

# The 1919 Independence Movement in Korea and Interconnected East Asia: The Incremental Unfolding of a Revolution

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**Abstract:** *The article re-examines the March First Movement of 1919 in light of the “Candlelight Revolution” of 2016-2017 and situates the latter as part of the incremental unfolding of a long revolution that started with the former. To do so, it turns attention to the East Asian configuration in which three nations—Imperial Japan, semi-colonial China, and colonized Korea—were all connected to the world order and interacted with one another while occupying their respective positions in the world hierarchy. The March First can be regarded as a beginning of a national revolution that sought a *kaebyŏk* (開闢, a great opening of a new heaven and earth), not only to adapt to modernity but also to overcome it, and the subsequent history is characterized by “incremental unfolding” of the revolution – through April Nineteenth (1960), May Eighteenth (1980), and lately, the Candlelight revolution (2016). These revolutionary transformations have been forwarded by the Korean people who remain inspired by the light of the March First. Their longing for a *kaebyŏk* that involves more than a mere reform of political institutions/systems connects the years of 1919 and 2019.*

**Keywords:** *March First Movement, May Fourth Movement, Candlelight revolution, East Asia*

## 1. Revisiting the Significance of the March First Movement in World History

What new light does the zeitgeist of the “Candlelight Revolution” shed on the March First Movement of 1919?

The new political space created by the “Candlelight Revolution” (2016-2017) and the reconciliatory initiatives between North and South Korea that immediately followed encourage intellectual re-engagement with the March First Movement to see it anew. At the same time, the Movement’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019, just a couple of years after the Candlelight Revolution, prompts critical explorations of more fundamental issues. Having experienced another historical shift through the Candlelight Revolution, we have come to reassess the past hundred years on a fundamental level. As the emergence of the phrase the “March First Revolution” evinces, the conventional historical framework of the March First Movement (hereafter, March First) must be reexamined.<sup>1</sup>

The March First has been constantly redefined in the context of sociopolitical changes since the 1920s. The Movement has been remembered differently by the South and the North, especially as Korea’s division became more entrenched after Korea’s liberation. Moreover, there have been battles over how the March First should be remembered and

defined even within the South itself. A disagreement on the “National Foundation Day”, for example, triggered a heated debate on the historical meaning of the March First and the Provisional Government of Korea during the Park Geun-hye administration. How one should remember China’s May Fourth Movement (hereafter the May Fourth), which celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019, has similarly been a subject of debate. How we should remember the May Fourth is not just a question of the past, but also of the present. It is beyond a doubt that the recent advent of new ways to characterize the March First—we are even seeing proposals to replace the term (March First) “movement” with “revolution”—is a response to the latest sociopolitical changes. The question is thus how well this new remembering can function as a common intellectual foundation for the future. For that to be achievable, it is imperative that we examine the significance of the March First in the context of the world history as well as its meaning in the context of civilizational shifts.



**Beijing students protest the Treaty of Versailles during the May Fourth Movement of 1919**

There have, of course, been discussions in the Korean academia about the significance of the March First in world history. Arguments about the influence that March First had on

contemporary national movements, including China’s May Fourth, have in fact existed for decades. This line of interpretation, however, has also been criticized for the fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. An alternative view proposes that the movements’ significance in world history can be reestablished from a frame that focuses on the simultaneity of weak and oppressed people.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a suggestion followed that the relationship between the March First and the May Fourth should be considered in terms of historical simultaneity.<sup>3</sup>

While interpreting the March First’s significance in world history from the perspective of simultaneity, I also want to draw attention to the singularity of the March First that becomes clear when one compares it with other events that occurred simultaneously in other countries. To this end, I will first re-examine the March First based on the notion of East Asia’s interconnectedness. I use the term “interconnection” as a word that “articulates the space (i.e., structure) in which intimately intertwined East Asian countries interact with each other multi-directionally as well as signifies their autonomous acts of solidarity.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, interconnection means a structural relation as well as the mutual referencing among agents, the latter of which can be observed not just in (sociopolitical) movements but also throughout the broader realms of ideologies and institutions. This study pays attention to the East Asian configuration in which three nations—Imperial Japan, semi-colonial China, and colonized Korea—were all connected to the world order and interacted with one another while occupying different positions in the world hierarchy. As Imperial Japan, which acted as the Western powers’ surrogate in East Asia, played a role in defining the other two nations’ semi-colonial and colonial status, it is imperative that we pay heed to such complicated relations. I do not, however, intend to compare the events in these three nations point by point. I am, rather,

interested in examining March First in the light of the differences between the colonial and the semi-colonial conditions<sup>5</sup> that can be discovered when one contextualizes it within May Fourth, China's anti-Japanese national movement.<sup>6</sup>

