The nation, the people, and the possibilities of the post-national

Historiographies of late nineteenth-century Korean reform movements

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Now in the second decade of the twenty-first century, South Korea is a global presence. South Korean corporations operate around the world as their products and technologies are produced and consumed across the continents while people of multiple languages and nationalities have immersed themselves in the pop-culture artefacts of the “Korean Wave.” Considering the widespread grinding poverty of the first decades after the Korean War, it is not hard to conceive of the current place of Korea in the world as an emergence, as a rise of an almost Aristotelian spontaneity. Indeed, this trope is common in academic and popular writings alike, but it is also possible to consider the place of South Korea in the world not as a rise but as a return. For the more than 500 years prior to the Japanese annexation in 1910, Chosŏn state, society, and culture were deep within the mainstreams of the philosophies, statecraft, literatures, and arts of the East Asian world. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, decades of internal socio-political instability coupled with an increasing chafing against the expansion of the global capitalist economy and the associated machinations of competing imperia provoked Chosŏn intellectuals and officials to engage in increasingly urgent interrogations of received bodies of political and intellectual practice. These critical engagements led to a number of social and political reform movements seeking a rehabilitation of state and society that would shepherd a strong, prosperous, and independent Chosŏn in the twentieth century. The late nineteenth century thus marked the beginning of more than 100 years of both material and epistemic violence through which the Koreas north and south have come to dramatically reposition themselves in the modern world. This initial period of critique and exploration has provided the frame and foundations for Korean encounters with and shaping of the global modernities in which we now live.

Crises of the nineteenth century

The reform movements of the late nineteenth century emerged in a society that had already undergone considerable political and economic stresses in the preceding decades, stresses that
touched the whole of the society from the *yangban* elite to the common peasantry. Growing numbers of *yangban*, particularly those in rural areas outside the capital, found themselves alienated from political and economic privilege. This is in part attributable to the weakness of Chosŏn monarchy after 1800. Chosŏn kings of the nineteenth century all came to the throne in compromising circumstances. King Sunjo ascended the throne in 1800 at the age of eleven and within a year the royal in-laws, the Andong Kim clan, came to dominate the court. Upon Sunjo’s death in 1834, King Hŏnjong ascended the throne at the age of eight and his court too was controlled by the consort clan, the P’ungyang Cho. Hŏnjong died in 1849 without issue and was succeeded by a distant member of the royal family living in poverty and alleged illiteracy on Kanghwa Island. The Andong Kim managed to install one of their daughters as the royal consort Queen Ch’ŏrin and then again reign supreme in the Chosŏn court. When Ch’ŏlch’ŏng died in 1863 without issue, Queen Dowager Sinjong and Yi Ha-ŭng brought Yi’s twelve-year-old son to the throne as King Kojong in 1864. Kojong married a daughter of the Yŏhŭng Min clan, which came to dominate the Chosŏn government into the 1890s and remained central to Chosŏn politics until the end of the dynasty in 1910. This dominance of the consort clans (*sedo chŏngch’i*) had implications far beyond the machinations of court intrigue in the high politics of the capital. They secured their hegemony through the control of government appointments, limiting access to real political power to the scions of their houses and affiliated families. The result was a growing body of *yangban* who had passed the highest of the civil service exams but were excluded from positions in the government.

The frustration of this marginalized elite was particularly acute in P’yŏngan Province, where successful civil service examinees suffered not only from the grim prospects for official appointment under the restrictions of consort clan rule but also from the regional biases of the capital bureaucracy. In the winter of 1812, Hong Kyŏngnae and his associates, members of this thwarted regional elite, took it upon themselves to bring the end of the dynasty. They attacked the Kasa magistracy, killed its staff, and took over the town. Within two weeks the rebellion had grown to seize a significant portion of the northwest of P’yŏngan Province north of the Ch’ungch’ŏng River with little resistance as many of their fellow elites and local officials were sympathetic to his cause. Several defeats at the hands of government forces in the early spring forced Hong and his rebels into a defensive posture. By the end of that summer, government forces laid siege to the rebels at Chŏngju and eventually broke through the defences and crushed the rebellion after four months. The Chosŏn state succeeded in subduing Hong and his forces, but it entered into its final century facing a fundamental challenge to its authority and legitimacy that it had not seen for generations (Kim, Sun Joo 2007a).

While the exclusive political practices of the central government limited the prospects for political participation and advancement for an increasingly marginalized *yangban* elite, the peasants who comprised the overwhelming majority of the Chosŏn population were facing far greater existential threats in the face of official usury under the auspices of state granaries. The state granary system had originally been tasked with maintaining grain stores for the purposes of providing famine relief, ensuring adequate military provisions, maintaining price stability in grain markets by purchasing surpluses or releasing reserves, and providing seed and working capital in the form of grain loans to enable peasants to survive the spring and summer seasons when food stores were low and harvests were yet to be brought in. Ideally these were to be interest-free loans, but early in the dynasty the state began to charge interest and wastage fees. Over the duration of the Chosŏn state, the system that was originally envisioned as a service to impoverished peasants came to constitute a revenue stream for both central and local governments; the grain loan system became a permanent tax. By the nineteenth century it was common practice for magistrates to charge interest and miscellaneous fees not only to supplement official budgets.
but also to enrich themselves. By mid-century some peasants even found themselves coerced into taking out loans at usurious rates as official corruption forced many to navigate a precarious course between subsistence, destitution, and outright starvation (Yang Chin-sŏk 2003a).

In the spring of 1862, peasants in Kyŏngsang Province could take no more and rose in rebellion in Chinju. The uprising spread rapidly through Chŏlla and Ch’ungch’ŏng Provinces to eventually include more than seventy different locations. The geographic scope of the rebellions, however, did not translate into a broad unified assault on the Chosŏn state itself. While the grain loan system was one of the main reasons for the uprisings, it was not the only one (Kim, Sun Joo 2007b). Grievances varied with local circumstances, and the targets of peasant ire were often distinctly proximate. The rebellions did prompt the state to institute limited reforms, but the underlying structural causes of unrest remained largely unaddressed (Han’guk Yŏksa Yŏn’guhoe, ed., 1993; Yang 2003b; Kim 2007b).

