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## **Dreams for the “Northern Lands”: Imaginations and Interpretations of Manchuria and Siberia in Modern Korean Nationalism**

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### **Abstract**

For the Joseon Dynasty’s Neo-Confucian scholars, the “northern lands” lying beyond the Korean peninsula was considered dark and cold where fierce and uncivilised nomads lived. Goryeo Dynasty was different and its ruling elite showed great interests in the northern lands, which they wanted to recover as the territories of the ancient Goguryeo. It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Joseon Koreans migrated to southern Manchuria and the Russian Far East, that the Koreans began to pay attention towards the “North” again. In fact, the once “dark and cold” lands of north began to be seen as a land of hope and future for many Korean intellectuals when the country lost its sovereignty to Japan. Korean nationalist intellectuals such as Shin Chaeho and Yi Neung-hwa saw Manchuria and Siberia directly related to the history of Korean people and culture. Soon, other nationalist intellectuals like Hahm Seokheon envisioned Manchuria for the hope and future of Korea while lamenting the “unfair” ordeal of Korea under the colonial rule of Japan.

Koreans’ romantic imagination of Manchuria and Siberia revived in mid-1980s when large companies of South Korea, such as Hyundai, Daewoo, and SK, needed new markets for their products and also natural resources for their ever growing manufacturing business. In addition, the needs for cheaper source of labour of these industries and the presence of the ethnic Koreans in China’s northeast and the Soviet Union’s Central Asia augmented South Korean attention to these “northern lands”. When South Koreans came to see a possibility of national reunification with North Korea with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist bloc in the end of the 1980s, their attention to the “North” grew much bigger. Since then the “north” and “northern lands” have become a normalcy for South Koreans. The dream of the “Northern Lands” revived at the end of the Cold War, and this time there were both historical as well as entrepreneurial projects. The “Risorgimento” nationalist imaginations towards the northern lands regained popularity in the late 1980s when there were significant changes both in international relations (the end of the Cold War) and in South Korea’s economy (full engagement into the global economy). Ambitious politicians and businessmen wanted to develop Manchuria and Siberia in order to protect the country’s food security and also serve as a supplier of natural resources that was necessary for the nation’s economy. Such ambitions, however, somewhat faded out in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Recently, however, with the changes in political atmosphere on the Korean peninsula, they rise again in

the form of the Eurasian railway connections and oil and gas pipelines through the Korean peninsula.

Such changing interpretations of the "North" among Korean intellectuals provide an interesting base for the understanding of modern Korean nationalism and nationalist imaginations of geography. They show the changing attitudes toward, interpretations and imaginations of the lands, resources, and peoples of Manchuria and Siberia. Much of these changes happened simultaneously with large scale migrations of Koreans to Manchuria before and after Japan's domination of the Korean peninsula and Manchuria.

Manchuria and Siberia were parts of the "Asian Frontiers" (Sunil Amrith 2011) together with the Malay island and the Mekong Delta regions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which provoked expansionist imaginations of European colonialists as well as Chinese, Indian, and Korean migrants to the regions. While such "expansionist" vision for the weak and colonized nations for frontier lands is not new, the sudden revival of interests to the "Northern lands" among Koreans is enough to provoke some questions.

This paper explores the resurgence of Korean ambitions and dreams of the "Northern Lands" in relation to the political and economic changes in Korea and the outside world. From the perspective of macro-historical discursive analysis, this paper investigates when such dreams and ambitions revived, by whom, and in what forms.

## I. Introduction

For the Joseon Dynasty's Neo-Confucian scholars, the "northern lands" lying beyond the Korean peninsula was considered dark and cold where fierce and uncivilised nomads lived. In their Confucianism-based Sino-centric world view Joseon elite saw the peoples between Joseon and Ming China as barbarians. Such a negative perception was further reinforced and their resentment of the "northern barbarians" after the latter invaded Joseon in the end of 1636, to whom the Joseon king surrendered.