I take this approach in order to understand the complexities of (semi-)colonial modernity created by Imperialism that asserted its mission of civilizing colonies. I also want to uncover the opportunities to overcome modernity that inherently lie in such complexities. In this context, a particularly useful methodological frame is the theory of the "double project," which articulates a simultaneous pursuit of adapting to and overcoming modernity.<sup>7</sup> This framing should make clear the structural meaning of the similarities and differences between China's May Fourth, which occurred 8 years after the successful revolution of 1911, and Korea's March First, which occurred 9 years after the forced annexation by Japan in 1910.

I hope that this project, which revisits the significance of the May First in world history and probes its meaning as a civilization-shifting event from the perspective of East Asia's interconnectedness and "double-project" theory, will serve as an elucidating methodological inquiry. It is also my intention that this study contributes to conceptualizing the historical foundation of the "Candlelight Revolution" and to reassessing the past 100 years of East Asia, especially Korea's history of the last 100 years.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. 1919, the Coming of a New Era: The Strong Currents of Reconstruction and Liberation

The paths to modernity taken by Korea, China, and Japan diverged critically from one another's during the ten years between the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Defeated in the

Sino-Japanese War, China fell to the status of a semi-colony as the prospect of divided rule by imperial powers loomed over it. Japan had joined the world system's semi-periphery following the Ganghwa Treaty of 1876, and ascended to the center following the Russo-Japanese War. Chosŏn was the pivot that set the two nations on the divergent paths.

In China's case, its semi-colonial condition allowed for a relatively autonomous space in which the 1911 Xinhai Revolution could succeed. But the superficiality of the revolution that led to the establishment of a republic only in "form" also caused the May Fourth, a movement that sought to substantialize this republican form with meaningful content.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, Chosŏn was annexed by Japan a year before the 1911 revolution. The colonial authorities declared that they would employ a "civilizing" policy of establishing—legally and institutionally—major components of capitalism in the colony, but tried to implement the policy in haste despite the lack of its financial resources because they were conscious of Western powers' eyes. This is why Japan implemented a violent rule—a policy that used military police, police, and officials to impose violent control over all aspects of people's lives—to enforce colonial modernization in Korea.<sup>10</sup> Instead of respecting the unique, self-governing system of local communities and the indirect management of the people by the central government of Chosŏn, the colonial authorities dismantled the autonomy of country districts and instead imposed a direct control, thus antagonizing Koreans. They instituted new taxes, such as a liquor tax, house tax, cigarette tax, and stamp tax to help fill their financial shortfalls. They also introduced convoluted tax statement forms that were troublesome to fill in, making the everyday burdens of the colonized people heavier. Koreans suffered from day-to-day discrimination on educational, administrative, and legal levels and from policies of micro-

management such as the enforcement of a cemetery order—which prohibited the burying of the dead in family burying grounds—an order forcing the cultivation of mulberry trees, strict regulations on using the slash-and-burn method in agriculture, and forced labor in reclamation projects. A deadly surge in prices and the outbreak of infectious diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and the Spanish flu aggravated colonial Koreans' discontent, which was already on the brink of an explosion. The civilizing mission could thus no longer be justified.

This is not to say, however, that March First, a nation-wide resistance movement, can be explained simply in terms of the people's growing feelings of resentment and rebelliousness. With that said, I would next like to examine the climate of the time in which 1919 was perceived as a new epoch for humanity and a new era for liberation.

What led 1919 to be interpreted in such a way was none other than World War I. Although the war itself was seen as a tragedy, the notion that its results were paving the way to a "new society" centered on justice and humanitarianism spread throughout the world, and made "reconstruction" a vogue term. Having experienced WWI in "near real time" through modern media, such as newspapers and telegraphs, people awakened to the "wordliness of the world" and developed a sense of "contemporaneity."<sup>11</sup> As they went through WWI, Koreans in particular overcame the sense of inferiority they had been feeling toward Western civilization and "civilized and enlightened countries" ever since they had opened their ports to trade under coercion. Moreover, they anticipated a fundamental reconstruction and reordering of the world system that included Japan, and they dreamed of a future in which their country would become an independent nation-state in the process of such reordering.<sup>12</sup> In other words, one can say that the Koreans were sensing, for

