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Academic Freedom in the tumult of politics and bureaucracy: What's keeping us from doing what we love?

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I am sure that many of you are wondering why I have chosen to talk about academic freedom today. The reason goes back to the formation of my entire academic career and maybe my worldview, but more importantly, if I talk about my specialty, 99% of you will be bored, so I sought a topic of general interest. Over the course of my generally unproductive life I have seen extremes. I know that there are many people in this room who have seen far worse than I am about to offer as reminisces, and I would encourage them to tell us their stories. The point is that I see signs of attacks on academic freedom. Some of these attacks are new but some are behaviours I thought had disappeared long ago. I feel that it would be irresponsible of me to not sound a warning. I will first bore you with my personal history to establish that I know what freedom of speech is. Then I will outline three pressures that are bearing down on our freedom of enquiry: institutional bureaucratism, the politics of identity, and a misplaced sense of political purity that has gripped some elements within the South Korean government.

I first went to East Asia as a child of fifteen in 1972, as a tourist. At that time the Vietnam War was raging and I was becoming conscious – too conscious, in fact – of my future as cannon fodder for that war. Back in south Georgia in the United States, where I grew up, very few people even knew where Vietnam was, much less anything about its history, its culture, and its language. But it was clear to even me as a young adolescent that three years into my future I would register for the draft, possibly go to this place, and possibly die some horrible death. Every day at 6.00 pm, we watched the war in our living rooms on the evening news, and the pointlessness was as clear as the daily body counts shown on the television screen: enemy dead so many, US dead so many. The major lesson of my youth was to find out as much as possible about this place, and to avoid dying in this war. I succeeded in avoiding the war, but I still know little about Vietnam.

I have lived a fortunate life, though. I travelled with my parents at age fifteen; we circled the Pacific by ship and docked in Hong Kong and Japan. At that time, mainland China was still in the throes of the great Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong was still alive, and China was generally known as Red China. I recall walking into a store in Hong Kong in a shopping area next to the pier and there you could buy mainland goods. There were vast parts of the store that sold clothes and carvings and porcelain and all sorts of objects. One large room was devoted to books – where there were no shoppers. I went into this room. It seemed that most of the books in the room were “The Little Red Book”, and I bought a copy printed in English, which I still have. I wish I had bought a copy in Chinese as well, but that was a mistake. In short, mainland China was a dark place: no-one could come and no-one could go. We knew precious little about it, except that it was hideously repressive. By contrast, of course, Hong Kong was a free city, politically, economically, and culturally, but that was because it was

still under British rule. British imperialism is much-aligned, but Britons often, not always but often, succeed in getting their politics right.

The next port of call was Japan, where we spent a week. We left ship in Nagasaki and re-embarked in Yokohama. In between Nagasaki and Yokohama we travelled by bus and visited Hiroshima, Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo. Japan was climbing the steep slope of its economic expansion, and 1972 was only eight years after the opening of the first Shinkansen line; only eight years after the Tokyo Olympics. The economic prosperity was everywhere to be seen, in combination with typical Japanese cleanliness and social order. Its democratic freedoms were evident when we took a bus from central Tokyo to the Yokohama docks and had to detour because of a massive demonstration against the so-called American “police action” in Vietnam. I did not know at the time – but I learned later – that Japan was, of course, a major staging ground for the American war effort, as it had been for the American war effort during the Korean War. The fact that traffic had been diverted because of a political protest impressed me greatly – I had never seen anything like that, except on television. It was unthinkable even in Hong Kong. The Brits like their traffic to flow.

At the time, I vaguely knew that Korea existed. Mainland China was terra incognita, Taiwan was under an authoritarian dictatorship, Japan was a modernizing model of economic and political development, North Korea was under a communist dictatorship, and South Korea was under an authoritarian dictatorship. In other words, the entire region except for Japan was suffering from political repression.

Growing up with the Vietnam War and with the resignation of an American president – heretofore unknown to the American republic – the political atmosphere for me as an adolescent who was just learning how the world worked was heavy and gave me the impression that all authority was corrupt and even morally implicated in the murder of young men. Now that you have invited me to stand in front of you as some form of authority, I can confirm today that all authority is, indeed, corrupt.

When I turned eighteen, I registered for the draft, but by the grace of God, that was 1975, and late in that spring the American involvement in Vietnam ended with the North Vietnamese victory over the United States and the Republic of South Vietnam. Although a horrible embarrassment to the United States who now joined the humiliated ranks of the French with their failed interventions, say what you might, but Vietnam was again unified.

