

Korean Collaborators: South Korea's Truth Committees and the Forging of a New Pan-Korean Nationalism

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The year 2005 has particular significance for Koreans concerning Japan: it is the 100th anniversary of the 1905 protectorate treaty (or Ulsa Treaty) which led to Korea's formal colonization by Japan in 1910. It is also the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Korea from colonial rule and it is the 40th anniversary of the normalization treaty of 1965. The year 2005 has also seen a distinct rise in anti-Japanese sentiments in South Korea. In March, angry swells of South Koreans protested at the Japanese Embassy, burning the flag of the Rising Sun, and expressing emotions so deep that some demonstrators cut off parts of their fingers. Riot police blocked a group of anti-Japanese demonstrators from blowing up a propane gas tank at the embassy gates. Citizens groups called for a boycott of Japanese goods, and at several golf courses, Japanese players were no longer welcome.

The Korean wrath centered on a territorial dispute over an uninhabited island chain known as Takeshima in Japanese and Dokdo in Korean. But tensions between the two countries have been building ever since January 2005, with the release of documents from the South Korean Foreign Ministry archives pertaining to Korea's 1965 normalization treaty with Japan. The issue

of compensation for colonial victims was raised by South Korean lawmakers. President Roh also called on the Japanese government to again atone for its historical misdeeds. Addressing an anniversary ceremony for the March 1 Independence Movement this year, President Roh said of Korea's relationship with Japan that, "we need to bring to light the historical truth. It is necessary to apologize and reflect, pay compensation should there be things that need to be compensated, and reconcile."



March 18, 2005 protest Japanese claims to Dokdo Island

Talk of the past has become a hot button issue in contemporary South Korea. In the wake of the historic shift in power that has occurred in the aftermath of the Cold War when South Korea's power holders were forced to yield to a new generation of leaders with a very different take on history, there has been an explosion of interest in re-examining South Korea's colonial

past. This movement, broadly termed kwagoch'ongsan, or "cleansing the past", has been compared with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Among the issues that have been recently raised is the re-examination of Korean collaboration under the Japanese colonial regime (1910-1945).

President Roh used the occasion of the 59th anniversary of the end of Japanese rule, August 15, 2004, to announce a new campaign to look into Korean collaborationist activities. "We are still unable to rid ourselves of the historical aberration that the families of those who fought for the independence of the nation were destined to face impoverishment for three generations," Roh said, "while the families of those who sided with Imperial Japan have enjoyed success for three generations." That same year, two laws were passed by the National Assembly to establish working committees to look into Korean activities during the colonial period, including the investigation of Korean collaborators who profited from the colonial regime as well as those who collaborated with the policy of forced labor under the Japanese.

There have also been high profile private endeavors to expose Korean collaborators. For example, the private organization Minjok Munje Yonguso (Korea Issues Research Center) is compiling a master list of Korean collaborators, which they hope to publish by the end of 2006. This group also sponsored, in 2004, a popular exhibition of Korean artists who collaborated with the colonial regime. Featuring a variety of pro-Japanese posters, letters, artistic works, and photographs, the aim of the exhibit, according to the exhibition catalogue, was to "expose all those who helped make possible Korea's subordination to the Japanese colonial regime." In a similar effort to expose collaboration, some citizens groups have led protests demanding the disinterment of bodies of alleged collaborators from the

National Cemetery and other patriotic burial sites. Not surprisingly, former President Park Chung-hee has been a central figure in this struggle. A former Japanese military officer, his link to both the colonial regime and military dictatorships, has made him an especially potent target of criticism. For example, the government has recently decided to replace the Kwanghwamun name panel at Kyongbok palace that is written in han'gul by Park Chung-hee because the current panel was written by a "questionable" leader. A new movie on Park, entitled, *Kuttae ku saramdul* (The President's Last Bang, 2005) plays up Park's association with the colonial past—he is frequently shown speaking Japanese and in his last moments, is shown enjoying Japanese songs.