the first time, the coming of a new era of civilizational shift as they shared this "global moment" of history that was regarded by their contemporaries as a groundbreaking moment.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to note here that although Koreans felt this sense of "contemporaneity" with the rest of the world, they worried about missing opportunities brought about by these shifting currents. The question whether colonial Korea (which could not send a formal delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, unlike semi-colonial China, which could) had a chance of playing a part during this time of global transformation caused anxiety for Koreans. This anxiety became a major variable that influenced the Koreans' thinking and actions.<sup>14</sup> Two historical cases that dramatically drive the above point home come to mind. For example, Yun Ch'i-ho refused to participate in the March First Movement because he was wary of the optimism that spread in response to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's talk of rights to self-determination and foresaw that the Korea problem would not even be mentioned at the Paris Peace Conference. On the other hand, Choi Lin participated in the movement as he believed that it would be better for Korea to join other nations in their cry for peace despite there being no guarantee what result such cries would bring.<sup>15</sup> While a majority of the Koreans probably stood somewhere between Yun and Choi, it should be pointed out that the March First Movement was not led by those who took a pessimistic stance based on an accurate knowledge of world politics. Rather, it was led by optimists whose hopes were grounded on their will, a will to join the "global moment" by appropriating the cracks in the changing world order. I should make clear that these optimists did *not* misunderstand the meaning of these changes and their will to improve their society matched the transformations happening in the world at the time.

Such an awareness of world history was shared

widely among many, including religious leaders of Christianity and *Ch'ōndoism*, teachers, and students. For instance, Moon Chang-hwan (then 24 years old), a *Ch'ōndoist* and farmer, told the detective interrogating him that “as the Hague International Peace Conference is fast approaching, it seems reasonable to believe that the issue of Korea’s independence will be a topic discussed at this conference and that a good conclusion will come of it.” His words quite dramatically reveal the extent to which global self-awareness had spread among Koreans.<sup>16</sup>

Koreans had a hopeful understanding of the times and international affairs that “a new heaven and earth” (a new world) would unfold, as pithily expressed in the Korean Declaration of Independence. At the same time, they were besieged by the angst of living under an intensely oppressive colonial government. These two contradictory and yet synergistic sentiments mightily contributed to catalyzing the mass resistance movement called the March First. However, a more influential factor was the development of resistant subjects.

### 3. People’s Mass Gathering Experiences during March First: Agents, Mediums, and Aims

In what follows, I shall discuss the people’s mass gathering experiences in terms of agents, mediums, and aims. The peculiar traits of the people’s March First experiences stemmed from the co-existence of modernity and pre-modernity caused by the colonial condition of Korea, and from their reconstructed understanding of the two. These circumstances led people not only to become aware of the negative aspects of the modernity that Japan’s “civilizing mission” promoted but also to revive their previous resistance experiences and intellectual resources to fuel the national resistance movement.

Let us first examine the agents of the March First. The protests in 1919 erupted spontaneously across the country during March and April without a national commanding headquarters. Admittedly, the sporadic nature of the movement and the consequent lack of organized plans were an inherent weakness that contributed to its failure to overcome the military oppression of the Japanese empire. It is, however, important to note that its very spontaneity, as well as the protests’ national spread, active participation, and the participants’ selfless devotion to the movement’s cause, are important aspects of the March First Movement.<sup>17</sup>

It is true that the organizational capacity to mobilize the protesters was rather weak. That the 33 representatives who proclaimed the Declaration of Korean Independence on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1919 were all religious figures (15 *Ch'ōndoists*, 16 Christians, and 2 Buddhists) reflected the exceptional reality that these religious organizations voluntarily assumed the role of representing the people when the Koreans could not be represented by their own government under the colonial rule, although it is also true that this grouping was inevitable after other prominent figures refused to step forward.<sup>18</sup> *Ch'ōndoism* (a continuation from Tonghak, “Eastern Learning” in 1905) had nearly 3 million followers and maintained the doctrine that religion cannot be separated from politics, unlike the Christian churches that followed Japan’s policy of separating politics from religion. It played an especially significant role in forming the national leadership and financing the movement as well as spreading the demonstrations in rural areas. In addition, the movement was bolstered by young students who had been brought up on nationalist education developed during the era of the Patriotic Enlightenment Movements and austere colonial rule and *yangban* (aristocrat) disciples of Confucianism who managed to stay alive in local communities despite Japan’s systematic efforts to dismantle them. It was

also aided by the experiences of the earlier movements such as the Tonghak Peasant Movements and the Righteous Militia Movements.