In addition to the domestic problems the Chosŏn state faced, the decade from 1866 to 1876 saw a series of international incidents that radically and irrevocably altered the place of Chosŏn in the world. During the summer of 1866, the General Sherman, an American-owned and piloted merchant ship with a crew of Malays and Chinese, sailed up the Taedong River to P’yŏngyang seeking trade. The General Sherman refused to comply with Chosŏn instructions to await word from Seoul and there were violent exchanges. After the death of several Koreans, the governor of P’yŏngan Province ordered the ship destroyed; there were no survivors. In the fall of the same year, the French launched a punitive expedition to avenge the Chosŏn execution of a French priest. Seven ships and 600 men under the command of Admiral Roze raided shore installations, but Chosŏn forces repelled them. Two years later, the German adventurer launched a peculiar expedition to disinter the Chosŏn regent’s father’s bones and hold them hostage in order to exact a trade agreement with the Chosŏn court. Chosŏn forces quickly dispatched Oppert and his men. In 1871, Frederick Low, United States minister to China, and Admiral John Rodgers lead an expedition of five US naval vessels and 1,200 men to investigate the fate of the General Sherman. Initial inquiries with Chosŏn officials produced no results. The Americans sailed closer to the mouth of the Han River, some thirty miles from Seoul, where Chosŏn shore batteries fired upon them. Low and Rodgers later launched a punitive attack on shore installations on Kanghwa Island. US casualties were insignificant, but hundreds of Koreans were killed in the ensuing combat before the Americans withdrew.

The Chosŏn government under the leadership of the Taewŏn’gun, father and de facto regent of King Kojong, mistakenly understood themselves to have successfully fended off the Americans, the French, and even the Germans without taking into consideration that none of these predations was undertaken with the intent or even authority to execute further military action. The Chosŏn government felt these skirmishes demonstrated its ability to adequately manage its own defence against hostile enemies and thus made little attempt to commence the extensive technological and institutional reforms then underway in Meiji Japan (Palais 1975). Chosŏn ignored developments in Japan at its own risk, however. In 1875, the Japanese sent the ship Unyŏ to survey waters near the mouth of the Han River. The voyage provoked fire from Chosŏn shore batteries, providing the Japanese with the justification for returning the following year to demand and ultimately conclude an unequal treaty with the Chosŏn government closely reminiscent of the United States treaties imposed upon Japan in the 1850s. Although this agreement, now known as the Kanghwa Treaty, was not fully implemented until the 1880s, it was the first of a series of treaties the Chosŏn state would conclude through the 1880s and 1890s with other states and marked the beginning of a fundamental repositioning of the Chosŏn state within the global geopolitics of the nineteenth century.
By the close of the 1870s, Chosŏn had passed through decades of political, economic, social, and finally geopolitical transformations that signalled to some that the existing socio-political order was incapable of responding to rapidly changing domestic and international environments. The Qing Empire had embarked upon a path of so-called self-strengthening in the early 1860s, and the Japanese followed in the late 1860s with even more radical reforms under the new Meiji order. By 1880, Chosŏn was already fifteen to twenty years behind its neighbours, but with a younger king open to reform and a newer generation of officials following the developments in Japan and the Qing Empire, it was indeed plausible that Chosŏn too might mobilize to reform its social and political institutions to meet the challenges and fully engage in the global modernities of the late nineteenth century.

Moderates and radicals: enlightenment thought in the 1880s

By the early 1880s, there was a small group of reformist officials in the Chosŏn court who sought social and institutional change to meet the merging domestic and international challenges of the nineteenth century. While most of them had come into contact with earlier forms of reformist thought during the 1870s through figures such as Pak Kyu-su, who himself came from reformist intellectual lineages dating back to the eighteenth century, the so-called enlightenment party (kaehwap’a) was generally divided between two factions: the moderates (on’gŏn kachwap’a) and the radicals (kŭpchin kachwap’a). The moderates looked to the Qing model of technological transformation with limited institutional and cultural change, while the radicals took inspiration from the more revolutionary approach of the Meiji reforms still underway in Japan.

In 1880, Chosŏn envoy Kim Hong-jip travelled to Japan where he met with the Qing diplomat Huang Zunxian. Huang presented him with an outline policy for the reform of Chosŏn diplomatic and trade relations entitled Chaoxian celue or “A Strategy for Korea.” While Huang drafted the text, it largely represented the consensus of Li Hongzhang, Qing Commissioner for Northern Ports and chief creator of Qing policy toward Chosŏn, and his staff. The text famously identified Russia as the chief threat to the security of Qing, Chosŏn, and Japan and recommended that King Kojong enter into close relations with Qing, Japan, and the United States in order to build a matrix of overlapping treaty obligations that would guarantee Chosŏn territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of possible Russian aggression. The document was also a call for Chosŏn to adopt the self-strengthening paradigm of the Qing Empire by adopting western military, transportation, and communications technologies. King Kojong and his inner circle accepted the proposals with enthusiasm and after dispatching considerable domestic opposition among conservative rural scholars in particular, he set about implementing the proposals (Van Lieu 2010). To this end, the Chosŏn government created a new office, the T’ongni Kimu Amun, based on the Qing Zongli Yamen, as something of a foreign office responsible for international relations, commercial affairs, foreign language education, military affairs, and armaments production. Kojong also sent a mission to negotiate new protocols for Chosŏn-Qing relations and a group of Chosŏn artisans under the leadership of Kim Yun-sik to Tianjin to train in the most current methods and armament and ship production in Qing armouries and students to study foreign languages.

The Chosŏn government also looked to Japan as a model of reform, sending observers to Japan in 1881–1882 and hiring a Japanese drill instructor to train a new unit of the Chosŏn army in modern tactics and weaponry. The resources and pay this so-called Special Skills Unit (pyŏlkijun) received became the cause of no small amount of resentment among the existing capital units, who by 1882 had not been paid in months. When the quartermaster finally did distribute their pay in rice during the summer of 1882, the soldiers found that the rice was...
mixed with sand and stones to increase the weight while reducing the actual amount of rice distributed. They exploded in revolt, killing the Japanese drill instructor and the Japanese legation and burning down the houses of Chosŏn officials associated with the Special Skills Unit and other reforms. The Taewŏn’gun took advantage of the ensuing mayhem to reinstate himself as regent and systematically undo the military and institutional reforms of the previous two years (Cho Sŏng-yun 2003).

Concerned with the possibility of Japanese military intervention in Chosŏn, the Qing court rapidly deployed a force of some 4,500 to Seoul. Upon their arrival, they abducted the Taewŏn’gun and detained him in Tianjin, dispatched the Chosŏn troops who had revolted, and reinstated Kojong to the throne. This was the beginning of a deep and direct Qing involvement in Chosŏn affairs that was to last until the Japanese victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. For the next two years, the Qing military presence also served to enforce Qing interests in further reforms of the Chosŏn state. During this period, Qing representatives oversaw the creation of the Chosŏn customs service and telegraph lines while Qing diplomats concluded treaties securing Qing political and commercial interests.

