

On “Eradicating the Vestiges of Pro-Japanese Collaborators”

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Abstract: In the six decades of division since the Korean War ended in a “cease-fire,” the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule have used various causes such as anti-communism, liberal democracy, regionalism, and Christian values to cement their status as a cornerstone upholding the system of the North-South division. In this context, the task to eradicate the vestiges of pro-Japanese collaborators must target the “vestiges of Japanese colonial rule” in every aspect, rather than just the “vestiges of pro-Japanese collaborators.” Furthermore, the “vestiges of Japanese colonial rule” must be clearly understood and addressed in light of their fundamental role in maintaining the division of North and South Korea. We must carefully observe how the political activities of sovereign citizens will affect the candlelight government’s efforts to complete the imminent tasks to seek reform and to eradicate the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule that remain a cornerstone of vested interests based on the North-South division.

Keywords: March 1st Movement, collaborators, division of North and South Korea, candlelight revolution, Moon Jae-in

The March 1st Movement or Revolution (henceforth referred to as “3·1”) was a monumental event that decisively initiated Korea’s double project to simultaneously adapt to and overcome modernity. The enormous

significance of “3·1,” not only for the Korean people, but also in world history, has only recently begun to be fully appreciated through the candlelight revolution. By itself, however, “3·1” failed to restore Korea as an independent nation, which was the most urgent task at the time. In fact, this mission has not been achieved to this day, as the Korean peninsula continues to be divided into two nations. After “3·1,” Japanese colonial rule persisted for another quarter-century, and was immediately followed by the division of North and South Korea, which has now lasted more than six decades. Even after the establishment of the Republic of Korea in the south, the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule were never properly addressed, let alone removed. On the contrary, the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule became a fundamental element of Korea’s division system that has been in place since the Korean War.



President Moon Jae-in on June 3, 2019

commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the June 3 Movement of 1919

In his address to commemorate the 100th anniversary of “3·1” in 2019, President Moon Jae-in pledged, “This new 100 years will be the century for completing a true country of the people,” while also emphasizing that “eradicating the vestiges of ‘chinil’ (i.e., pro-Japanese activities) is an undertaking that is long overdue.” At the time of President Moon’s speech, tensions between South Korea and Japan were rising after the Korean Supreme Court’s ruling that Japanese companies must offer reparations to Korean victims of forced labor during the colonial period. Then, shortly after the Korea-United States DMZ Summit in late June 2019, the Japanese government took the retaliatory measure of imposing trade restrictions on South Korea, triggering a chain of events that some have called a “trade war.” Thus, President Moon’s vision of the “new 100 years” was immediately threatened. But for that very reason, the need to eradicate the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule has never been more apparent.

Nonetheless, it is essential to consider what it is exactly that we are seeking to eradicate. In particular, we must think about the propriety of the term “chinil,” which is typically used to refer to Koreans who voluntarily collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial period. Hence, most previous efforts to remove the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule have narrowly focused on individuals. For example, shortly after the Republic of Korea was founded, the Special Committee for Prosecution of Anti-National Offenders (1948-1949) was established to seek legal retribution against pro-Japanese collaborators. Fifty years later, President Roh Moo-hyun created the Presidential Committee for the Inspection of Collaborations for Japanese Imperialism (PCIC,

2005-2009), which again sought belated settlements from pro-Japanese collaborators. Also in 2009, Minjokmunjeyōn’guso (The Center for Historical Truth and Justice), a non-profit organization, published its three-volume Encyclopedia of Pro-Japanese Figures. All of these projects exemplify the efforts to identify and punish individual Koreans who collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial period. Despite the failure of the Special Committee for Prosecution of Anti-National Offenders and other early efforts, all of these projects deserve praise, if only for their persistence and refusal to allow this issue fall by the wayside. Moving forward, however, similar efforts of retribution must be carried out within a broader context in order to address the intrinsic and systematic vestiges of Japanese colonial rule as a whole. Otherwise, retribution can never be sufficiently implemented.