While it is commonly argued that their activities changed from peaceful protests in urban centers to violent revolts in rural areas,<sup>19</sup> these two types of protests seem, if the whole picture is seen, to have co-existed from the beginning. Recent studies of Korea's local histories have brought to light how the participation of peasants, the driving force of March First who spread the movement across the country, transformed the *manse* demonstrations to something akin to a rebellion.<sup>20</sup> There were signs of violent protests, and there were cases in which people resorted to violence from the outset. These actions mentioned here were expressions of legitimate anger at the injustice of the asymmetrically brutal crackdown of the demonstrations. Moreover, the targets of this violence were restricted to colonial institutions and agents, in other words, the acting deputies of the Japanese Empire that inflicted institutionalized violence.<sup>21</sup> Thus, these acts of resistance were significant in the world history as part of the global movement to realize the positive peace of national self-determination, civil rights, and equality, and could be seen ultimately as "peace from below."<sup>22</sup> These actions did not conflict with the tenet of non-violence that the March First's national representatives promoted as their strategic method of protest.

The agents of the March First were different from those of the May Fourth. The latter was an urban-centered nationalist movement that was carried out by an alliance of the people from various sectors (functional/professional). Modern intellectuals and the "new youth"—that is to say, students—led merchants and laborers into protesting through strikes in markets, factories, and schools. In Korea also, students catalyzed the March First and merchants and laborers participated as well. Merchants in

particular protested by closing their shops, which was a traditional means of voicing their objections to government policies during the Chosŏn dynasty. Laborers and craftsmen went on strike, and students boycotted classes for more than three months. However, these protests were smaller in scale than their Chinese counterparts. This difference was due to the disparate circumstances in which the two countries found themselves. China as a semi-colonized nation had a government, and although it was a government with limited autonomy, it was, unlike the colonized Korea, able to adapt to modernity by developing its national industry during the brief period when WWI caused Western powers to focus on their own problems, creating a little breathing room for China.

Things were different in Korea. Here, the unique characteristics of the March First become quite clear—modernity and pre-modernity co-existed and the meaning of the two was reconstructed as the movement went on. Religious groups, young students, and yangban disciples of Confucianism were the primary agents of the March First, as mentioned before. They were joined by others with the shared experience and memory of the Tonghak Peasant Movements and Righteous Militia Movements. In this sense, the March First can be regarded as a national movement encompassing more diverse subjects and social classes than the May Fourth. (One major difference is that religious groups and peasants were major driving forces of the March First. They had the potential to become catalysts for overcoming modernity).

This uniqueness is reflected in the various media that were used in the development of the March First movement. Let us examine, first, the state funeral and *manse* protests that served as mediums of mass-gatherings. Anticipating that countless people would gather for the funerary ritual of Emperor Gwangmu (Kojong) who was the de facto last King of the

country, March First protesters took advantage of this opportunity to start the movement. At the demonstration, a sense of mourning for and memorializing of the late emperor oddly comingled with a sense of appreciation for the *manse* as an occasion for joy and festivities that was rather incongruous with a funeral.<sup>23</sup> To understand this mixed response better, we must examine the meaning of the rallying cry of *manse*.

*Manse* (literally ten thousand years) and *chõnse* (literally one thousand years) were used interchangeably during the Chosõn Dynasty, and were unified as *manse* at the time that the Daehan Empire (the Korean empire) was established in 1897. *Manse*, which was popularized when the Korean Independence Club and Patriotic Enlightenment Movements were active, developed into something more than a simple exclamatory word. In fact, it came to signify a political culture that Korea's modern intellectuals disseminated as they sought to enlighten the populace. And finally, at the time of the March First, *manse*, "mediated by the political cultures of previous peasant revolts," came to "foster a sense of national unity and to serve as a medium through which people's voices of protests against Japan could be sounded nation-wide."<sup>24</sup>

The same can be said of another major medium that was used to mobilize the populace—the T'aegũkgi (Korean national flag) and other flags. It seems that the leaders of the March First refrained from using the T'aegũkgi systematically during protests because they feared that the flag that was emblematic of the emperor of Daehan's sovereign power would evoke memories of the lost empire. Despite their circumspection, however, the T'aegũkgi gradually came to represent national unity rather than the emperor's sovereignty.<sup>25</sup> In addition, protesters frequently used flags to disclose their names or their affiliation, following the precedent of the participants of the Tonghak peasant movement. Flags, in other

