

## **North Korean Historians at the Helm of Power (1945-1950)**

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In reconstructing the general picture of correlation between academic research and political power in a totalitarian state, one may find certain elements of the North Korean academic system exceptionally graphic. The foundation of national history research in the DPRK, which was laid during the 1945-1950 period, suggests the evident parallel in evolution of the North Korean and Soviet historiographical traditions. Both countries developed the mechanism which quickly catapulted Marxist historians into ruling positions but, at the same time, predetermined their demotion to the role of Party scholar-bureaucrats and often threatened their lives.

Working with material, which I brought from the field-trip to North Korea, China and Japan, I came to conclusion that the wholesale emulation of the early Soviet historiographical experience in the DPRK predetermined future reprisals against North Korean intellectuals. Although the period of 1945-1950 was the Golden Age for history-writing politicians and policy-making historians, it was the "old guard" of Korean Marxist intellectuals who predetermined serious crisis in official history writing and became its first victims. Almost everyone, who stood at the helm of political power during the first years of the Democratic People's Republic, were purged or demoted. My primary sources ? history books and academic articles published during those five years ? allowed me to find the true culprits of Kim Il-s?ng's cult of personality and helped understand the reasons for a dramatic change, which happened in North Korean historiography in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

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During the first months after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the continuing discord about the feasibility of "scientific methodology" induced Marxist intellectuals in the American zone of occupation to seek autonomy outside the Seoul-based Korean Academy of Sciences. Soon after the US Military Government adopted a range of anti-communist laws, Marxist scholarship in southern Korea faced a dilemma: to go underground or to move to the rapidly sovietising North where they could start creating a new state and culture. The latter option promised leftist intellectuals a unique opportunity to generate their own academic structures where the Marxist concept of "historical materialism" would become the ruling methodology. The North Korean Provisional People's Committee, which acted as a proto-government body,

energetically facilitated the creation of new academic structures in the Soviet zone of occupation. The Committee's immediate objectives were to attract to the North all experienced scholars and to bring up a new generation of academics who could effectively absorb Soviet academic experience.

By the time two separate Korean states were established in August-September 1948, many Marxist scholars of history and economics had already settled in Pyongyang and were guided by their famed colleague and coordinator, historian-economist Paek Nam-un. Paek and other scholars of the Socio-economic school of historiography were instantly appointed to the highest State and Party posts. They were encouraged to organise government-sponsored research institutions, to establish professional journals and to disseminate Marxist views on scholarly issues. A new version of national history, which within a couple of years was created in North Korea, was solely based on research institutions, to establish professional journals and to disseminate Marxist views on scholarly issues. A new version of national history, which within a couple of years was created in North Korea, was solely based on the Marxist theory of historical materialism. Neither alternative hypotheses nor rival schools could intervene in the research pursuits of Marxist historians. Moreover, considerable funds and resources were funnelled to materialism. Neither alternative hypotheses nor rival schools could intervene in the research pursuits of Marxist historians. Moreover, considerable funds and resources were funnelled to bring up the new official historiography

Compared to the bitter experience of colonial and post-war southern Korea, the new status of Marxist academics in the DPRK was that of scholar-politicians. Korean leftist intellectuals, who for several decades had been actively studying the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, now mingled with former anti-Japanese guerrillas and professional revolutionaries. In dealing with the issues of the ongoing education and cultural reforms, they were allowed to act as the supreme decision-making authorities. North Korean intellectuals would often join Kim Il-sŏng and other top leaders to travel overseas. Many prominent scholar-politicians and members of their families were dispatched to the USSR for networking and studies. In such trips, they continued learning from the "big brother": most North Korean textbooks for schools and universities were copied from the Soviet teaching materials. Unconditional emulation of Soviet academic tradition became a major trend in the development of North Korean historical scholarship.

North Korean official historiography began to adopt Soviet patterns in research at the earliest stages of its formation. The popular slogan of the time "Learn towards the Soviet Union!" [Ssoryŏn-ŏl hyanghay? paeura] invariably encouraged Korean intellectuals to follow Soviet examples in every field of their activity. Soviet works on history were especially warmly welcomed because they exemplified the highest achievements of the Marxist historiography praised for its "scientific approach". Similarly, Soviet political journals *Pod znamenem marksizma* [Under the Banner of Marxism], *Filosofiia i istoriia* [Philosophy and

History] and *Kommunist* (former *Bolshevik*) symbolised an inexhaustible source of scientific thought for North Korean historian-politicians.

