean hopes and fears about the future of their nation.

Korea has become the most vital site of cultural production in Asia and is playing a central role in world culture as well. At the same time there remains great uncertainty concerning Korea's identity which has been both modeled on, and constructed in opposition to, perceived external cultural traditions. Ultimately, although the actions of China, Japan and the United States will affect Korean opinion, the ultimate debate about foreign nations is part of the domestic meaning of those cultural traditions within Korean society itself.