

Colonization and trauma: thoughts on re-imagining nationalist historiography

S. Park

Johns Hopkins University

Nationalist discourse has been instrumental to the construction of Korean identity in the 20th and 21st centuries. The stakes of this discourse have shaped our understanding of the fundamentals of Korean culture such as its linguistic origins, its geography and history. Some scholars have argued that at its roots, nationalist historiography is an ideological project driven by anxiety and insecurity that obscures the search for truth. Moreover, a nationalistic conceptualization is fundamentally an exclusionary and often elitist narrative that disregards the very voices of the people that it purports to serve. The perspectives of minorities, gender, and the disenfranchised are often omitted, giving life to the mistaken belief in a unitary teleological national trajectory. Several scholars have pointed out the various problems with nationalist histories and problematques but have not been able to explain the tenacious hold of such paradigms.¹

It should be pointed out that the abundance of nationalist symbols and discourses is not unique to Korea. Western historians were largely uncritical of nationalist histories until the emergence of the French Annaliste school in the early 20th century. For those who sought methodologies other than nationalist frameworks, Marxist historiography seemed a less than palatable alternative.

¹ Please see: Pai, Hyung Il and Timothy R. Tangherlini, eds. *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity*. (Berkeley: UCal Press, 1998), Hyung Il Pai *Constructing "Korean" Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography and Racial Myth*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), Andre Schmid, "Rediscovering Manchuria: Sin Ch'aeho and the Politics of Territorial History in Korea," *JAS* 56.1 (Feb 1997): 26-46 and the works of Henry Em and Carter Eckert.

Nationalist historiographies saw a resurgence in the realm of colonial and post-colonial narratives, particularly flourishing in the wake of World War II. Under the threat of imperialism, the elites of colonized and semi-colonized countries such as China, India, Senegal, Nigeria and Algeria countries sought to reclaim their sovereignty by participating in a nationalist project that mirrored the historical trajectory of their colonizers. Hence Chinese, Korean, and writers of other nations became deeply involved in the recovery of folklore, the search for genesis (Central Plains theory, Tangun), the competitive recovery of national relics and technologies (the first printing press, the first systematically invented writing system) and the anointing of national heroes (Yi Sunshin and Yue Fei). Such studies were strongly structured by a dichotomy of colonizer and colonized, where authentic ‘Koreanness’ and sovereignty was determined in reaction to the discourse of colonization. Shaped by the desire to repulse the cultural imperialism of the colonizers, yet mimicking the structure of the nationalistic history of their overlords, such reactionary histories often had the unintended effect of reifying the very power dynamics that it sought to undermine. Chungmoo Choi in her article on “Decolonization and Popular Memory”² makes use of Frantz Fanon’s argument that local elites often inevitably end up mimicking the discourse of their colonial masters in a process of identifying themselves “with the Western bourgeoisie from whom it learnt its lessons.”³

Historians too are inextricably bound in these conceptual webs. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his *Provincializing Europe* writes about how Europe is the theoretical fundamental subject of all histories of India, and how empirical research of the latter

² Tani E. Barlow, ed., *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*. (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 357

³ Frantz Fanon, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 153

seeks to flesh out its constitutive theoretical skeleton and categories. In other words, Europe has become the ruler against which we measure all other histories. Europe and its attendant trajectories of modernity, development, and civilization is the universal that ghosts behind studies of ‘capitalist sprouts’ or self-reliance. In our case, we can sometimes substitute ‘Japan,’ the ‘US’ or the ‘West’ where we read ‘Europe.’ However, Chakrabarty posits a “politics of despair” where scholars can at best display an awareness of their subject position but ultimately cannot escape their metaphysical heritage. While he does not ask for the extremes of relativist or nativist history, he calls upon scholars to write histories that “deliberately makes visible within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity.”⁴ In its most basic form, this is a call to explore ways to mitigate the rigidity of the Self/Other, Colonizer/Colonized binaries, and to venture beyond a ‘permanently postcolonial’ history.