Moderate officials like Kim Yun-sik and Ô Yun-jung, among others, saw no need to fundamentally change Chosŏn society or institutions; all that was truly needed to meet the challenges of the age was to embrace the technologies of the west and simply insert them into the existing socio-political milieu (Chang In-sŏng 2002; No Tae-hwan 2005; Kim Sŏng-bae 2009). In 1968, the historian Han U-gŭn famously characterized this stance with the phrase he coined, “eastern ways, western means” (tongdo sŏgi) (Han U-gŭn 1968; No Tae-hwan 2005). This interest in maintaining the socio-cultural as well as institutional status quo often led these men to maintain a pro-Qing stance. Much like the Northern Learning (pukhak) scholars of the turn of the end of the eighteenth century, the moderates at the end of the nineteenth century saw the Qing Empire as the locus of practical reform and placed trust in the integrity of the 250-year peaceful relationship between the Qing and Chosŏn states.

The typically younger, radical reform-minded officials, however, had no interest in or patience for piecemeal reform that did not engage in socio-political transformation as well as technological change. Deeply suspicious of the moderates’ dependence on both the Qing model and the Qing state, this alternative group looked not to the north but to the east for their inspiration. In 1882–1883, several young Chosŏn officials, Kim Ok-kyun chief among them, studied in Japan, then deep in the throes of the Meiji reforms, and came to develop close relationships with educator and reformer Fukuzawa Yukichi. These students returned to Chosŏn wholly unable to accept the existing order into which the moderates sought to import their new technologies; they wanted nothing less than revolution.

With the encouragement and the material aid of the Japanese legation in Seoul, Kim Ok-kyun and his associates executed a coup d’état in December of 1884 (Cook 1972; Ch’ŏnga P’yŏnjippu 1983; Sin Yong-ha 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Yun Pyŏng-hŭi 2003a, 2003b). The coup was initially a success as Kim and his party seized control of the government and announced a fourteen-point plan to reform Chosŏn state and society. The planned reforms included ending the tributary relationship with the Qing Empire, which they deemed naught but “empty ritual” (hŏrye), abolishing all formal status distinctions and adopting the principle of equal rights for all, abolishing the grain loan system, rooting out corruption and instituting aid for the indigent, and centralizing all fiscal affairs under the purview of the ministry of revenue (hojo). These and other institutional reforms were to be the beginning of transformation of Chosŏn modelled after the Meiji reforms then still underway in Japan. As radical and potentially transformative as these reforms would have been, the new government lasted only three days before it collapsed under the military might of the combined Qing and Chosŏn military units under the command
of Yuan Shikai, a young Qing officer tasked with the training and command of new units of the Chosŏn army. Aside from a handful of armed guards from the Japanese legation, Kim and his party had no real arms to speak of and soon fled. Kim and other made it to exile in Japan while many more were killed on the spot or later executed for treason.

The failure of the Coup of 1884 effectively put an end to meaningful reform in Chosŏn for the next ten years (Lew 1984). The Qing Empire installed Yuan Shikai as a de facto imperial resident in Seoul the following year and secured unparalleled influence in Chosŏn, with little enthusiasm for the kinds of self-strengthening reforms it had once encouraged King Kojong to pursue only two years previously (Larsen 2008; Van Lieu 2009, 2010). The Japanese remained largely passive, unable to challenge Qing supremacy in Chosŏn. Those Chosŏn reformers who remained both alive and within the country maintained a low profile, while those who fled were trapped in a helpless exile in Japan for the better part of a decade. Kim Ok-kyun himself fled to Japan, where he largely refrained from political activity. Chosŏn agents eventually tracked him down while he travelled in Shanghai and assassinated him. They brought his corpse back to Chosŏn, where the government had it cut into pieces and put on public display in different locations throughout the country as a warning to others who might consider another revolution.

The Tonghak Rebellion and the Kabo Reforms, 1894–1895

The remainder of the 1880s remained largely without serious unrest, but by the early 1890s there were increasing tensions in the southwest of the country as merchants from Qing and Japan scoured the countryside for rice and bean harvests, bringing distortions to local markets and causing tensions in rural areas where foreigners were generally not welcome. The pressures of Chosŏn’s integration into the global capitalist system coupled with local officials leveeing taxes and corvée for their own enrichment made for a politically fragile situation that in 1894 erupted into violence and a rebellion of such scale that for a time it threatened the viability of the Chosŏn state. The moving force behind this rebellion were members of the Tonghak faith, a syncretic religion incorporating elements of Confucianism, Daoism, and Catholicism. The founder of the faith, Ch’oe Che-u, had been executed by the state in 1864, and by the early 1890s the faithful petitioned the government for his exoneration without significant result. The Tonghak finally took up arms in the summer of 1894, but by that time the aggrieved were no longer limited to Tonghak believers but also tens of thousands of peasants suffering under official abuse and the burdens of socio-economic inequality. The uprising met with considerable early success and established what amounted to a proto-state that administered large swaths of the southwest of the country and enacted reforms that deposed corrupt officials, abolished status distinctions, rectified systems of taxation, and curtailed foreign commercial activity in an effort to correct local and regional market distortions (Weems 1964; Han’guk Yŏksa Yŏn’guhoe, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997; Kallander 2013; Moon 2013b; Young 2014).

The Chosŏn government initially found itself unable to stop the Tonghak advance toward Seoul and called upon the Qing Empire to intervene military. The Qing military escalation prompted the Japanese to send an expeditionary force as well. By this time the Chosŏn government has managed to stop the Tonghak advance through negotiation, but the close proximity of Qing and Japanese forces soon led to combat and the opening of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 (Cho Chae-gon 2003; Pak Yŏng-jae 2003). The Japanese quickly took Seoul and surrounded the palace. Under these circumstances King Kojong readily agreed to a Japanese proposal to form a “deliberative council” (kun’guk kimuch’ŏ) under the leadership of Kim Hong-ji. In the nearly six months that it was active, from July through December of 1894, the council enacted more than 200 laws, collectively known as the Kabo Reforms, named for the kabo year.
of the lunar calendar (1894–1895) in which they began. The reforms, based in no small part on the Meiji reforms enacted in Japan in late 1860s and through the 1870s, restricted the Chosŏn government by establishing the post of prime minister, creating a cabinet, and completely reorganizing the old ministries. The new government stripped away much of the authority of the throne and placed it in the new office of the prime minister and his cabinet, concentrated all fiscal authority in the newly created ministry of finance, and abolished the civil service examination system. The reforms also brought an end to slavery, yangban legal privilege, state-granted merchant monopolies, torture, and guilt by association while embracing the principle of the rule of law, creating a hierarchical system of courts and a new police system, adopting the Gregorian calendar, and implementing a Western-style education system with an emphasis on training in the technology and the sciences (Son In-su 1980; Yu Yong-ik 1990; Yi Hae-myŏng 1991; Yu Yong-ik 1998, 2003).