Goryeo Dynasty was different and its ruling elite showed great interests in the northern lands, which they wanted to recover as the territories of the ancient Goguryeo. It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Joseon Koreans migrated to southern Manchuria and the Russian Far East, that the Koreans began to pay attention towards the "North" again. In fact, the once "dark and cold" lands of north began to be seen as a land of hope and future for many Korean intellectuals when the country lost its sovereignty to Japan. Korean nationalist intellectuals such as Shin Chaeho and Yi Neung-hwa saw Manchuria and Siberia directly related to the history of Korean people and culture. Soon, other nationalist intellectuals like Hahm Seokheon envisioned Manchuria for the hope and future of Korea while lamenting the "unfair" ordeal of Korea under the colonial rule of Japan.

Koreans' romantic imagination of Manchuria and Siberia revived in mid-1980s when large companies of South Korea, such as Hyundai, Daewoo, and SK, needed new markets for their products and also natural resources for their ever growing manufacturing business. In addition, the needs for cheaper source of labour of these industries and the presence of the ethnic Koreans in China's northeast and the Soviet Union's Central Asia augmented South Korean attention to these "northern lands". When South Koreans came to see a possibility of national reunification with North Korea with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the communist bloc in the end of the 1980s, their attention to the "North" grew much bigger. Since then the "north" and "northern lands" have become a normalcy for South Koreans. The dream of the "Northern Lands" revived at the end of the Cold War, and this time there were both historical as well as entrepreneurial projects. The "Risorgimento" nationalist imaginations towards the northern lands regained popularity in the late 1980s when there were significant changes both in international relations (the end of the Cold War) and in South Korea's economy (full engagement into the global economy). Ambitious politicians and businessmen wanted to develop Manchuria and Siberia in order to protect the country's food security and also serve as a supplier of natural resources that was necessary for the nation's economy. Such ambitions, however, somewhat faded out in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Recently, however, with the changes in political atmosphere on the Korean peninsula, they rise again in the form of the Eurasian railway connections and oil and gas pipelines through the Korean peninsula.

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This paper explores the resurgence of Korean ambitions and dreams of the "Northern Lands" in relation to the political and economic changes in Korea and the outside world. From the perspective of macro-historical discursive analysis, this paper investigates when such dreams and ambitions revived, by whom, and in what forms.

## **II. Rising of Interests to Manchuria and Siberia (Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century – 1945)**

Joseon scholars interests in Manchuria did not rise but they left some records on Manchuria particularly when Joseon envoys passed the "northern lands" on their way to Beijing. One of them was the *Diary of Yeolha* by Park Ji-weon who was a part of the envoy to Qing in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (1780). By then, many of Joseon scholars were interested in the advanced technology, knowledge and economy of the Qing Dynasty, and Park Ji-weon was one of them. Nevertheless, Joseon scholars' view of the "northern lands" was still highly negative.

By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the "northern lands" gained attention as the geopolitical situation in northeast Asia began to change with the Russia's movement to south and also Koreans movement to Manchuria in search of cultivable land. This happened soon after the Chinese migration to Manchuria after the 1860s. Then, with the expansion of Japanese power to the Korean peninsula and the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894 brought Manchuria to the centre of attention.

It was mostly during the Japanese colonial period that Koreans came to learn about Manchuria and Siberia in earnest from Japanese sources. Some patriotic Koreans realised the importance of Manchuria for the survival of Koreans when Korea lost its sovereignty to Japan in 1910. They included nationalist historians such as Shin Chae-ho and Yi Neunghwa, who connected Koreans to Manchuria and Siberia historically and culturally. They even viewed the lands as the original Korean homeland before their ancestors moved to the Korean peninsula. The increasing number of Korean migrants to Manchuria and the Russian Far East also brought further attention to the lands among the Koreans. In particular,

Shin Chae-ho viewed Manchuria as the origin of the Korea's national history (Schmid 1997).

Nationalistic intellectuals promoted and encouraged Korean migration to these lands in the 1920s (Yi Jong-myeong 2018). Hahm Seok-heon, who had been educated in Japan, was the most prominent intellectual who openly promoted Manchuria as an essential territory of the Koreans. He claimed that Koreans must take Manchuria as their territory as this was a God's plan for the Korean nation.