In July 1948, a new professional historical journal, *Ry?ksa Chemunje* [Questions of History], was for the first time published in North Korea. Both the title and concept of this journal were copied from the Soviet monthly *Voprosi istorii* [Questions of History]. One of its regular rubrics, “Academic Thought Overseas” [weguk sajo], was specially designed to introduce the state of history research in other communist countries, particularly in the USSR. The North Korean *Ry?ksa Chemunje* often carried articles penned by leading Soviet scholars B.D.Grekov, A.V.Mishurin, M.A.Leonov, A.L.Galperin. In these works, the principles of “Party spirit” [partiinnost’] and “class spirit” [klassovost’] were proclaimed to be first and foremost in historical research.

As an example of unrestrained adoration of Soviet economic and cultural power was a book *Impressions from the Soviet Union* [Ssory?n insang] (1950) by the North Korean scholar-politician, Paek Nam-un. The opening page of this travelogue carried the full-length portraits of Stalin and Kim Il-s?ng. This collage apparently intended to underline the propinquity of two leaders as a token of the USSR-DPRK friendship. Paek Nam-un (then the Minister for Education) toured the Soviet Union in February-March 1949. In the company of Kim Il-s?ng and Pak H?ng-y?ng he left for Moscow where they met Stalin, Molotov and other Soviet top leaders. During the visit, the first Bilateral Agreement on Economic and Cultural Cooperation between the USSR and DPRK was signed.

Whilst conferring with the professors of the Moscow State University, Paek willingly used this opportunity to clarify a number of vexed questions of Marxist philosophy, economics and historiography. Among the queries with which he approached the Dean of History Department, Pashkov, there was the problem of the Asiatic Mode of Production, the question of Slave-ownership in the ancient history of the East, and the attainments of Soviet archaeology relating to the history of Siberia and Manchuria. Undoubtedly, Paek was looking for concise answers to complicated theoretical problems which had remained unresolved for Korean Marxist historiography since the colonial period.

During the meeting, Paek learned that the “five-stage model” of history progression ? from Primitive Communism, Slave-ownership, Feudalism and Capitalism to Communism ? formulated in the 1930s by Struve, was now adopted as the only legitimate hypothesis in Soviet historiography. In his pre-war writings on Korean history, Paek Nam-un had already used this vulgar-Marxist hypothesis. He passionately discussed its righteousness in the halls of Moscow University and assured his Soviet colleagues that academic circles in the DPRK would follow this hypothesis in their research. Thus, in the context of inevitable progression to Communism, North Korean historians received a legitimate right to claim that their own country had experienced all “compulsory stages” of historical development.

As the DPRK scholarship continued indiscriminately copying the USSR official historiography, the atmosphere of fear and “double thinking”, which characterised Soviet academic circles of the late 1930s, quickly spread among the North Korean academics. The compilation of history books was becoming an increasingly dangerous business and often put historians into predicaments from which they could be rescued only with the help of a powerful patron. As a result, historians in the DPRK, in order to secure their high positions in the Party, were to pay increasingly more attention to the role of the Party Leader.

From the earliest days of Soviet occupation, historical scholarship in North Korea was nurturing its own tradition of exulted adoration of the Leader. Stalin’s cult of personality in the USSR served as a perfect model for emulation: North Korean scholar-politicians, in making of Kim Il-sŏng the “Stalin of Korea”, simply continued to follow the Soviet methods of mass indoctrination. Especially active in enforcing the cult of personality in the DPRK were historians Ch’oe Ch’ang-ik and Yi Ch’ŏng-won. Although the majority of Korean intelligentsia sincerely detested the cult of Japanese Emperor Hirohito, these two scholars formed a vanguard in public acclamation of Kim Il-sŏng’s “heroic deeds” and “merits”.

Suh Dae-sook explains the premature political death of Ch’oe and Yi by reference to their “less than adequate glorification of Kim Il-sŏng” in their historical writings. This comment should be accepted with caution due to its suitability only for the cases where the writings by Marxist historians (such as Ch’oe and Yi) are compared with the products of *Juch’e* historiography, a much later construct. In fact, both Ch’oe Ch’ang-ik and Yi Ch’ŏng-won ? deliberately or not ? concentrated their efforts on creating a Kim Il-sŏng-centred version of modern Korean history.