However, a deeper understanding of the affective underpinnings of nationalist historiography is required in order to best understand how to dismantle its structures. Having briefly stated some of the issues with nationalist scholarship, I would like to propose a new schematic to recast the narrative of modern Korea. I posit that colonization can be conceptualized as a form of historic ‘founding trauma’ for Koreans.⁵

⁴ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (Princeton UP, 2000), 45

⁵ Historical trauma is informed by individuated PTSD but should be understood as having a separate contextual existence that is found in literary theory and historical study. Caruth sometimes conflates individual and historical trauma (see Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, (Cornell UP, 2004), 133-136). For more on historical trauma, please see the writings of Dominick LaCapra: *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.

Remarkably painful and difficult events, such as the Shoah (the Holocaust), the Manchu conquest of China, Argentina's Dirty War, the Nanjing Massacre, the Rwandan genocide are among those which have been examined as traumatic events. The Greek origin of trauma, meaning 'wound' refers to the rupturing of the skin or a break in a protective barrier that harms the organism.⁶ This word was mapped onto psychic and mental pain and harm probably in the early 20th century as therapists began to encounter and theorize cases of shock and hysteria that resulted from train accidents and trench warfare. Cathy Caruth, one of the foremost theorists of trauma has defined trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena."⁷ Trauma has several distinguishing traits: there is often a deferral or to use Freud's term, *Nachtraeglichkeit* between the causative event and the return of the traumatic event. Under the impact of trauma, persons can act out or continuously and unwittingly relive the traumatic event, as we see with post-Vietnam flashbacks. Cathy Caruth and Bessel A. van der Kolk have suggested that trauma lies outside of meaning and significance. Trauma "overwhelms people's existing coping mechanisms" and hence the event cannot be "experienced fully at the time."⁸ There is an insistent and literal return to these fragments and scraps of catastrophic experiences. What separates the event and the return is the gap, the aporia or the 'black hole' which prevents knowledge

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) and *History and Memory after Auschwitz* and *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*.

⁶ Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 19.

⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 91

⁸ Bessel van der Kolk, "Trauma and Memory," in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society*, ed. Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane and Lars Weisaeth (New York, 1996), 279 and please see Cathy Caruth's *Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: 1995), 4

and representation of the event. According to Caruth however, histories of the events can be written when the victim enacts their trauma and a witness listens: “the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another.”⁹ However, if we follow Caruth, trauma can be passed from the victim to the listener, as those who witness the pain of the victims are susceptible to the same dynamics of trauma. The result is that individuals who never experienced the trauma directly themselves are imagined as inheriting the traumatic memories of previous generations.¹⁰ The historical past becomes part of our own direct experience in a way that elides space time barriers. One can postulate that there have been similar slippages of time in the way in which colonization has been incorporated into Korean collective memory. Intergenerational trauma explains how those who were not there can be marked by the trauma of colonization, and the emergence of a Korean identity that is based on the need to fight the battles for national sovereignty and ‘Koreanness’ that were conducted half a century ago.

The controversial transgenerational phenomenon of trauma has been much remarked upon in the last decades. Natan P. F. Kellerman has noted that there have been over 400 papers published on intergenerational transmission of trauma on just the children of Shoah survivors over the last three decades.¹¹ Vamik D. Volkan has also

⁹ Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, 11

¹⁰ Please see: Ernst von Alpen, “Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory” *Poetics Today* 2006 27(2):473-488, or Tamar Bauman, *The intergenerational transmission of trauma symptoms in children of Holocaust survivors*, (Diss: Pace University, 2003)

¹¹ Kellerman, Natan P. F. *Bibliography: Children of Holocaust Survivors*. AMCHA, the National Israeli Center for Psychosocial Support of Holocaust Survivors and the Second

expanded on the theme of intergeneration trauma by focusing on what he terms ‘chosen trauma.’ A ‘chosen trauma’ “refers to the shared mental representation of a massive trauma that the group’s ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy. When a large group regresses, its chosen trauma is reactivated in order to support the group’s threatened identity.”¹² In his more recent writings, he has also explored the concept of resistance to transgenerational trauma due to fears that healing or reconciling the trauma would mean changing one’s identity. The original victims transmit their injured selves with their children, who are also entrusted with the burdens of “reversing helplessness, shame and humiliation, being active instead of remaining passive.”¹³ Volkan, a psychiatrist, also argues that the second or third generation victims will unconsciously integrate the trauma into their large-group identity. The ‘chosen trauma’ with its attendant identity configurations will be activated when the group is under three also argues that the embrace of a ‘chosen trauma’ can inhibit “peaceful activities for the resolution of ethnic or other large-group conflicts.”¹⁴

Dominick LaCapra comes to a similar view as Vamik Volkan but from a different methodological perspective. Rather than ‘chosen trauma’ he uses the term ‘founding trauma’ which I prefer. He has several warnings about historical trauma that may be relevant to all cases discussed within this paper. Fundamentally, historical trauma is “related to particular events that do indeed involve losses” including the Shoah,

Generation, 1999 and also “Transmission of Holocaust Trauma-An Integrative View” in *Psychiatry* 64(3) Fall 2001, 257.