Later, when the Manchukuo was established in 1932 by the Japanese Empire, more Koreans were semi-forced to migrate to Manchuria. Some ambitious Koreans saw the newly created state of Manchukuo as an opportunity. Korean businessmen such as Kim Yon-su thought that he would create Korean farms in the land-rich Manchuria to produce food (Kim, Yon-su 1981). Several Korean companies, including Samyangsa (for which Kim Yon-su served as a director) and Kyungbang (Kyungseong Spinning) opened their factories and business in Manchuria backed by the Japanese authorities. There were also many other ambitious Koreans who chose to study or work in Manchukuo and one of them was Park Chung-Hee, who became President of South Korea.

Korean capitalists such as Kim Yon-su were covetous of Manchuria for its abundant resources and huge market. Kim Yon-su visited Manchuria in 1921 as a member of "Manju Sichaltan" sponsored by the Pyongyang City (which was for Japanese businessmen) for one month. After the visit he wrote that how realised the importance of Manchuria :

I was overwhelmed by the sheer size of the continent, and at the same time I felt sympathetic to Chinese nation who led such poor life regardless of such abundant resources. I felt that we (Koreans) could not survive without Manchuria. I made up my mind that someday I would do some business in a large scale in Manchuria. This is still my belief that has never changed until today (Kim, Yon-su 1975: 53).

He described Chinese in Manchuria as uncivilized and dirty.

The most strong impression for me in Manchuria was not the exotic scenery or imported jewel but the poverty of Chinese. Their clothes were shiny with oily filth and their fingernails were long and sharp as those of wild birds. Their runny noses and sunken eyes made me suspect if they were all opium addicts (Kim, Yon-su 1975: 52-53).

Then, he exerted his business acumen and planned to establish large scale Korean farms in Manchuria by utilising the Korean migrants to Manchuria. He states:

In 1934 I formalized the Samyangsa, which was to manage my personal property, into a judicial person, and planned to run plantations in Manchuria. It was the time of the global depression,

and in Korea it brought an agricultural depression, which impoverished most of peasants. Huge number of peasants were moving to Manchuria, and I thought that building plantations in Manchuria would help these Korean peasants. Such calculations urged me to expand into Manchuria. Those Korean peasants who migrated to Manchuria knew nothing but farming, and they were not capable of engaging in other business... Therefore, I decided to build plantations and settle Korean peasants in my plantations (Kim Yon-su. "Kim Yon-su" in Chang Kang-jae ed. *Chaegye Hoego*. Seoul: Hanguk Ilbosa, 1981:53]

Then, after the Korean War and in the midst of the Cold War, Manchuria and Siberia virtually disappeared from ordinary South Koreans' attention except some historians. By the 1980s when the Cold War began to show signs of thaw, these "northern lands" returned to Koreans.

### **III. Economic, Popular, and Political Interests (1980s-1990s)**

There emerged serious economic interest in the "north lands" particularly for its natural resources as well as new market for Korean products. Here the major promoter of such ideas was large conglomerates such as Hyundai.

Hyundai's former Chief Executive Officer Yi Myong-bak, who became the 17<sup>th</sup> President of South Korea (2008-2013), was one of the most prominent person who advocated for South Korea's needs and inevitable use of Siberian natural resources including natural gas in Yakutia, Russia. In 1995 he stated that Korea was blessed by God with the availability of Yakutia's abundant natural gas. In his autobiography *Sinhwa nun Optta* [It was no myth] (1995), Yi claims that Siberia is a saviour for South Korea. He says that he reaffirmed his dream [of developing Siberia's natural resources] when he visited Siberia. Then, he thanks God for such an opportunity:

Watching Siberia from the airplane, I reaffirmed my dream (293)... The most exciting thing for us in Yakutia was its natural gas. They say that its gas reserves is almost 6 billion tonnes, which is enough for Korea to consume for more than fifty years. Regardless of such huge gas reserves the population of Yakutia is only two million, and other than Korea there is no country where they can export this gas. Europe is too far from Yakutia and it would not be economical to export this gas to all the way to Europe. The Far East is the only feasible place for exportation. It takes only 3,800 km to Korea. Overall, this gas has been reserved only for Korea. I sincerely thanked God for this unbelievable energy preservation (Yi, Myong-bak 1995: 303).