So what are we to make of all this hoopla over Korean collaborators, most of whom are now long dead or dying? Why the recent struggle to come to terms with Korea's colonial past? Why the attempt to revisit this past on the living, few of whom lived though the colonial period?

Part of the answer lies in the profound geopolitical shift that took place in East Asia at the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, South Korea's relationship with some Asian countries, notably China, Vietnam, and North Korea, remained contentious because of Korea's role in the U.S.-South Korean security alliance. Moreover, throughout the Cold War, South Korea was heavily dependent on Japanese capital and investments for economic development. The need to appease Japanese sensibilities (and U.S. interests) combined to suppress discussion of the horrors of the war and the colonial period.

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the transition to democratic rule in South Korea in the early 1990s, however, South Koreans, no longer constrained by the geopolitical demands and economic imperatives of the Cold War, began to look at their past very differently. And this included not only a new

assessment of Japan and the United States, but North Korea as well. The stark contrast between a rich and powerful South Korea and a poor and isolated North Korea could no longer support the kind of anti-North Korean rhetoric that had sustained the South Korean state throughout the Cold War. President Roh Mu-hyon's "Policy of Peace and Prosperity" toward North Korea, which extended the earlier Kim Dae-jung administration's approach, interprets Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons primarily as a defensive strategy and advocates a policy of engagement with the North to solve the nuclear question as part of a broad understanding to reduce tensions between the two countries and between North Korea and its international adversaries, particularly the United States.

But these post-Cold War political reevaluations of North Korea as a blighted but basically benign enemy in need of prodding and support is cautiously opposed by South Korea's conservative politicians, many of whom have links to the colonial past. The Grand National Party, whose leader, Park Kun-hye, is Park Chung-hee's daughter, takes a harder line approach to the North, and is openly critical of Roh Mu-hyon's engagement policy towards North Korea.

In short, the struggle over Korea's colonial past is really a struggle over the two Korea's future. Critics of the truth committees say the effort is politically motivated and in a society where offspring are judged guilty by family association, they maintain that the truth committees are simply attempts to damage certain politicians. (Ironically, however, it was the chairman of the Uri Party, Shin Ki-nam, who was forced to resign from his post after it was disclosed that his father was a military policeman during the Japanese colonial Japanese.) They believe the collaboration issue is simply a means to single out members of the Grand National Party, especially Park Kun-hye. As one lawmaker of the Grand National Party

put it, "it is a political game. They are afraid that Park Kun-hye, who is very popular, may become president in the next term."

The view of whether the truth committees are designed simply to censure certain politicians or are sincere efforts to come to grips with Korea's past largely depends on one's own political orientation. What is particularly elusive is how the unearthing of Korea's colonial past is linked to the question of nationalism. By presenting an interpretation of history as parable rather than as politics, South Korea's new truth committees largely deny the particular conditions that allowed Korea to be colonized in the first place. In South Korea, this meant portraying colonialism not as a condition of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, or the corrupt and inept Korean government that had invited foreign powers into Korea during the turn of the century in the first place, but rather as one more instance in the familiar story of "national victimization" that had taken place throughout Korea's history since ancient times. "We must right the wrongs of the past to make sure that history is not repeated," said Moon Byong-ho, a lawmaker for the governing Uri Party. "It is the responsibility of a democracy to look into the wrongs of the past." The irony, of course, is that the very achievement of South Korea's new-found democracy and economic prosperity is also the product of that past. While critics of Park Chung-hee rightly condemn him for the abuses of his regime, they cannot deny that Park also created the foundation for South Korea's stunning economic success. Indeed, despite Park's mixed legacy, he continues to be viewed by the vast majority of South Koreans as the nation's most important and respected modern leader. For example, a November 2004 nation wide poll conducted by the major national daily newspaper *Munhwa ilbo* (The Cultural Daily), found that nearly 80% of respondents named Park as the person who had contributed most to modern Korea. In this way, Korea's colonial and post-war history is not presented as the

outcome of actual causal, social, political, military and cultural relations that are connected to the prosperity of the present, but merely as a dark backdrop against which to contrast South Korea's new found democracy and future pan-Korean unity.