The scope of the political and social change embodied in these reforms was enormous and thus, unsurprisingly, they did not meet with the unanimous support of the court. The king had been side-lined in the process and there were more than a few officials, and even the politically powerful Queen Min herself, who approved neither of the pace and content of the reforms nor of the central role played by the officials of the Japanese legation. By 1895 the Japanese had won a decisive victory against the Qing Empire and appeared unassailable, but before they were able to consolidate their position, Russia, Germany, and France, in what has come to be known as the Triple Intervention, pressured Japan into forfeiting its lease on the Liaodong Peninsula that it had recently won in the peace negotiations with the Qing Empire (Kang Ch’ang-il 2003). Sensing weakness, anti-Japanese and pro-Russian elements in the Chosŏn court deposed key pro-Japanese officials and threatened continued Japanese influence. In October of 1895, believing her to be the locus of the anti-Japanese faction, Japanese minister Miura Gorō sent assassins armed with swords into the queen’s quarters where they murdered her and her ladies-in-waiting and then burned her body on the courtyard. The assassination served only to ignite a nationwide outrage and stir anti-Japanese sentiment into a storm of unprecedented apoplexy. By February of 1896, the king had fled his own palace to take refuge in the Russian legation, where he, his inner circle, and a coterie of pro-Russian officials conducted the affairs of the Chosŏn state without consultation with the Japanese or their now dwindled supporters at court (Yi Min-wŏn 2003a). The new government and most of the hundreds of reforms it decreed were effectively finished.

The Independence Club

Over the three-year period from 1894 to 1896, various factions of the Chosŏn court had depended on direct Qing military intervention, direct Japanese military intervention, and finally on the Triple Intervention and the provision of the haven of the Russian legation. Sŏ Chae-p’il, Yun Ch’i-ho, and others did not see any long-term advantage in the Chosŏn government constantly allying itself with more powerful foreign states and instead sought to define a path of true independence in which a viable Chosŏn state would have sufficient political, economic, military, and diplomatic resources to stand on its own in the international community. To this end, they established the Independence Club in 1896. The club first devoted its energies to the construction of the Independence Gate (tongnimmun) at the site of the old Gate of Welcoming Imperial Grace (yŏngnimmun) where Chosŏn officials once welcomed Ming and Qing imperial envoys, the acquisition of the former official guest house for Qing envoys and renaming it “Independence Hall,” and the creating of an Independence Park (Chandra 1988). The club also organized a variety of educational activities, including lectures and debates on the issues of the day pertaining
to the question of Chosŏn independence. Among the more lasting of the club’s projects was the publication of a newspaper in both Korean (Tongnip sinmun) and English (The Independent). The Tongnip sinmun is remarkable not only for its extensive exploration of liberal political ideals but also for its having been published entirely in the Korean vernacular script, now known as Han’gŭl. The club saw independence not only as a political state of being also a cultural condition. Rather than employ the Classical Chinese more common in formal publications of the day, the club employed the vernacular script as a bold statement of Chosŏn political and cultural self-reliance (Yu Yong-nyŏl 2003).

When the club formed in 1896, the king was still residing in the Russian legation. There is little about that arrangement that could be construed as independent, so the club vociferously called for the king to return to the palace and, moreover, declare the Kingdom of Chosŏn an empire and declare himself an emperor rather than a king. This would place Chosŏn on the same level as the Japanese, Qing, and Russian empires on its borders and move the Chosŏn state that much further to safeguarding its independence in a maelstrom of global imperial rivalries. When the king left the Russian legation and return to his palace, he did indeed declare himself an emperor with his own reign era, “kwangmu,” and he renamed the state “the Great Han Empire” (Yi Min-wŏn 2003b). It was not hard for the newly enthroned Kwangmu Emperor to find the Independence Club both acceptable and useful in this period as their work of securing Korean independence and calling for the creation of an imperial institution was seamlessly flush with his own intent to become an absolute monarch in both name in reality. As he moved to relocate executive and fiscal authority in the throne, however, the Kwangmu Emperor was to clash with the more liberal strands of the Independence Club of which he was not yet particularly aware (Kim To-hyang 1994; Sŏ Yong-hŭi 2003; Yi Yun-sang 2003; Hwang, 2006; Kim Do-hyung 2006; Chang Yong-suk 2010).

By the spring of 1898, the Independence Club was publishing editorials and holding public discussions on representative government, popular political participation, and the creation of a deliberative assembly to participate in the creation and implementation of imperial policy. The club proposed the transformation of the Privy Council (ch’ungch’uwŏn) from a body largely without substantive role in deliberation or decision making into something of a national assembly with a central role in policy (Chandra 1988; Wang Hyŏn-jong 2003). Increasingly suspicious of the club’s intentions, the emperor was reluctant to accept the idea. As the throne and its conservative allies either ignored or obstructed the move to create the assembly, the Independence Club organized massive street demonstrations in Seoul calling not only for the creation of the assembly but also for the full implementation of the body of reforms decreed during the Kabo Reforms three years previously. After some waffling in negotiations with the club, the emperor finally ordered the demonstrations forcibly broken up and the leadership of the Independence Club arrested by the end of 1898. The club soon collapsed, and much of its membership dropped out of political activism. By 1899, the emperor stripped the Privy Council of all semblance of deliberative function, utterly extinguishing the vision of a national assembly.

**The Patriotic Enlightenment Movement**

The demise of the Independence Club did not signal the end of its concerns and causes. Indeed, the opening years of the twentieth century saw a growing concern across the country for the very issue that first animated the club: the defence of Korean sovereignty in an increasingly hostile world. The imperial government sold mining, communications, and transportation concessions to foreign interests and throughout the late 1890s and early 1900s as it grew ever more dependent upon Russian guidance and sponsorship. With the Russian defeat in the Russo-
Japanese War of 1904–1905, however, the Korean government was left bereft of protection, and by the end of 1905, Japan had coerced the Korean imperial government into a protectorate treaty that stripped it of the right to conduct its own foreign affairs (Ku Tae-yŏl 2003). With this fundamental assault on the sovereignty of the Korean state, the hypothetical fall to foreign imperial powers was rapidly becoming a reality. It was during these final ten years of the Han Empire, from approximately 1900 to 1910, that a nationwide discourse on the nature and defence of Korean identity and sovereignty arose that has come to be known collectively as the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement (aeguk kyemong undong).