Then, he also expresses his wish to make the Russian Maritime Province to Korea's territory:

Whenever I think of the north the first thing that comes into my mind is the Maritime Province. One hundred years ago, if only our ancestors had opened their eyes and had defended their country from the invading imperial forces, now our country would have been the master of the Northeast Asia, and we would have expanded our territories all the way to Manchuria and the Maritime Province (Yi, Myung-bak 2991:314).

These big business was the heralds of the revived attention to Manchuria and Siberia, and soon politicians joined them. In the late 1980s newly elected South Korean President Roh Tae-woo initiated a new policy of "Nord Politics". His administration pursued active engagements with China and the Soviet Union. In addition, the migration of Joseonjok (ethnic Koreans in China) to South Korea raised further interests in the old Manchuria, where most of the Joseonjok people reside. South Korean tourists began to visit the Yanbian Joseonjok Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province and they often returned with nationalistic sentiments towards the ethnic Koreans there and also to the old history of Goguryeo and Balhae, which used to occupy most of Manchuria.

One researcher at the Samsung Institute of Economy views the future of the Korean nation in terms of great pan-Korean nationalist ambition:

There live two million Koreans in China, eight hundred thousand in Japan, and one million and two hundred thousand in the United States. The total number of overseas Koreans is said to be roughly five million. The fact that overseas Koreans are concentrated in the four superpowers is greatly advantageous for our global policy. Cooperating with those overseas brothers, we must form a "Pan-Korean Economic and Cultural Community" and let our overseas brothers act as intermediaries in developing bilateral relationships between their host countries and their mother country. Let them, principally, be loyal to their host countries and, secondarily, let them work to develop a friendly relationship between their host countries and Korea.... The developmental goals for the Korean nation are first to gain membership in the OECD, and by the end of the twentieth century we will gain membership in the Group of Seven. After the twenty-first century, our country will become an ultra-superpower (ch'o gangdaeguk), and our power will expand all over the world just as the power of the Great Britain of the nineteenth century or that of the U.S. of the twentieth century (Ku Chong-sŏ 1995, 178-9).

Romantic imagination of Manchuria as a territory that Koreans should recover was popular among South Koreans in the 1990s. It was the time when the country's economy continued to grow and Koreans had high level of confidence, which was also augmented with Koreans' historical victimhood by its powerful neighbours. This was well represented in a popular song "In the Wilderness" (Gwangyaeso) composed and worded by Mun Dae-hyeon in the mid-1980s.

There is bloody cry on this land that disappeared with its broken bosom.  
There is a blood vein of the white clothes rising from the clutching hands.  
From the sun-rising east to the sun-setting west  
From the hot south to the open Manchurian fields  
We shall not be poor, we shall not be hesitant  
Oh, the hot soil that we grabbed on the field where we stand again.

Relying on such romantic ideas of the Korean societies, such resorgimento nationalist themes were frequently used in various media in commercial advertisements. They often incorporated the image of the powerful country of Goguryeo, which had occupied most of Manchuria between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries in history.

A 1997 advertisement for Chinnokch'ŏn, an herbal drink, associates bodily energy with that of the "conquering" spirit (*chŏngbok chŏngsin*) of Koguryŏ, the ancient Korean kingdom that occupied large areas of northern Korean peninsula and most of Manchuria. Its caption reads: "The Spirit that Once Dominated the Continent! Wake up, Koreans!" Koguryŏ carries many connotations in contemporary popular nationalism both in South and North Korea: it not only suggests the proud tradition of the conquering state, but it also evokes energy, spirit, and especially national "virility." Indeed, the images and symbols of Koguryŏ have frequently been utilized in various advertisements and commercials as seen below.