My concern then shifted to the next place that I might have to go to die: it was evident to me that that would be somewhere in the Middle East. I went off to university and began to study history. The university where I took my undergraduate degree was a small liberal arts school in the American south, known mostly for producing lawyers and Episcopal priests. This university, The University of the South (Sewanee), has the most pretentious name I could ever imagine, but it is located in one of the most beautiful parts of Appalachia, and is literally a shining city on the hill, if then only composed of a little more than 2,000 people.

I spent two blissful years with no television, no movies, no bars – nothing but books, good whiskey, and interesting people to talk to. My third year I could travel abroad, as long as I found some academic program that offered instruction and some kind of assessment scheme that allowed transferred credits. So, I thought I would go to the American University in Beirut to learn Arabic in what was at that time the Paris of the Middle East. At least that was the idea I had.

When I broached this travel plan to my mother, she laughed and showed me the morning newspaper: in my blissful isolation as a student, I had missed the fact that a civil war had begun in Lebanon (1975-1990). The morning newspaper she held had a picture of a wall in the American University in Beirut, and the wall had a great round hole in it where a rocket-propelled grenade had penetrated the wall. She said to me, “I will not pay money to ship your body back from Beirut.” I had a hard time understanding this lack of adventure on her part,

but I was desperate to go somewhere that was completely different. So, I countered with the suggestion, “How about Japan?” She had fond memories of the cleanliness and the social order, and immediately responded, “Good idea!”

In the autumn of 1977 I went to Japan to spend a year at what was then one of only perhaps two, programs in Japan where English-speaking students could study. This was the Kansai University of International Studies, located between Kyoto and Osaka, and boasting a rather elaborate program of Japanese studies. Kansai Gaikokugo Daigaku was not the prestigious Osaka Gaidai, but a former two-year woman’s university that had recently expanded to four years and set up a programme for foreign students to study Japan in English. During my year there, I studied language, history, and a variety of subjects, but most importantly, I met a number of expat Americans who were deeply involved in political activism in East Asia devoted to human rights. Japan was where they lived, because Japan was free, but their focus was on Taiwan and South Korea. At that time both Taiwan (1954-1979) and South Korea hosted American military forces. The political situation in both countries was oppressive, but at least democracy was part of the rhetoric that you heard from Korean and Taiwanese politicians.

Over the course of the year I visited both Taiwan and South Korea several times, primarily as a spy for organizations such as Amnesty International, carrying information about political prisoners. This was the first time that I visited South Korea, and I was greatly impressed by the general warmth of the people, the beauty of the countryside, and even the bustle of the cities. But I was also greatly impressed by the fact that every fourth man I saw was in a military uniform and that there were curfews. There was also a time during the day, 5pm if I remember correctly, that everyone stopped whatever they were doing to listen to the national anthem being broadcast across Seoul.

Back in Japan I followed a new interest in Korea by using the Korean community as a way to learn about Japanese society. Coming from the American south, I knew that you did not ask the dominant group – i.e., a white man in Georgia – to explain his society, because his ignorance is extensive. You ask a black man in Georgia to explain society, because he knows both black society and white society, for survival reasons. This was my theory about Koreans in Japan – they must know their own society and Japanese society in order to survive. I was not disappointed. I learned a great deal about Japanese prejudice and Japanese racial oppression, and over time it became clear that I needed to know a lot more about Korea itself in order to understand the people I was talking to. I went back to the States and finished my undergraduate degree by creating a major that did not exist at my university called “Asian Studies”.

What I learned in Japan was primarily that the freedom to study certain things, or to talk about certain subjects, even in free countries, has limitations, even as it did in the United States. For example, in polite Japanese society at that time, one never mentioned Koreans, just as one never really talked about blacks in polite, white, southern society.

By the grace of God, the US federal government gave me a scholarship to go study in paradise at the East-West Center on the campus of the University of Hawai’i at Manōa. It was there that I began the serious study of the Japanese language and a serious study of the history and politics of East Asia. While studying for a Master’s degree in the Department of History, I again spent a year in Osaka, this time living in the Korean community of Ikuno-ku, which is the largest Korean ghetto in Japan.