The Patriotic Enlightenment Movement was coeval in Korea with the flowering of a vibrant public sphere facilitated by multiple newspapers, magazines, and newsletters. Newspapers like the Hwangsŏng sinmun, Cheguk sinmun, Maeil sinmun, Taehan maeil sinmun, and Kyŏnghyang sinmun, among others, ran essays and editorials on an enormous variety of topics (Kim Min-hwan 1988, 1996; Ch’oe Chun 1997; Han Wŏn-yŏng 2002; Robinson 1988; Schmid 2002; Kim Dong-no 2006). This newly emerging patriotic enlightenment discourse largely followed two courses: explorations of the western political, cultural, and institutional practices worthy of study and adoption in the struggle to fend off the existential threat to the Korean state and re-examinations of Korean history as part of a project to reimagine a Korean national identity that could serve as the foundation of a strong and thriving independent nation-state (Robinson 1988; Cho Hang-nae 1993; Ch’oe Ki-yŏng 1997, 2003; Chŏng Yong-hwa 2004). Many of these discussions delved into a Spencerian Darwinism in which superior peoples and states rose to dominate the world while inferior peoples, saddled with backwardness and ignorance, were doomed to colonization and cultural extinction (Pak Sŏng-jin 2003; Tikhonov 2010). There was an emerging consensus that if Koreans did not refashion themselves into an educated modern people fully cognizant of their national identity and civic duties, Korea would soon vanish, absorbed into the empires of peoples who were fully conscious and committed to the love, defence, and advancement of their own nations.

Historians such as Sin Ch’aeho (1908) and Pak Ŭnsik (1915) attributed the purported absence of a Korean national consciousness to centuries of historiographic practice that emphasized participation in a universal Confucian civilization that revolved around China while denigrating Korean language, culture, and history collectively as a primitive vernacular that functioned to obstruct and cloud true human civilization. For Sin in particular, Confucianism was at the very root of Korean weakness. It was Confucianism that encouraged a fetishization of the ancient Chinese past, the erasure of the Korean nation from the historical consciousness of his compatriots, and the weakening of the nation through an emphasis on scholarship and the arts at the expense of the martial skills and values that he deemed so desperately necessary to maintain the Korean state and people before the incoming tides of foreign aggression.

While the kinds of socio-cultural transformations for which the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement campaigned may well have been central to the construction of a robust nation-state capable of mobilizing in defence of its sovereignty, the newspapers, organizations, and schools created to foster these changes were too little too late. Indeed, it is arguable that by the conclusion of the protectorate treaty in 1905, the struggle was already lost. Over the five years following the end of the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese Residency-General systematically dismantled the Korean state until the summer of 1910 when Japan annexed the Great Han Empire outright (Yun Pyŏng-sŏk 2003). Despite the annexation, however, these movements continued to shape much of the future discourses of the nation, development, and independence throughout the colonial period and beyond (Robinson 1988; Schmid 2002; Miyoshi-Jaeger 2003; Duncan 2006). Indeed Korean incorporation into the Japanese Empire may seem to render thirty years of reform movements an interesting yet ultimately futile exercise in failure, but to understand these
intellectual and political labours in such terms is to turn away from the very real engagement with the modern these movements represented. This realignment of perspective is central to the development of the historiographies of late nineteenth-century reform during the last fifty years.

**Post-war historiographies of reform**

Being the twilight of the Korean dynastic state, the time of some of the earliest Korean encounters with global modernities, and the prelude to the experience of colonization, the late nineteenth century has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. While it is beyond the scope of the present work to cover the entirety of the literatures on the reforms of this period, the remainder of this chapter will discuss primarily the developments in South Korean historiography along with a sampling of some of the more recent works in English. South Korean historians began to look in earnest at the late nineteenth-century reform movements in the 1960s and 1970s. These works were committed to rectifying perceived distortions of Japanese colonial historiography and deeply informed by modernization theory. For these historians, the reform movements represented a pre-colonial proto-modernity that failed to mature due to Japanese colonial intervention. The reformers were ultimately unable to modernize the nation and therefore failed to save it from colonization. With the spread of the democracy and mass movements of the 1980s and early 1990s, many South Korean historians turned to uncovering a Korean history in which the masses, or the people (*minjung*), were the only authentic subjects of historical change rather than the nation unmediated by class. People’s histories written in this period still identified the failed modernization of the nineteenth century as the prime cause for the loss of nation sovereignty, but they located this in the movements’ refusal to engage the masses. Without popular support, the reformers were doomed to seek foreign sponsorship and ultimately to sacrifice the nation for the sake of their own class interests. During the last fifteen years, research on the period in both Korean and English has made a conscious effort to reconsider both the nation and modernity in the late nineteenth century. Rather than judge the reform movements by their perceived failure to modernize and rescue national sovereignty, these works move beyond these conceptual categories to explore both the movements’ contemporary cultural and intellectual accomplishments and their legacy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Duncan 2006).

A sustained and systematic critique of colonial historiography did not fully emerge in South Korea until the 1960s. During the fifteen years following liberation from colonial rule in 1945, national division, the imposition of United States military rule, the Korean War, the flight of left-wing historians to the north, and the continued institutional prominence of historians trained during the colonial period made such a critique difficult to undertake. By the early 1960s, however, a newer generation of historians motivated by the progressive impulses of the April 19 Revolution of 1960 and the public discord over normalization negotiations with Japan opened a discursive space wherein the historiographical legacy of the colonial experience was subject to direct interrogation (Ch’oe Ki-yŏng 2003; Kim In-gŏl, 1994; Kim To-hyŏng 1997; Em 2013).

Although intended largely as a general survey of Korean history, Yi Ki-baek’s *Han’guksa sillon* (A new theory of Korean history), first published in 1961, provides a succinct summary of the emerging critique of colonial histories of Korea. Indeed, the text opens with this declaration:

> There are many tasks we must take on for the correct understanding of Korean history but the most important work among these is the liquidation (*ch’ŏngsan*) of the colonial historical perspective (*singminjijuŭi sagwan*).

(Yi Ki-baek 1961)
This perspective was defined first by what Yi identified as a geographical determinism (chinnjk kyokhongnon) in which the fact of Korea’s peninsular geomorphology relegated it to something of a geographical and historical footnote to the dynamic time and space of the continent. This stance precluded the recognition of Korean historical autochthony (chayulsong), rendering change attributably only to the heteronomy (t’ayulsong) originating from the continent. This alleged peninsular nature of Korea ensured that no significant socio-historical change was possible without some kind of intervention by outside forces. A second claim closely related to the heteronomy thesis is stagnation (chongh’esong). Unable to produce socio-historical change on its own, Korean peoples remained largely unchanged across the millennia as they maintained agricultural societies that never developed from feudalism to modern capitalism. Finally, Yi pointed to Japanese colonial historians’ invocation of a debilitating factionalism as a Korean national trait (tangp’asong). The culmination of this line of scholarship, Yi maintains, is the legitimation of Japanese rule; a society that is unable to change on its own, mired in stagnation, and incapable of self-governance due to endless factional infighting naturally comes to be ruled by other states and, moreover, cannot but benefit from the experience (Ch’oe Ki-yong 2003; Em 2013).

