Rhee Syngman’s Theory of Unification by Northward Advance

Major Political Campaigns and the Fabrication of Symbolism

The campaign for myeoljong bukjin tongil (Die-Hard Anti-Communist Unification through Northward Advance) was a typical political phenomenon and an intense expression of Rhee Syngman’s ‘Anti-Communist Politics,’ which had been developed in the 1950s through demonstrations and rallies where students and the masses were mobilized. His campaign for bukjin tongil (Unification through Northward Advance) was not just one of his many policies; it was more than that. It was one of his typical mass mobilization policies. It was also his basic or core policy. His theory of unification was more than a unification policy or unification campaign. It played a most crucial role in buttressing and strengthening his political power in the 1950s. The role was similar to that which the Korean Central Intelligence Agency played in the 1960s and 1970s in protecting Park’s political power and reinforcing the ultra-right anti-communist regime. It is therefore crucial that we analyse the character of Rhee’s Unification through Northward Advance. Rhee’s political behaviour and ideology were vividly reflected in his unification theory. In a word, the Theory of Unification through Northward Advance was the key to Rhee’s political power.

In the 1950s, the issue of national reunification was emphasized more strongly than in the later periods. It also subsumed or engaged other important policies. The significance of Jo Bong-Am’s Theory of Peaceful Unification in short contrasted with Rhee’s Theory of Unification through Northward Advance and Extermination of the Communists and went far beyond a unification policy. It contained the hope and ideals of Jo Bong-Am and his Progressive Party for freedom, democracy and modernity, and was also inseparably tied to social democracy. In Korea, the issue of national reunification involved more than just unification itself because democracy and the national question were inseparable. The aspiration for national reunification also became much stronger after the Korean War. The national division was such a recent phenomenon that people felt the national division to be
unacceptable. Many families were separated across the South-North divide. People harboured the hope that something good would occur when national unification came. For this reason, all political groups, whether they were for or against national unification, exploited the issue of national reunification in their political campaigns. Thus, ironically, even those who opposed national reunification and worked for consolidating the national division staged campaigns for reunification. What is worse, some political groups exploited the issue of national reunification in order to reinforce the anti-communist dictatorship and to force people to endure impoverishment.

In this chapter I will first discuss the Theory of Unification through Northward Advance as it was developed before the Korean War, keeping in mind the fact that the theory underwent change before and after the war. I will especially focus on the relevance of Rhee’s Theory of Unification through Northward Advance to his unification policies and proposals and examine in what ways it was related to his political power and to his ultra-right anti-communist regime.

The question of the meaning of Rhee’s Theory of Unification through Northward Advance for his unification policies and proposals will be addressed by discussing whether his theory aimed to maintain or transform the status quo, what kind of relationship the theory had to other unification policies and whether the theory was realistic.

As to the second issue, I will discuss what kind of roles his unification theory played in the strategy of the ultra-right anti-communist regime and why Rhee Syngman developed his unification theory through mass mobilization. In addressing this point, I will also discuss the relationship between the ‘wartime regime’ and the ‘leader’ of the ‘wartime regime,’ which were both central to the campaigns of Unification through Northward Advance. This is related to the question of whether his unification theory was mobilized for his domestic politics, for his North Korea policy or for his foreign policies. In addition, since the issue of the relationship between his unification theory and his power (or his ultra-right anti-communist regime) is related to how he managed the loss of political effectiveness of his unification theory, I also place a great deal of weight on analysing his management of this situation. In addition, I discuss whether his unification theory was for the benefit of the nation or simply a product of the Cold War, whether it was self-sustaining or dependent on foreign powers, and what kind of people were the protagonists of the Unification through Northward Advance (i.e. the leaders of the Liberal Party and the government).

The meaning and political purpose of Rhee’s unification theory can be more clearly understood through a comparative study of Rhee’s Theory of Unification through Northward Advance and Jo Bong-Am’s Theory of Peaceful Unification. In light of the crushing calamity and fratricidal tragedy of the Korean War, the Theory of Peaceful Unification or campaigns for ending the war could have been more persuasive than that of Unification through Northward Advance which haunted the impoverished masses with the endless spectre of war. Nevertheless, since the armistice agreement was about to be signed, the campaign for Northward Advance Unification