Echoing the Soviet historiographical tradition, North Korean authors started portraying every exploit of Kim Il-sŏng as brilliant and victorious. But this would only exacerbate Kim’s expectations to become the “Stalin of Korea”. Flattering compliments such as “true Marxist-Leninist” or “faithful follower” very soon would become inadequate, provoking the Great Leader to seek ideological autonomy from his Soviet patrons. Paradoxically, the more historian-politicians in North Korea exercised the Soviet-style veneration of the Leader, the higher was the danger for them to be accused of “anti-Party” or “anti-state” activity in future.

Moreover, in their pre-war research, Paek Nam-un, Yi Ch’ŏng-won, Ch’ŏn Sŏk-tam and other Marxist historians had concurred in that the medieval Korean economy and society were exceptionally “backward and stagnant”. In other words, the “old guard” of North Korean historians continued looking at the issues of national history from the perspective of Asiatic stagnation. Their main argument was that every aspect of life in traditional Korea before the Japanese colonial occupation (i.e. before the actual development of domestic capitalism) was moribund and missed any progressive element. Such supposition had been

normally used to explain why Korea became so easily trapped in colonial dependency.

Similarly, Korean Marxist historians had used the hypothesis of intrinsic Asiatic backwardness in order to draw an important conclusion regarding the type of pending social revolution: the dormant class contradictions, which for centuries were concealed under the veil of Asiatic state land-ownership, were woken after the colonial occupation by the rapid growth of industrial capital. Combined with the struggle for national liberation, all social contradictions in Korea were believed to have found the way for ultimate resolution by the catharsis of a two-stage social revolution ? first, bourgeois-democratic, and then, socialist.

In many ways, this approach was copied from the early official Soviet historiography of Mikhail Pokrovsky, who called upon every Marxist historian to unmask the “rottenness” of the old regime. In the 1920s, Pokrovsky, being involved in a discussion with Trotsky about the role and interaction of “trade-capital” and “industrial-capital” in Russian history, indiscriminately condemned all Russian Tsars and Princes as “rascals and swindlers indulging themselves in drinking or speculation in lands and property”. Lenin’s praise of Pokrovsky’s school of historiography for many years gave him immunity from criticism.

However, Stalin’s collectivisation and industrialisation policies often demanded a nationalistic interpretation of history. That is why, after 1934, the school of Pokrovsky was mercilessly ostracised in the USSR as “anti-patriotic” and “anti-Marxist”. In 1936, the Central Committee of the Communist Party scrutinised the “vulgar, sociological views” of the former leader of Marxist historians. Pokrovsky was found guilty of advocating a “subjective conception of Marxism” and held responsible for forcing the course of history into a “Procrustean bed of materialism”.

Years of war in China and the Pacific isolated Marxist scholarship in Korea from information on the state of Soviet academic circles’ development. For that reason, North Korean historians habitually continued to pursue the goals once set by the early Soviet historiographical tradition. Castigating poor socio-economic conditions in pre-colonial Korea, they successfully answered the question why Korea lost its independence. However, such understanding of historical truth would eventually come to conflict with the increasingly nationalistic policies of Kim Il-s?ng.

The bitter experience of the Korean War also forced the North Korean historiography to change its face making the largest part of earlier efforts undertaken by Marxist historians futile. In mid-1950s, many of them were forced to leave their high posts, while some even were to pay with their lives for having depicted the national past in “unpatriotic” colours. In other words, similarly to how the orthodox Marxist school of Pokrovsky was scrapped in the USSR in 1934, the Marxist historiography in North Korea was swept away by the forces of nationalism-inclined *Juch’e* historiography in 1968.

Copied from the Soviet model, the North Korean academic circles were designed to support the regime in manipulating public opinion and people's consciousness. The Japanese-trained Marxist historians and economists managed to occupy the highest State and Party posts and succeeded in the role of leading statesmen and ideologists. However, their triumphal reign was short-lived. The more North Korean scholar-politicians followed Soviet patterns in research the closer was the end of their domination on the DPRK political stage. This was the beginning of entirely new era or self-reliance and nationalism, the era of *Juch'e*.