This was the intellectual legacy that historians of the early 1960s had to negotiate in order to establish a new history free from the politics inherent in the production of colonial knowledge. They adopted an explicit agenda to write histories of Korea that would engage in a continuous assault on colonial perspectives by uncovering Korean historical autochthony. Often uncritically accepting the modernization theory that undergirded the very intellectual regimes they sought to overturn, these historians looked to produce histories foregrounding the development of a proto-capitalism in the late Choson period, anti-colonial struggles of the independence movement, and the emergence of enlightenment thought (kaehwa sasang) in the nineteenth century (Ch’oe Ki-yong 2003). Studies of the Korean enlightenment in particular provided opportunities to show that Korean intellectuals were well aware of the internal and external problems facing the Choson state and society in the nineteenth century and were actively and strategically engaged in the very reforms of thought and policy that evinced an internal dynamism to Korean intellectual and political history.

One of the most prolific historians of the 1960s and 1970s writing on Korean enlightenment thought was Yi Kwang-nin. Yi wrote dozens of field-defining articles on the figures, texts, and projects of the 1870 and 1880s reform movements. Tracing the beginnings of Korean enlightenment thought to the 1870s, Yi saw reformist impulses born largely of an intellectual curiosity about western technologies. By the 1880s, however, this impulse was to change, Yi maintained, to a more urgent dynamic of selective importation of modern technologies, described by Han U-gun’s (1968) notion of “eastern ways, western means.” Korean enlightenment thought changed again from the late 1890s with the Independence Club’s interest in republicanism and sovereignty and the development of nationalist identity politics in the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement prior to annexation. For Yi, Korean enlightenment was a domestic phenomenon born of an intellectual history internal to Choson that over the course of the late nineteenth century came into contact with western enlightenment ideals to produce dialectically a phase of social development capable of transporting Choson from the pre-modern to the modern. Ultimately, however, Yi saw the enlightenment intellectuals of the late nineteenth century as failed conservative reformers unable to enact the systemic changes needed to build a viable Choson independence capable of withstanding the vicissitudes of nineteenth-century imperialism (Yi Kwang-nin 1969, 1973, 1994; Yi Wan-jae, 1989, 1999).

Working from a similar theoretical stance, Kim Yong-ho rejected the understanding of Korean enlightenment thought as a reaction to foreign pressures or even as the exogenous introduction
of a global capitalist modernity. He maintained that *kaehwa* was itself a part of modernity. Modernity then became for Kim not something external to the Korean historical experience but a phenomenon arising internally as an integral part of the Korean historical experience. The nineteenth century represented a sprouting of the modern akin to the “sprouts of capitalism” of modern Chinese historiography. Kim called for a historical practice that investigated the results of the clash between this indigenous modernity and foreign political, commercial, and intellectual pressure (Yi Wan-jae 1989).

Building on the notion of a modernity arising within Chosŏn, the work of Kang Chae-ŏn is of particular interest in this period. He examined the roots of *kaehwa* thought and linked them back to Pak Che-ga and the Practical Learning and Northern Learning scholars of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Chosŏn (Kyŏ Zaigen 1973; Kang Chae-ŏn 1982). Kang’s work was a pioneering illustration of the kind of scholarship that could highlight the intellectual vibrancy internal to Chosŏn without dependence on a heteronomous understanding of historical change. There was some question as to how close the relationship really was and whether future work should seek to clarify the connections or look for the disjunctures, but even with these issues, Kang’s work was an early model for scholarship on Korean enlightenment that did not begin from an assumption that Korean intellectual transformation had to be the result of external influences (Yi Wan-jae 1989).

Kang’s work was an important step in positing a connection between the *kaehwa* reform movements and earlier Chosŏn intellectual currents, but the precise points of contact and deviation remained unclear. One strand of *kaehwa* research in the 1970s thus turned in earnest to the question of origins. Yi Kwang-nin and Sin Yong-ha, among others, suggested that the reformers of the 1880s had been influenced by Chosŏn interpreters who brought Qing texts on Western thought and technology back to Chosŏn and by their interactions with Pak Kyu-su and his intellectual lineage as represented by his grandfather and Practical Learning scholar Pak Chi-wŏn (Yi Kwang-nin 1973; Yi Wan-Jae 1989, 1999; Son Hyong-bu 1997). It was through this body of scholarship that the intellectual connections between the Practical Learning and Northern Learning schools of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the various enlightenment movements in the final decades before colonization became established in the field of Korean history.

There was something of a consensus in the 1970s concerning the nature of the *kaehwa* movements. First, *kaehwa* thought was not just a matter of reformist thought imported from Japan or Qing but rather an intellectual practice born of older Chosŏn scholarly lineages that came into contact with foreign practices and ideas. Second, *kaehwa* thought arose in the mid-nineteenth century, twenty to thirty years before the radical reformers of the 1880s turned to the Japanese model, and set its roots in the scholarship of eighteenth-century Chosŏn intellectuals like Pak Che-ga and Pak Chi-wŏn. Third, *kaehwa* thought was at its base a body of conservative reform thought seeking to eliminate the weaknesses of the existing order by adopting the technologies of the west. Finally, *kaehwa* was bourgeois. The enlightenment thinkers across the movements from the 1880s through to the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement of the 1900s were all of the elite, educated classes. Their intellectual world was limited by their bourgeois class interests and thus their reform proposals were ultimately limited. They were incapable of contradicting their class interests and as a result failed to implement the systemic reforms necessary to preserve the independence of the Chosŏn state (Yi Wan-jae 1989).

Although the question of class was not at the forefront of the research on the enlightenment movement during the 1960s and 1970s, political conflict in South Korea from the late 1970s and into the 1980s brought a dramatic change in perspective (Yi Se-yŏng 1997). Among the
most widely recognized people’s history scholars, Kang Man-gil (1978, 1984) was an active opponent to the authoritarian military government under Chŏn Tu-hwan. In January of 1981, two months after the 1980 Kwangju Massacre, Kang found himself “unemployed,” as he put it, after having been forced to resign from the history department of Korea University for his political activities (Kang 1994). It was during this time that he began work on his two volumes, Han’guk kŭndae sa (Modern Korean history) and Han’guk hyŏndaes sa (Contemporary Korean history), both first published in 1984. Kang identified the masses, or the people (minjung) as the only authentic revolutionary subject capable of instituting substantive historical change. It is from this perspective that he provided an alternate reading of the history of nineteenth-century Korean reform movements. Kang located the cause of the failure of the reform movements to save Chosŏn from colonization in the social class of the reformers themselves. From the 1880s to the 1900s, leaders of the various reform movements looked to one another and to foreign sponsors rather than to the Korean people for support. The result, Kang maintained, could only be failure and the inevitable loss of national sovereignty (Kang Man-gil 1984; Kang Man-gil 1994; Em 2013).