I was there to do research on the legal position of Koreans in Japan, because the history of the American civil rights movement taught me that the way forward towards equality lay with the creation and the application of progressive law. What this meant in practice was that I would occasionally call into universities but mostly what I did was engage with support groups trying to prevent the deportation of illegal immigrant Koreans back to

South Korea. My friends were mostly third and fourth generation *zainichi* Koreans. I knew second generation Koreans, of course, and would occasionally come into contact with actual first generation Korean immigrants. Some of these people carried North Korean identity cards, many of the third and fourth generation spoke no Korean, but all of them faced the challenges of living in Japan as a minority people.

Interestingly, their conversation had no limitations. Nothing was out of bounds. They spoke freely about Korea; they spoke freely about Japan, about the United States – about anything that came to mind. Mostly it was all critical. They found it incredible that this young white man was living in a Korean slum. They suspected me of being a CIA agent because they could not understand why I would choose to live there. Strangely, I encountered the same comment—*are you actually CIA?*—when I moved to England, because the English are naturally suspicious of anyone who speaks a foreign language other than French or Italian. French is for hotels and Italian is for restaurants.

After a year I again returned to Hawai'i to finish my master's degree but the major lesson that I had learned was to leave the tension of contemporary politics behind and retreat into the safety of studying dead people in the past, although dead people can also be very politically charged – in our minds, at least. Living people who study dead people usually have more of a restrained passion, and so we can be protected, usually, from imprisonment simply for talking about them. Talking about living people was and is very serious business. That was clear to me from what I knew of South Korea at the time, where I had met Kim Dae Jung, who was then under house arrest, and others, who lived from day-to-day not knowing if they would be arrested, tortured, and imprisoned. The KCIA and its Taiwanese equivalent were real, palpable threats. I had been followed by Taiwanese police, strip-searched at airports, and had my photograph taken outside Korean prisons. The only reason I could escape was because I had an American passport.

For my Master's thesis I wrote about Korean-Japanese relations in the Tokugawa period. You may have noticed that I have been using that theme ever since as a way of exploring contemporary relations between Koreans and Japanese.

When I went back to Korea in 1983, I went for the serious study of the Korean language. What I discovered, in addition to the Korean language, were some of the darkest years under President Chun Doo Hwan. We would sit in a classroom and outside the window we could see the students of Yonsei University gathering to hurl rocks at police squads who were still being allowed onto campus. After throwing rocks, they would retreat, and then the police would come into the frame, and fire tear gas. At which point, without missing any part of the lesson or breaking her flow of conversation, our teacher would casually stand up, walk over to the window, and close it to keep the tear gas out. This was normal life. Democracy and the freedom of speech was something that was being fought over in front of our eyes. Students were arrested and killed; labour leaders disappeared: those were dark days.

Needless to say, you could not talk about North Korea at all. I knew a Japanese student who served time in a Korean prison for possessing North Korean books. Your friends had to be fairly drunk before they would freely talk about domestic politics – usually with jokes about how stupid the President was. But at the same time, I could stand in the middle of demonstrations and watch effigies of Ronald Reagan being burned – and yet my friends would then stop at 6:00 o'clock to go and attend their TOEFL classes. There was clearly a complexity to their lives that I had yet to fathom. The distinction between the reality of politics and the ideal of politics was very clear. They liked to have me around, because they could talk to me about the ideal. I was trying to get the reality out of them. And we both knew what was going on.

In 1985 I went back to Hawai'i to begin a PhD program in history, and I retreated again into the past: dead people are very pleasant people, very easy to talk to, once you get to

know something about them. The problem, of course, as all historians know, is not talking with the dead, but it is the challenge of trying to find out the things that they do not say.

For the sins of my youth, I lived more recent decades as a retiring academic. In 1987, I applied for Japanese government scholarship (then called a Monbushō) to study Korean history in Japan. My advisor at Hawai'i, Ch'oe Yōng-ho, told me that either the Japanese government will love my application or immediately toss it in the trash. Luck favoured me again. From 1987 to 1993, I spent wonderfully quiet years at Kyūshū University in Fukuoka studying Korean history and wrote a Ph.D. thesis that I submitted to the University of Hawai'i. At Kyūdai, I learned that Japanese scholars are well aware of all the problems that plague contemporary Korean-Japanese relations. My teachers and classmates offered me outstanding examples of the dispassionate and honest search for truth.

In summation, I have to lay claim to having some knowledge about freedom of speech. Yes, I was protected, and coddled, and sheltered – so my life was never in danger. But I got close enough to people whose lives were in danger to understand how serious it is to be able to say what you think, freely.