Notably, the Special Committee for Prosecution of Anti-National Offenders did not fail because of indifference or incompetence, but rather because it was sabotaged and ultimately dissolved by the government. This was due in large part to the active involvement of Rhee Syngman, the first president of South Korea. As a result, many former Japanese collaborators were able to retain undue power and influence in Korea after independence. The collusion between Rhee and these collaborators clearly demonstrates how the “vestiges of Japanese colonial rule” cannot be reduced to the “vestiges of pro-Japanese Koreans.” As an independence activist, Rhee Syngman himself was clearly anti-Japanese affiliations, although he was widely criticized and denounced for other failings by other activists. Crucially, it was Rhee’s alliance with former collaborators in the new era of Korean independence that allowed the “vestiges of Japanese colonial rule” to evolve beyond the actions of individuals and become more deeply entrenched in South Korean society.

Joining hands with former collaborators, Rhee Syngman announced that the most pressing issues of the post-liberation era would be anti-communism and the establishment of a separate government in the south. As President Moon pointed out in his aforementioned address, the colonial Japanese government collectively stigmatized all Korean resistance fighters as “commies,” regardless of their actual political affiliations, thereby initiating a practice that continues to ripple through many of Korea’s present-day social issues. Through the post-liberation years and the Korean War (1950-1953), the act of labeling someone a “commie” evolved from a tool for covering up one’s former pro-Japanese activities into a ubiquitous political weapon that was actively used to remove anyone who was critical of Rhee’s government and the establishment. In the six decades of division since the Korean War ended in a “cease-fire,” the association between Japanese collaborators and the anti-communist movement has become entangled with various other elements, fueling the rise of powerful and complex forces that continue to subsist off the division system. Under such circumstances, the label of “pro-Japanese collaborators” is too simple to be applied to so many different types of people.

Thus, any attempt to “eradicate the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule” must involve more complex and elaborate concepts than simply eradicating the “vestiges of pro-Japanese collaboration.” First and foremost, we need to ask, “Who exactly has benefitted or is benefitting from the division of North and South Korea?” The answer will include not only North and South Koreans, but also elements in the US and Japan who have supported what in my essay I have called the division system. In addition, we must meticulously examine and weigh their respective responsibilities, in order to adequately respond to their domestic and international collusion. For example, amidst the recent trade tensions between South Korea and Japan, some Korean political and social figures

have sided with the Japanese government, despite the risk of being labeled as “pro-Japanese.” Such actions should immediately raise a red flag as an indicator of solidarity between reactionary forces in Korea and Japan who oppose the candlelight revolution.

After independence in 1945, many former collaborators avoided repercussions by prominently proclaiming their pro-American stance, transforming themselves into a more complex network of forces. Pro-Japanese activities during the colonial period should, in their turn, be understood within the historical context of Korea’s unique characteristics as a “colony.” In his essay “Korea, A Unique Colony: Last To Be Colonized and First To Revolt”, Bruce Cumings asserts that the relationship between Korea and Japan “is more akin to that between Germany and France or England and Ireland than to that between Belgium and Zaire or Portugal and Mozambique.” When discussing the need to expunge the “vestiges of pro-Japanese collaboration,” people often recall the case of France’s retribution against Nazi collaborators after the Second World War. In questioning how and why Japanese collaborators have evaded justice for so long, many have noted that France was able to swiftly and severely punish Nazi collaborators, despite the fact that Germany’s occupation of France lasted only for a short time compared with Japan’s occupation of Korea. The truth is, however, that the longer an occupation lasts, the more collaborators there will be, making it that much more difficult to duly identify and punish them. Another crucial difference between the two cases is that, prior to 1940, France already had a long history as a modern nation-state, and was thus fully equipped with criminal laws pertaining to treason and enemy collaboration. On the other hand, in 1905 (the year that Japan officially deprived Korea of diplomatic sovereignty) or 1910 (the year of Japan’s forced annexation of Korea), the Korean Empire (1897-1910) had not yet been firmly established as a modern nation-state. At

that time, government officials and leading public figures who betrayed the Korean emperor were indeed denounced as traitors. But the Korean Empire did not have any legal clauses by which to punish pro-Japanese activities during the colonial period. For this reason, efforts to punish pro-Japanese collaborators after the establishment of the Republic of Korea have defined the target as ‘anti-nation’ activities rather than ‘anti-state’ activities.