In his analysis of the Coup of 1884, Kang cited an interview with Sŏ Chae-p’il, one of the central figures of the coup conspirators, in which Sŏ identified their failure to secure the support of the people as the greatest miscalculation, an error that fundamentally undermined the movement. This was an important admission to Kang but not because it indicated a failure on the part of the masses to support a potentially progressive political cause. He noted that the Korean masses had clearly demonstrated their taste and skill for direct political action throughout the nineteenth century both before and after the Coup of 1884. The problem was that the radical reformers of the 1880s themselves did not arise from the masses. The class origins of the men and their ideas was enough to ensure their failure. Kang also noted, in absence of popular support, that the radical reformers had to look to Japan for sponsorship, further eroding their support among the people. It was their rejection of the Korean masses and their embrace of a foreign power that ensured the failure of the movement. Although there have been more recent attempts to reveal popular participation in the Coup of 1884 (Pak Ŭn-suk 2005), Kang’s analysis remains representative of what is still a broadly accepted understanding of the nature of the coup and the root of its failure.

The questions of autochthony and heteronomy are Kang’s central concerns in his analysis of the Kabo Reforms. With the central role of the Japanese in creating a political space in which the reforms could move forward, to what degree was the reform program a Korean project and to what degree was it a Japanese imposition? During the first two months in which the deliberative council was active and, Kang notes, the period in which the council decreed the most important reforms, the Japanese were distracted by on-going combat operations against the Qing Empire, leaving Kim Hong-jip, Kim Yun-sik, and Yu Kil-chun. It was not until the autumn when Pak Yŏng-hyo and Sŏ Kwang-bŏm returned from exile in Japan to join the cabinet that Japanese influence overshadowed the reforms. And yet Kang was unwilling to celebrate Kim Hong-jip and his colleagues as exemplars of an authentic national sovereignty for they were among the old gradualist reformers from the 1880s and had no desire to challenge the institution of absolute monarchy; they too actively rejected the Korean masses in favour of foreign favour as they refused to support the Tonghak rebels in their mission to end the abuses of the state and exonerate the founder of their faith.

Kang refused to refer to the uprising of 1894 as the Tonghak Rebellion (Tonghangnan), preferring to call it the Peasant War of 1894 (Kabo nongmin chŏnaeng). There was broad peasant participation in the uprising that went beyond the community of the faithful and the objectives
of the uprising exceeded matters of faith to include overthrowing what Kang called the “feudal system” in order to execute an authentic socio-political transformation. He saw the uprising as an authentic mass movement for the creation of a new society and as such was the moment at which the Korean people came the closest to realizing their role as the sole true subject of history. In this respect the uprising carried a historical significance greater than any of the other reform movements of the late nineteenth century. This movement too, in Kang’s evaluation, was to fail for the Chosŏn state, ever willing to reject the people for the political sponsorship of foreign powers, facilitated peasant defeat at the hands of the Japanese military.

The fate of the Independence Club was somewhat different in Kang’s estimation for it did not meet its end through dependence on foreign powers. He instead identified two factors that lead to its demise. The first was that the club’s demands were too radical and too fast for the emperor to tolerate, especially as he saw the project of the new imperial state as central to establishing in reality the absolute monarchy that existed in theory alone in the political realities of the previous Chosŏn state. The second was the deep elitism of the club leadership. While their drive to establish a parliamentary body was born of their interest in the western liberal traditions of republicanism, Kang points to their denial of the very ability of the uneducated masses beyond the club’s membership to participate in the political process at all. Moreover, the club was vociferously opposed to armed peasant uprisings in the 1890s, referring to them only as bandits to be suppressed. As in the failed reform movement that preceded them, the Independence Club abandoned the masses and in so doing alienated themselves from the only legitimate progressive force in Korean society.

Kang saw the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement as burdened by many of the same errors as its predecessors. He took note first of its commitment to obedience to the law and its refusal to advocate direct armed resistance; obedience to the law of the residency-general was already capitulation. The movement could not hope to successfully undermine colonial authority by submitting to it. A further problem was the widespread acceptance of social Darwinism within the movement. This too, Kang argued, was something of a surrender. Presaging some of the work of Andre Schmid (2002) on this period, Kang observed that if it was, as a function of immutable natural law, only the wealthy and powerful states and peoples that were to survive in a world of competing empires, there was little to recommend Korean independence. This identification with the laws and discourses of the colonizing power was coupled with what Kang saw as the movement’s condescension to the masses. Rather than a potent revolutionary force, the intellectual elites leading the movement saw the people as ignorant, pitiful, and in need of an education so as to be made aware of the conditions of their lives and their identities as members of the Korean nation. With the movement’s fundamental identification with the colonizing power and its rejection of the Korean people as equal partners in forging the direction of the nation, Kang pronounced the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement doomed to failure from its very inception. Like the previous iterations of reform in the late nineteenth century, Kang saw ultimately the failure of reform movements to depend on the people. Without popular participation, a modern nation-state was impossible, and without the modern nation-state, there was no viable resistance to colonization. For Kang, this was the thread that ran through all the reform movements, with the exception of the Tonghak uprising, from the moderates of the early 1880s to the radicals of 1884 to the Kabo Reforms to the Independence Club to the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement on the eve of annexation (Kang 1984, 1994).

While writings on late nineteenth-century reform movements have been dominated by questions of the location of the authentic nation, the perceived failures of modernization, and ultimately the search for the reasons these movements failed to save Korea from colonization, more recent research demonstrates a shift away from the nation, the masses, failed modernization,
and even the question of modernization altogether. This realignment has opened new spaces of inquiry previously precluded by the primacy of the nation and its discontents on the eve of colonization. Research on the late nineteenth century has largely turned in the twenty-first to understanding the cultural moment, the experiences of the modern in the 1890s and 1900s that came to serve as the foundations of the places of Korea in the present.