This brings me to the topic of the day, which is the threats facing academic freedom. There are three sources of pressure that curtail academic freedom: internal from our own institutions, internal from our intellectual debates, and external from the current governments of the countries we study. We are losing the ability to say what we think, freely, and it is getting worse. Although academics are actually hired to be critics, conformity is now considered normality.

I would like to discuss the three areas where I see pressures building that militate against free enquiry, but let me try first to explain what I mean by “free enquiry,” so that you understand my point of view.

“Free enquiry” is not like good art – that we know it when we see it. It is not subjective. Free enquiry in scholarship is the basis of science, and what we engage in is, in fact, science, and that is why our European colleagues often refer to “scientific activities” in relation to the humanities. What they mean is the formulation of hypotheses and the collection of data to test the hypotheses both positively and negatively, without fear or favour. This is what scientists do. We do not think this to be strange, because they are looking at the material world. So, why do we find this strange when we look at human endeavours? This is not a defence of social science, but it is a defence of rationality. Rationality is also used to explain emotions. Without rationality we would find it difficult to understand all the permutations of a poem by Ch'oe Ch'iwōn. Rationality allows us to see clearly that he can compose in a strict parallel style, which made him famous in Tang China, but that his prose and poetry was predominantly in an ancient or free style that conveys content laden with emotion. We need to pay attention to the objective style of communication as well as the subjective content; generally, this is what I mean when I refer to “free enquiry.”

Free enquiry has come under attack in recent years. It seems to be out of fashion or suffering from the delusion that all authority can be freely ridiculed. I ridiculed authority and still do, but I do not claim to know as much as my physician. That is another story, but the one I want to follow now is more insidious. Internal to educational institutions is the drive, building primarily from administrators who live in constant fear of funding cuts or lawsuits from aggrieved students, for academics to pursue two, often mutually exclusive objectives. One the one hand we are told to pursue external funding by writing grant proposals that occasionally even pay our own salary. On the other hand, we are told to “satisfy the customer,” people we know more commonly as students. Sometime in the recent past, this corporatist vision of outsourcing your costs and reducing education to a business transaction has grown in importance to reach some kind of critical mass, probably in correlation to the rise of the business schools and the snake oil they sell called the Masters of Business Administration.

Regretfully, departments in universities that have been dedicated to teaching methods have also acquired a proclivity towards what they call “educational administration.” This is all nonsense.

Students, by definition, are people who pay money to receive a discipline. If they do not like the discipline, they can withdraw. If you want to learn *karate* and expect that you will never break a bone, then *karate* is not for you. If you want to become a priest, you do not negotiate with the Church over doctrine. Universities are not restaurants, and the customer is rarely right. Herein lies the great push towards grade inflation, the great push towards limitation of time regarding the completion of research degrees in the name of “through-put,” and a host of dangers presented to the pursuit of truth, which I might define as a reality about which we can all agree until new evidence is presented. Truth is, as Sheila Miyoshi Jager recently reminded us, a product of consensus,<sup>1</sup> and as Stefan Knoob recently reminded us, truth is often reliant on real and constructed memories.<sup>2</sup> There are no different truths; there are simply different ways, almost always incomplete, of looking at the same phenomenon. But I digress.

While the nature of truth is and always will be controversial, I think the majority of us can agree that bureaucratism is a cancer, and it is the nature of bureaucracies to metastasize. The worst bureaucracies are academic bureaucracies, because academics work with the best of intentions, and they are trained to anticipate all possible risks and problems and design policies to address them, no matter how ridiculously remote the risk may be. My epiphany in this regard came in the middle of a college committee meeting when we were first presented with about fourteen pages of a risk assessment exercise in which we found references to chemical warfare, terrorist bombs, and pandemic disease. Beside these cataclysms were boxes with two or three sentences of what somebody thought would be an appropriate response. We sat in stunned silence until one of my colleagues asked, “what about thermonuclear war? It seems to be missing.”

The short of it is that we now spend large parts of our limited time talking to ourselves about trying to get somebody outside of the institution to pay our salaries, worrying over ludicrously remote possibilities, and trying to avoid challenging our students because that might puncture their overblown self-esteem. The result of all this is that we teach less and less, and we make fewer and fewer new discoveries through our research.