¹² Volkan, Vamik D. “Transgeneration Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity,” *Group Analysis* 2001 34:79-97.

¹³ See 30th Mfelitta Sperling Memorial Lecture by Vamik D. Volkan: □ Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma and Resistance to Change in Individuals and Large Groups. October 18, 2004

¹⁴ Ibid

Hiroshima/Nagasaki or in our case, the colonization of Korea.”¹⁵ Such events can be utterly catastrophic and can give rise to sacralization and sublimity. In cases where founding traumas become the basis for identity, there is a tendency to collapse the ambivalence between suffering and the sublime and valorize the event, resulting in an essentializing narrative of exceptionalism. In this manner, Korean history would be seen as being unique, or uniquely difficult—its colonization as being uniquely brutalizing and totalizing.

The colonization of Korea (1910-1945) was clearly a painful fracturing of Korean consciousness. Historians have developed long lists of the legacies of colonialism: several million Koreans had been conscripted for forced labor and removed to the northern provinces and Manchuria. Though estimates vary, about 80,000 Korean women were forced to serve as ‘comfort women’ to the Japanese forces in the Pacific theatre. Korean language and education came under the pressures of assimilation. Protests and demonstrations were quickly and bloodily suppressed. During the wartime period, food shortages made subsistence particularly difficult. Numerous textbooks, articles and studies have catalogued the multitudinous suffering of Korean people under Japanese administration.

Yet this very cataloguing somehow misses the point. Regardless of the amount of bloodshed and the quantification of human misery, there can be no harmless colonialisms and no colonization can be quantified as being worse than another. The unequal relationship between metropole and colony is imbued with a constant, at times silent, but always present threat of violence. Hence all colonial experiences are brutal

¹⁵ LaCapra, 80

and violent and the Korean case was not different.

The trauma of Korean colonization has been articulated and propagated in a narrative of national humiliation. National humiliation narratives are not necessarily unique to Korea and should be understood as being much more than a simple calculus of defeat, humiliation and revenge. At one point, both China and Korea celebrated a 'National Humiliation Day.' But what exactly does a nation gain in revisiting past suffering and celebrating what it sees as its blemished past?

In the narrative of national humiliation, the trauma serves as a breach with a flawed past. Engaging in a discourse of national humiliation allows actors to claim the paradoxically more powerful voice of the victim. As a victim, the participants are released from all responsibility for their sufferings. They are freed to criticize and dictate and in essence, manage the narrative from a privileged viewpoint. The discourse of nationalist humiliation often places blame on external aggression and the failure of internal leaders. The participants become obsessed with claiming a mythical glorious past, and realizing an oppositional position from those elites who failed them. Hence, the Choson yangban were weak and made effete, and the new Korean man would be active and martial. Here, I will refer back to Volkan's claim that transgenerational victims of trauma are often charged with the task of "reversing helplessness, shame and humiliation, being active instead of remaining passive."¹⁶

However, I follow William Callahan in reconfiguring humiliation from an irrational emotion to a socio-cultural practice that needs to be placed in historical context.

¹⁶ See 30th Melitta Sperling Memorial Lecture by Vamik D. Volkan: □ Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma and Resistance to Change in Individuals and Large Groups. October 18, 2004

Upon closer examination, the national humiliation narrative is a constellation of many contesting voices, many conflicted, others sanguinary. Moving beyond a superficial level of analysis allows scholars to transcend the causal links between defeat, humiliation and revenge. Otherwise, we are only left with facile analyses that attributes Korean nationalism, especially forms of Korean aggression, to revenge. As Callahan has argued in his studies of international relations, national humiliation allows its participants to share in a critical/self-critical discourse. In this framework, historical actors draw lines between Self and Other, though in the self-critical form, it is the Self that is most often being Othered and criticized. That is, there is a pre-traumatic self that is held accountable, and the post-trauma energies are directed at excising this self. As much anger was directed at foreign aggression, even more anger and contempt has been heaped upon what has been seen as 'weaknesses in Korean character' that failed to prevent Japanese aggression.

