Rewriting the History of Colonialism in South Korea

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Introduction

Until the beginning of 1990s, the Cold War system dominated not only international relations but also the practice of history. Practicing history in the Cold War era in South Korea, as in many post-colonial societies, puts much emphasis on establishing national history and de-colonizing colonial history. Rewriting modern or contemporary history of Korea, particularly colonial history, has been a competitive enterprise in South Korea in both Cold War and Post-Cold War historiography. The Cold War system accommodated anti-colonial narratives in the simple binary of an exploitative colonizing Japan versus a resisting and enduring Korean nation in South Korea. However, with the end of Cold War era, an intellectual challenge has initiated a paradigm shift in reinterpretation and revising the history of 20th century's colonial Korea. Groups of intellectuals in South Korea have been critical about the way in which colonial history is represented as – for example – the colonial history of Korea had for a long time only been narrated in a dualistic narrative of domination and oppression. They have attempted to rewrite or re-explore colonial history with different perspectives, methodologies and sources since the late 1980s. Consequently, a paradigm shift in viewing the colonial past has taken place, and this has caused a deep debate amongst intellectuals such as historians and sociologists over how to conceptualize the nature of Japanese colonialism and its legacies in Korea.

There have been a couple of different approaches in dealing with the colonial past in post-colonial South Korea. One is to view it as a “matter of the past” (kwagŏsa), a view held by former authoritarian regimes whose elites were trained in colonial Korea and who led post-colonial nation-building. This term suggests that colonial history has relevance only to the past, and that it is not appropriate to raise issues connected to colonial legacies, such as comfort women, forced labor, and many others. The other approach sees the colonial past as a matter to be “settled” in the crucial process of de-colonization. Not only in the field of academic historiography, but also in public discourse in

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1 One of South Korea's former presidents, Park Chung Hee (1961-1979), was himself a product of Japanese wartime militarism as a graduate of the Manchurian Military Academy.
Post-Cold War South Korea, there have been intensive debates related to the colonial legacy, such as issues of “settling the unresolved colonial past”. For example, pro-Japanese “collaborators”, “comfort women”, and forced labour have become important present-day issues especially since the beginning of the 1990s. In particular, settling the issue of collaborators with the colonial power is seen as critical “to set straight the nation’s righteousness” (minjok ch’ŏnggi). The task of “setting history right” has become a major point on the political agenda of the former Roh Moo Hyun administration (February 2003-February 2008). As part of the task of history redress, the Korean National Assembly introduced new laws in May 2005: namely, the “Special Act for Fact Finding and Investigation of the Pro-Japanese, anti-National Behavior”, and the “Special Act for the Return of the Wealth Earned by Pro-Japanese Activities.”

In relation to Japan, Roh Moo Hyun emphasizes,

> It is the moral obligation of a leader to confront and redress past historical wrongs, to draw from them a lesson for the present and ensure that the future remains free from such mistakes.

“Uplifting fallacies about the past,” “setting history straight,” “rectifying the past,” “righting past wrongs,” “cleansing the past” and “correct version of the past” are terms put forward in academic and public discussions of the colonial past in South Korea. These terms are very much immersed in a moralistic approach to historical writing and imply that there is an “objective” and “uncontroversial” account of the past available.

When it comes to colonial history, remembering colonial experiences has been a central point in Korean modern historiography: firstly, because decolonization, as Duara (2003) has argued, involved both the anti-imperialist political movement and an emancipatory ideology which sought to liberate the nation and humanity itself; and secondly, because the colonial past plays a powerful role in defining the contemporary identity of the subjects of history. Groups of historians in South Korea and Japan have attempted to revise colonial history since the 1980s. More recently, in the 1990s, a growing number of scholars not only in South Korea, but also in Japan and the United States began to conceptualize the problem of colonial domination and nationalist resistance in more multifaceted ways. Consequently, there has been an acrimonious debate over the interpretation of the colonial past, especially over modernization, in Post-