Turning now to the second point of pressure, we have to recognize that our intellectual environment is shifting. The shift has become extremely apparent in the North American case, and less apparent in the European case and in Asia, but I have seen the contagion begin to creep into the United Kingdom. We in Europe hear about American “trigger warnings,” “micro-aggressions,” and “safe spaces” on university campuses, where challenging ideas are excluded for fear of reminding students of some past trauma or contradicting their cherished beliefs. In the words of Lionel Shriver,

In an era of weaponized sensitivity, participation in public discourse is growing so perilous, so fraught with the danger of being caught out for using the wrong word or failing to uphold the latest orthodoxy in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Miyoshi Jager, “Re: [KS] Correcting the Record,” Korean Studies Listserv, 30/09/2016.

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Knoob, “[KS] Memories and narratives,” Korean Studies Listserv, 30/09/2016, “Against this scientific background [cognitive psychology] it seems to me that the only way that we can approach any historical event [Kwangju massacre] of such a complex nature is to try and gather as many accounts and documents as possible, from as many corners as possible, to try and establish a multi-dimensional narrative that can live with the possibility of alternative threads whenever the evidence itself is multi-faceted. And to then try to concentrate on the essence of the underlying conflict and the circumstances, beliefs and motivations of the different individual and collective actors in them.”

disability, sexual orientation, economic class, race or ethnicity, that many are apt to bow out.<sup>3</sup>

British universities are like canaries in the mine for Europe, in that Americanisms intrude there first. And so there are occasional dis-invitations and “denials of platform” to controversial speakers at the Oxford Union. Imagine a university debating society founded in 1823 shying away from challenging ideas. I have yet to be accused of “cultural appropriation” because I am white and I write about Koreans and Japanese, but I have been accused, behind my back I might add, of being “*ch’in-Il-p’a*,” because I happen to study Japan, too. Let me be the first to admit that I am a decadent and corrupt Orientalist who traffics in elitist authority, and I am from the American South, so I am a natural misogynist and racist. I am glad to get that off my chest, and I still take great pleasure in telling everyone that I work in one of the last “Oriental Institutes” left on the planet.

Finally, the third point of pressure bearing down on academic freedom in regards to Korea is the one that most of us thought we had long left behind: overt political pressure from the South Korean or North Korean governments. North Korea has been consistent in never abandoning its sensitivities and hatred of free enquiry, but the south turned decisively towards freedom of speech and freedom of enquiry from 1987 onwards. From 1992 South Korea became not only a model of economic development but also of political promise. The promise of a liberal, bourgeois society in South Korea has indeed come to fruition. I do not think that time is over, but I see worrying signs of state-led impositions on academic freedom, and these attacks are on us on the outside. I think that the attacks are rare but indicative of a strange new zealotry devoted to patriotically protecting the “branding” of South Korea.

In Europe and the United States, we have reports of outright political pressure being applied in its grossest form: embassy personnel attending lectures and taking notes, embassy personnel intimidating students, and embassy personnel delivering veiled and overt threats to academics. These threats include the potential curtailment of funding or the actual curtailment of funding, unfounded and slanderous accusations made in the public sphere in South Korea, and generally the application of fear with unknown consequences. These incidents are still rare, but they do exist and they demonstrate some mistaken notion of what scholars actually do. I know that this may come as a shock to many people, but most scholars are not engaged in political partisanship. We recognise partisanship in our ranks when we see it, and partisan papers and books fail to be published, at least by reputable presses. This is called peer review.

By way of conclusion, let me state again a few simple truths. Academic freedom rests on the complete freedom to pursue the truth as revealed through evidence. It is threatened by those who dislike objective truth: by frightened bureaucrats, by intellectual tribalists who are also found among our students, and by politicians who inhabit partisan worlds and believe that everybody lives in their narrow reality. The pursuit of truth is now being threatened by institutions, intellectual fashions, and political actors who value stability and the lack of controversy above intellectual disruption and innovation. Scholars are, by nature, lonely professional critics, and this is our service to society. If this is not what is wanted, and I must become a babysitter or a propagandist, then I want to be paid more money to sell my soul.

But, I want to end on an upbeat, because I believe the future holds more potential for good than bad, despite the dire warning lights that flash all around us these days. The hope we should hold close comes from the numbers attending here at this congress and the diversity represented by your scholarship. I just want you to defend that diversity.

Thank you for your attention.

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<sup>3</sup> Lionel Shriver, “Will the Left Survive the Millennials?” *New York Times*, 23 September 2016.