The Japanese experience continues to be the cultural, historical and temporal axis around which Korean understanding of self and its history revolves. Echoing Cathy Caruth, there is an unwitting and constant return to these painful shards of experience. The rhetoric of national humiliation continues to dominate Korean historiography, creating an imagery of Koreans as a uniquely troubled and victimized people. For instance, most prefaces to works on the Imjin Waeran or the Pyongja Horan state some version of the following: Korea has been invaded so many times by more powerful foreign powers. Textbooks, journal articles commonly recite this thesis as an article of faith.

But has Korea been unusually victimized by foreign aggressors? Looking at the

trajectory of Choson history till colonization, Korea actually seems to have enjoyed unusually long periods of peace. Excepting the brief Japanese and the Manchu incursions, Choson did not experience foreign invasions in its 518 year history, roughly giving it a percentage of .8% years of war and 99.2% years of peace. Public figures no less than Park Chunghee have stated that Korea has a “history of suffering and foreign invasion, these [being a] result of Korea’s geopolitical position.”¹⁷ The idea that Korea has had a uniquely long history of national suffering, a victim at the hands of superpowers is of fairly recent origin and can be traced back to the writings of Independence activists such as Sin Chaeho and have been propagated by historians and leaders such as Park Chunghee, Roh Taewoo and Chun Doohwan.¹⁸ To take this further, the colonial experience has been extrapolated back and forward in time, coloring our interpretation and understanding of Korean national history. There is not enough space in this paper to discuss these issues in the depth that they deserve, but it is clear that the Imjin Waeran and the Pyongja Horan, particularly the former, cannot escape being interpreted in light of the Japanese occupation. This is particularly evident in the studies on the Righteous armies (in both periods) and the glorification of the Turtle ship and the sacralization of Admiral Yi. Notably, Yi Sunshin is one of the few early modern people who are honored in the Independence Hall museum, supporting a state sanctioned linkage between this 16th century general and 20th century events. The transformation of Yi Sunshin from loyal Choson subject to a nationalist warrior is a remarkable step in the creation of a Korean mythology.¹⁹

¹⁷ Park Chunghee, 122.

¹⁸ Pai and Tangherlini, 4.

¹⁹ See Sin Chaeho: Yi Sunshinjun.

A founding trauma can generate its own temporality, becoming a genesis for a mythologized narrative of creation or new beginnings. For example, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have cleaved Japanese historiography, with a post-war ‘New Japan’ and ‘Old Japan’ separated by the traumatic nuclear bombings.²⁰ Interestingly, one of the central symptoms exhibited by victims of trauma is the inability to place events into a narrative memory. Such victims continue to relive these events over and over again, as literal truth, unable to comprehend their relation to the present. Consequently, secondary transgenerational trauma victims embrace the history of the primary sufferers as their own. This means that the children of those at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of Shoah victims or of Korean colonization continue to suffer from the anxieties and fears of those who actually lived those events. From a historical point of view, this eliding of victimhood can be disturbing as the sanctity of the catastrophe, the position of those who witnessed and directly experienced these events is threatened.

Historical trauma, in its vaguest form, is related to loss. And what was lost in the colonization of Korea? Korean history would be the primary candidate. A Korean history free of colonization, of the narrative of national humiliation and the search for redemption is almost impossible to imagine. Historical trauma became founding trauma when the event paradoxically became integrated into collective memory through newspapers, textbooks, and other instruments of public discourse, and consequently became a source for identity. Such founding trauma often becomes mythologized and integrated into the history of a people, but as Dominick LaCapra points out, such cases can be questioned when the trauma plays an “ideological role,” in the structure of

²⁰ Carol Gluck. *Post-War Japan as History*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 64-66.

identity.²¹ Embracing trauma ideologically mutes critical ways in which Koreans can come to terms with their history. Given the repetitive nature of traumatic phenomena, and its transgeneration virality, it is likely that many coming generations will still be unable to make the affective distinction between past and present—the trauma of colonization will continue to be just as real as it was for those who lived it.

²¹ LaCapra, 80-81.