South Korea's truth committees thus distill Korea's colonial past into a manageable, lucid story of timeless struggle and redemption in which the collaborator is reviled. Moreover, the revival of the memory of Korea's experience of colonialism offers a familiar story of national victimization and imperialist aggression that can serve to bind the two Koreas together in a shared history of collective suffering. The collaborator plays an important role in this narrative, since he/she is viewed as existing outside of Korea's history of victimization, and hence, outside of the nation itself. The main purpose of the truth committees is to affirm the national myth of victimization and struggle by selecting those who belong and those who must be excluded from that myth.

Of course, in seeking to remember the abuses of the colonial regime and the collaborators who profited from it and later rose to power under the military dictatorships of Park Chung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan and Noh Tae-woo, the Roh Mu-hyon administration overlooks the real-life human rights abuses that are currently going on in North Korea today. This irony has been brought to the fore by a new coalition of 386ers who had initially supported Roh's 2001 presidential bid. (The phrase "386" was coined in the 1990s and refers to those who were in their 30s—they are now in their 40s-- who came of age during the turbulent decades of the 80s, and who were born in the 1960s.) Known as the "New Right", this new coalition of 40-something political activists and intellectuals has accused the Roh administration of deliberately ignoring North Korea's appalling human rights record to promote a conciliatory North Korean policy that indirectly supports Kim Jong-il's continuing human rights abuses.



Anti-Park Chung-hee demonstrators.

The slogan reads: "Immediately remove the name plate for the memorial museum written by Takaki Masao (Park Chung-hee's Japanese name) that disrespects the patriot Yun Pong-gil."

While the Roh government focuses on the collaboration issue and Korea's past victimization by the Japanese colonial and postwar military regimes, these critics point out that it has deliberately ignored the present victimization of the North Korean people by the Kim Jong-il regime. The death camps, the documented human rights abuses, the plight of North Korean refugees in China, the crackdown on private and religious groups aiding North Korean refugees, not to mention the very difficult conditions of North Korean defectors living in South Korea today, are all set aside in favor of a nationalist hue of memory focused on the country's past victimization under colonial and military rule. The almost complete erasure of the present appalling conditions in North Korea in official discourse is ironically sidelined in favor of a new and urgent focus on Korea's victimization under past Japanese colonial rule. This is due not only to the fact that the policy architects in the South believe that a North-South reconciliation would be hindered by an honest probe into Pyongyang's death camps; the focus on past abuses by the colonial regime also furthers their pan-nationalist agenda by

creating a common memory of suffering that can help bridge the gap between the two countries.

Thus, the current obsession with the colonial past has little to do with the actual or lived past. The truth committees serve as an agent of nationalism by appealing to cogent metaphor and themes that affirm the “new” pan-Korean nation and the search for a view of history that can serve to bind North and South Korea in a shared memory of common victimization, struggle and redemption. The question of collaboration thus becomes one of selecting who belongs and who is excluded from this nationalist narrative. What the truth committees slight is the fact that everyone living under the Japanese had to collaborate to some degree in order to survive. No one, except the staunchest resisters or those living outside of the colony, could claim a clean conscience.

By appealing to a national myth of victimization and struggle, the preservation of the memory of collaboration is made possible only by the

erasure of memory on all other spheres, including the very historical conditions that led to Korea’s colonization in the first place. This includes the actual lives of Koreans under the colonial regime as well as the obfuscation of the real-life contributions that collaborators like Park Chung-hee made in creating the foundations for South Korea’s “miracle of the Han.” In short, the truth committees invoke the past less as a record of lived events, than as a constituent element of pan-Korean nationalism and identity.

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