Furthermore, evaluating the “pro-Japanese” activities of Koreans who were born after Korea lost its sovereignty is no simple task, since such citizens were raised under the laws of the Japanese regime. Of course, even if such Koreans cannot be reprimanded based on legal standards, they should still be criticized for betraying the spirit of the Korean people and the memories of “3·1.” Just as we honor the memory of independence activists, we should also condemn those who flagrantly collaborated with the Japanese, even if they are no longer alive. Nonetheless, between these two extremes (i.e., liberation fighters and known collaborators) is an enormous grey area that is very difficult to navigate. There is also the ambiguous case of Koreans who, taking advantage of the modest autonomy earned from “3·1,” resorted to occasional pro-Japanese activities as an expediency to assist the Korean people or aid the cause of Korean independence. These and other complex cases require us to more comprehensively measure the merits and demerits of an accused collaborator’s actions, considering as many details and circumstances as possible. It is not wholly advisable to hold people to the traditional Confucian norms of loyalty or to the purist standards of independence activists who worked overseas.

But even given all of the differences between Japan’s colonial rule of Korea and the German occupation of France, the Special Committee for Prosecution of Anti-National Offenders

could have achieved some significant results if it had received adequate support in the early years of the Republic of Korea. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine that the committee could have creatively evolved to suit the unique circumstances of Korea, playing a role much like that of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. In reality, the committee never evolved beyond its initial role as a type of revolutionary prosecutor, before it was purged entirely by the very collaborators that it was created to purge. As a result of this early failure, even after more than sixty years, it is still difficult to hold serious discussions or advocate informed policies related to the pro-Japanese activities of Koreans. Indeed, this is one of the darkest and most damaging legacies of Japanese colonial rule and the North-South division.

As mentioned, immediately after Korea’s liberation in 1945, collaborators who had reaped the benefits of pro-Japanese activities during the colonial period took cover under the banner of anti-communist and pro-American causes. Since then, the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule have used various other ostensible causes (e.g., liberal democracy, regional rivalry, Christian values) to similar effect, thus cementing their status as a cornerstone upholding the system of the North-South division. Understandably, Koreans associated with these vestiges have been quite cautious about openly demonstrating their pro-Japanese stance. In fact, their support for Japan (both implicit and explicit) in the recent trade conflict may be the first time in history that they have shown their true colors. But why would they take such a risk now, at a time when the majority of Koreans have voluntarily joined the nationwide boycott of Japan?

This phenomenon can be directly attributed to the candlelight revolution, which caused the conservative party of former president Park Geun-hye to lose power and also the hope to regain it in a ‘normal’ way. Notably, some of

the most prominent and powerful members of this party have ties to former Japanese collaborators. In the past, these figures were able to fool the public and hide their pro-Japanese stance simply because they were in power (or close to seizing power), but they can no longer afford to do so. Moreover, North Korea, which had long helped the conservative party maintain power by periodically firing missiles, holding nuclear tests, or hurling insults, betrayed the cause by responding to inter-Korean reconciliation efforts. The party was further injured when the US (their strongest ally) initiated talks with North Korea, rather than continuing to raise tensions. Suddenly, they were left with only one possible supporter: Japan.

They feared even this alliance might crumble if Prime Minister Shinzō Abe were to pursue reconciliation with North Korea. The Moon Jae-in administration denounced the 2015 deal (signed under Park Geun-hye) regarding Japan’s wartime sexual enslavement of Korean women, which had been strongly opposed by the Korean public. Striking further blows against the conservative party, Moon’s administration also proposed the new Korean Peninsula policy, and announced that it would respect the Korean Supreme Court’s ruling on Japan’s wartime forced labor, based on the separation of the administrative, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Thus, for opponents of the candlelight revolution, Prime Minister Abe’s decision to confront President Moon and the Korean government was a godsend. Given that their only hope of regaining power is to topple the Moon Jae-in administration, they had no choice but to support Japan.