Doosan's "One Thousand Seven Hundred Eyes Watching the Kwanggaet'o Stele" exploits a similar historical word choice. The Kwanggaet'o stele is a stone monument that was erected by the Koguryŏ king Kwanggaet'o to mark the territories of his kingdom. The same advertisement calls attention to the company's funding Korean teachers on visits to Manchuria, especially the archaeological remains of Koguryŏ. The purpose of these trip is, according to the advertisement, to educate teachers about the "proud conquering spirit of Koreans" so that they would instil their students in South Korea with the same. Similar is the 1996 advertisement of Daelim Automobile (The Spirit of the Koguryŏ Kingdom), which also features the Kwanggaet'o stele. These recurrent references to Koguryŏ reveal the dual standards of Korean national identity, which, on one hand, emphasizes the peaceful character of the nation (i.e., such as the "land of the morning calm"), but, on the other hand, boasts of the conquering character of Koguryŏ.

The use of Koguryŏ to symbolize Korean national identity is not so strange when one considers the popular business discourse of national expansion to Manchuria, and especially its desire to utilize the presence of the two million Koreans in northern China today.

#### IV. The "Northern Dream"

Koreans today and past have used geographical boundaries for Korea such as "bando samcholli" (the Peninsula 3000-ri long), "paldo" (the eight province), and these terms confine the territories of Korea into the Korean Peninsula, not including Manchuria. Nevertheless, both romantic and practical interests in Manchuria and Siberia among South Koreans seem to live and in fact they have become even stronger.

Recently there have appeared numerous academics and journalists who specialise on Manchuria and Siberia. This became possible thanks to the accessibility to the "northern lands" in China and Russia after the 1990s. This year alone, there were at least several books published on Manchuria, Manchurian history, culture and language. A few examples include:

Yi, Hun. *Manjujok Iyagi* (2018)

Yi, Myeong-jong (2018) *Geundae Hanguineui Manju Insik* [Modern Koreans' Perception on Manchuria] Seoul: Hanyang University Press.

There was even a Manchurian language textbook published in 2015 even though today the language is not used: Yi, Seon-ae & Gyeong-na Kim (2015) *Chogeup Manjueo* [Manchurian Language for Beginners]. Seoul: Bagmunsa.

Yi Hun states that understanding the Manchus and Qing Dynasty is "not just to expand our knowledge of a neighbouring nation and their state, but to understand the history of our own [Korean] country and nation."

The Korean "resorgimento" nationalism that insists that old Koguryo's territories should be recovered. They include Tanguinists, shamanists, and other megalomaniacs who insist that ancient Korean territories had included most of today's Siberia, Northern China, and Manchuria, and Koreans were the "master" race in ancient history. Kim Jeong-bin's novel *Tan*, Ham Sok-hon's *Ttusuro bon Hanguksa*, and some Christians' prediction on the Koreans as God-chosen people all belong to this.

The Haeoe Hanminjok Yonguso, which is run by Yi Yun-gi, has been publishing the journal *Hanminjok Kongyongche* [The Korean Commonwealth] in South Korea since the early 1990s. Its Director Yi has been promoting South Korea's attention to the "northern lands" as the survival strategy of the Korean nation. He argues:

"The history of Korean nation has been the history of their southward movement from Mongolia to Manchuria and Maritime Province and finally to the Korean Peninsula. Now is the time when we should create the new history by moving toward north, from the Korean Peninsula to Yonbyon (in Manchuria) and the Maritime Province. This is the opportunity that came in one thousand years since the time when Balhae fell. Sooner or later we can achieve

national reunification, expand to and develop Yonbyon and the Maritime Province, enjoy economic prosperity, and when Korean culture prospers in these areas, we can realize our dream of creating the Korean Commonwealth. This is the direction of our nation in the twenty-first century and this is our survival strategy” (Yi 2013: 15).

Appeasement policy toward North Korea

Trans-Siberian Rail Way

Korea as a hub

China’s One Belt One Road Policy

## **V. Conclusion**

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