Yi T’aejin (2000) has called for a re-examination of the Kojong reign and the Kwangmu reforms of the Great Han Empire period. In a rhetorical style reminiscent of the historiographical project to correct the perceived distortions of colonial historians, Yi argued that received narratives of Kojong’s incompetence and failure were products of western “amateur historians” and Japanese colonial scholarship that were in urgent need of revisiting; the king-cum-emperor was not a corrupt, self-serving, yet inept monarch but rather an enlightened ruler who launched the nation not on a failed path but rather a succeeding but interrupted path to modernization. His declaration of the Great Han Empire and his assumption of the title of emperor were bold statements of Korean sovereignty to the world. His efforts to centralize state authority in the throne were essential to creating a modern state capable of surviving and thriving in a hostile environment. Yi even found reason to evaluate the emperor more highly than the Independence Club, citing its relationship with the Japanese legation. In Yi’s estimation, the suppression of the Independence Club with its suspect contacts with the Japanese was a perhaps unpleasant but necessary task in the construction of an authentically powerful and sovereign state. The Japanese, Yi suggested, ultimately intervened and terminated this path toward a mature modernity that the Kwangmu reforms, left untouched, would have produced (Yi T’aejin 2000; Kyosu Sinmun Kihoek 2004).

Andre Schmid’s (2002) monograph Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919 is a broad exploration of the discursive production of the Korean nation in the myriad publications of the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement and the first decade of the colonial period that he posited as the foundation of modern Korean nationalism. Here Schmid was not concerned with the question of success or failure in resisting colonization; his work was not about what did not happen but rather about what did. The writers and educators of the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement produced an enduring construct of the Korean nation that arguably remains relevant to the present day. The critical distance with which Schmid approached the question of the Korean nation allowed for the creation of a more permeable understanding of the domestic and the foreign. Here Schmid understood the creation of Korean nationalist discourse not in the terms delineated by the 1960s poles of heteronomy and autochthony. The discourses of the Patriotic Enlightenment Movement were not, as earlier scholars like Yi Kwang-nin or Kang Chae-on might have suggested, a matter of an internally developed intellectual system coming into contact with an external body of ideas and practice. Schmid saw the interplay of the local and the global in this formation of nationalist discourses from the very moment of their inception.

A further current took shape in the extensive project out of the Korean Culture Research Institute of Ehwa University (Ihwa Yŏdae Han’guk Munhwa Yŏn’gwŏn) on the question of modernity from 1896 to 1910. The institute had already taken an interest in this period in previous publications (Han’guk Munhwa Yŏn’gwŏn 1999), but it embarked upon an especially ambitious three-volume project (Han’guk Munhwa Yŏn’gwŏn 2004, 2006, 2007) to more fully address the origins of Korean modernity. A collective of more than a dozen scholars working in the institute designated this time the “modern enlightenment period” (kŭndae kyemong kī) and identified it as the moment from which the Korean modern emerges. Through close discursive analyses of the print media of the period, especially the Independence Club publication Tongnip sinmun, the authors argue that the print capitalism that arose in Korea facilitated a vibrant public sphere. This discursive space served to mediate world and self so as to produce a distinctly modern sense of individual subjectivity, society, and political practice. The authors argue that there was
in this period a Korean modernity pre-colonial in origin in which not only the educated elites but also the people (inmin) came to the fore as socio-political actors and the progenitors of Korean modernity writ large (Chŏng Sŏn-t’aе 2006, 2007; Yi Sin-ch’ŏl 2011). In recent years the intersection of religious faith and political action manifest in the Tonghak movement has attracted renewed scholarly attention with the work of George Kallander (2013) and Carl Young (2014). Like Schmid, Kallander and Young both refrain from evaluating the Tonghak faith by the metric of preventing colonization, of success or failure vis-à-vis the nation. They look instead to the ways in which participants understand their own involvement and the political, social, and familial relationships that formed in Tonghak communities and the impacts they had on the dynamics of colonial Korean society and beyond. While Young focuses on the changes in the organizational structure of the Tonghak faith into its later iteration as Ch’ŏndogyo, Kallander has examined the movement as a refuge from material and physical hardship in a world of increasing cultural and geopolitical uncertainty. In moving away from the Tonghak movement as an exclusively nationalist, anti-colonial phenomenon, Kallander’s work opens greater potentials for research into facets of the Tonghak experience not often seen in previous work, such an examination of the impact of the movement on community and family life in rural Korea at the end of the century.

Perhaps the most radical departure from both the narratives of the nation and modernization, Yumi Moon’s Populist Collaborators (2013b) examines the Ilchinhoe, an organization often omitted from the historiography of late nineteenth-century reform movements altogether. For decades written off as treasonous stooges of the Japanese, the Ilchinhoe, or the “Advance Together Society,” was advocate for Japanese rule in the years before the annexation. Moon asks her readers not to judge their collaboration anachronistically but to take into consideration the conditions and possibilities of the period in recognition of the conceptual poverty of the collaboration/resistance binary. Moon notes that for some, empire can represent opportunity rather than enslavement, while aligning with the nation does not always result in freedom. More than anything else, the Ilchinhoe, with its overwhelmingly grassroots membership, was an organization concerned with the welfare of the common people. This concern transcended the national and welcomed the creation of a political order that the organization deemed capable of bringing the greatest good. Moon thus maintains that the Ilchinhoe was neither national nor colonial, neither traditional nor liberal. Her work abandons both nation and modernity to create a field of vision now capable of engaging with a more complete accounting of the myriad experiences of the colonial (Moon 2013a, 2013b).

Prospects

Research in Korean history has travelled great distances since the first interrogations of colonial historiography in the 1960s. Much of the scholarship through the 1980s and even beyond has been a navigation and a negotiation of the colonial, a coming to terms with both past experience and contemporary legacy. The field also spent years in close cohesion with the telos of modernization theory, but here too both Korean-language and Anglophone literatures have gone to great lengths to sever relationships with this framework and its conceptual limitations. There is now a significant body of literature of intellectual heft that explores the myriad facets of the fin-de-siècle Korean modern through interdisciplinary projects that bring together the theoretical and methodological practices of historians, political scientists, and scholars of literature. These reconstructions of experiences and dynamics occluded in previous works harnessed to expunging the colonial, to rescuing the nation, and to failures or successes of perceived processes of modernization have yielded empirically rich and theoretically exciting
results. As the field moves with greater enthusiasm toward research in the global engagements of the Korean modern, some of the most recent work has moved beyond the discursive communities of Korean scholars to speak to issues of more global concern. Kallander and Moon in particular have produced work that not only illuminates questions of concern to that which we might call the Korea field but also speaks to larger issues of the global with their critical engagements with dissent, resistance, collaboration, and the production of spaces of practice beyond the binaries of national/colonial or traditional/modern. These are intellectual spaces of global concern to which the developing scholarship on the late nineteenth-century reform movements in all their permutations is now poised to contribute.

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