In this context, President Moon was absolutely right when he proclaimed that eradicating the vestiges of pro-Japanese collaborators was an urgent priority for “the next 100 years.” Only, I wish to emphasize that such an undertaking must target the “vestiges of Japanese colonial

rule” in every aspect, rather than just the “vestiges of pro-Japanese collaborators.” Furthermore, the “vestiges of Japanese colonial rule” must be clearly understood and addressed in light of their fundamental role in maintaining the division of North and South Korea.

In 2019, the anti-candlelight forces that rely upon the division system embarked on three major offensives. First, they formed a human blockade in a futile attempt to prevent two bills (to reform election procedures and the prosecution service, respectively) from being adopted as the parliamentary agenda. Adding insult to injury, several of these individuals were arrested and charged with violating the National Assembly Advancement Act and causing a public disturbance, which may disqualify them from running for election next April. Thus, if convicted, these particular vestiges of Japanese colonial rule will have eradicated themselves.

Second, they refused to deliberate upon a supplementary budget bill, leading to a prolonged parliamentary deadlock and earning harsh criticism from the public. Although the bill was eventually passed, it was needlessly delayed for almost 100 days after the government had submitted it to the National Assembly.

Third, they actively resisted President Moon’s appointment of Cho Kuk (former Senior Secretary to the President for Civil Affairs) as the Minister of Justice, which led to a major clash. In the process, every conceivable political or ethical skeleton in the nominee’s closet was dragged out into the light (regardless of whether or not there were grounds for legal charges) arousing anger and frustration among many Koreans. Moreover, virtually every media outlet joined in the assault, and the public prosecutor’s office utilized an excessive amount of staff and resources in the probe, at the expense of

investigating much more serious crimes. Although Cho was eventually forced to step down, President Moon was then able to appoint Chu Mi-ae, who initiated steps to reform the prosecution system. If the efforts of these forces had been successful, they would likely have prevented President Moon from reforming the prosecution system. For this third offensive had the potential to revitalize the opposition party and ensure its initiative in the political sphere.

Once again, it was candlelight protests that turned the tide. For three consecutive Saturdays in the fall of 2019 (September 28, October 5, and October 12), huge crowds of protesters gathered in front of the central prosecution office, demonstrating that the candlelight revolution is still ongoing. The massive crowds came as a bit of a surprise even to the event organizers and participants, who had not expected so many people to show up. The candlelight protests in the past (including the late 2016 protests that led to the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye) took some time to incubate, with the crowds steadily increasing week by week. In this case, however, the moderately sized protests for prosecution reform (which had been drawing thousands or perhaps tens of thousands of people) exploded almost overnight into a million-citizen protest on September 28. This remarkable turn of events clearly demonstrated that the candlelight protests of 2016 and 2017 were not an isolated anomaly, but a sustained movement to transform the entire ‘constitution’ of Korean society, beyond merely changing the ruling party. After successfully ousting Park Geun-hye and ushering in Moon Jae-in’s “candlelight government,” the people of Korea initially seemed content to resume their daily lives

while watching how Moon’s administration implemented reform and tried to overcome the peninsula’s division system, turning over the public square to groups of right-wing forces waving their Korean and American flags. However, once the candlelight protesters recognized a serious threat to their cause, they took to the streets once again, directly opposing the attack of the anti-candlelight forces and rejuvenating the push for prosecution reform.

One might add that the continuing strength of the candlelight revolution is evidenced even by the large anti-government demonstrations that have been held against the candlelight protesters. On one hand, these demonstrations may reflect the desperation of the conservative establishment, as they seek to concentrate their forces for a final showdown. But unlike in the past, most of the participants in these demonstrations were not ‘bought’ or coerced into joining, which means that they too are seeking to express themselves in the mode and spirit of the candlelight revolution, albeit in a completely different direction.

We must carefully observe how the political activities of sovereign citizens will affect the candlelight government’s efforts to complete the imminent tasks of seeking reform and eradicating the vestiges of Japanese colonial rule that remain a cornerstone of the establishment based on the North-South division. Every Korean who takes great pride in the national legacy of such political engagement, from “3·1” to the present, will not be remiss in monitoring whether the current government lives up to the standards of the candlelight revolution.

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Contents.

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