words, had become not only a means to express an individual or collective political stance, but also a modern symbol of struggle and resistance. As the *manse* spread from urban to rural areas all across the country, flags, circulars, and appeals came to be more frequently used as expressive mediums than underground newspapers or manifestos.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that schools, religious facilities such as churches, and marketplaces were used as a public sphere of discourse. Local markets that took place at regular intervals served as an explosive intermediary space where rumors about the movement traveled through the grapevine. On a related note, it would be remiss to overlook the fact that "*gasa*"—a simple form of premodern verse with twinned feet of three or four syllables each—was another important medium during the March First. The socio-critical *gasa* that had been sung at peasant resistance movements at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the enlightenment *gasa* that became a modern means of communication through the newspapers in the 1900s had a great influence on the various patriotic songs that were heard during the March First.<sup>27</sup> March First participants also utilized traditional means of protest such as beacon fire protests and lamplight marches.<sup>28</sup> Also it is thanks to trains that amplified the sound of rumors and visits—which can be said to be more traditional mediums of communication—as well as the modern print media (mimeographs etc.) that the March First grew nationwide.<sup>29</sup>

The March First is distinguished by the multiplicity of the media that were used, from traditional oral media to modern print media, in accordance to the movement's specific needs. It contrasts with China where although traditional mediums for mass gatherings were sometimes used during the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, various social groups organized in major cities as well as modern print media such as

newspapers, magazines, and telegrams were primarily used to spread the news by the time of the May Fourth when capitalism had developed further in China. This difference too derives from the different historical circumstances in which colonial Korea and semi-colonial China found themselves.

Let us now examine the objective of the March First participants. Their cries of *manse* heard at scenes of the demonstrations reflected a desire for individual and national liberation as well as a hopeful anticipation for a new state. Was this “new state” envisioned as a republican polity? Despite the traditional belief that to be patriotic was to be loyal to one’s sovereign, the March First protesters who shouted *manse* at Kojong’s funeral were “performing historical funeral rites for both Kojong and the dynastic order.”<sup>30</sup> Although restoration movements did occur around 1919, the forced annexation in effect ended monarchism in Korea. The forced break from the monarchic past served to promote republicanism as an irreversible route that had to be taken. News of the Xinhai revolution that reached Korea also influenced Koreans’ thinking. What happened in Korea was, in other words, quite different from the course of action in China. The Chinese had made a formal break with the emperor system through the 1911 Xinhai revolution and *then* found ways to establish a republic in both form and content through the May Fourth.

The title of “national representatives,” which was prominently used during the unfolding of the March First, holds a special meaning especially in relation to the issue of republicanism. In the course of newly establishing a nation state, an awareness emerged that the people had sovereign rights and that they delegated their rights to their representatives. This awareness is quite well reflected in the title of “national representation.” The massive protest that occurred on April 23 around Posin’gak Pavilion in Chongno—a central district in Seoul—was

called a “national convention.” This “national convention” inspired the idea that local representatives form a national representative group. The ideal of a republic consisting of people’s representatives spread rapidly among the populace, and during the March First movement, some individuals appointed themselves as national representatives without joining or formulating political groups or organizations.

On the May Fourth, the masses gathered held a “national convention” at Tiananmen Square. Their experiences of this led to the initiative to establish a “national congress”—an organizational force consisting of various allied groups—and a “national congress movement” that sought to complete the initiative. Such movements continued into the 1920s and influenced the Chinese National Party as well as the Chinese Communist Party. The people, in other words, were seeking ways to achieve democracy at a time when they could not have elected regional representatives. It is worthwhile to reflect on the significance of their directness and representativeness. The so-called representatives of the March First and the May Fourth were not elected through formal and/or legal elections. Thus, the legitimacy of these “representatives” was retrospectively confirmed in the context of the people’s mass protests or earned when they refused Japanese imperial rule and represented the people’s interest.<sup>31</sup> The latter seemed more salient in the colonial Korea. I assume this experience can be read as an experiment with a new type of democracy that moved beyond the representative democracy composed of regional delegates.<sup>32</sup>

The desire for a republican system expressed by the March First led to the establishment of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea on April 11, 1919, in Shanghai. The “Provisional Constitution of the Republic of Korea,” consisting of ten articles, reflected the spirit of March First. While there are still

debates among scholars about the legitimacy of the Shanghai Provisional Government, its political significance, and questions about whether the Provisional Government's representativeness has been over-anticipated and overrated,<sup>33</sup> I do not wish to intervene in the debate. I instead would like to emphasize the fact that the internal logic through which the March First legitimized Korea's independence (as well as the Provisional Government's establishment and goal) was grounded on the notion that the right to self-determination was a means by which to realize democracy and equality. The national independence, in other words, was inspiring as a wellspring from which democracy would be newly imagined.<sup>34</sup> To the extent that the goal of establishing a democratic republic was based on aspirations to go beyond representative democracy and to achieve equality, it "encompassed a will to overcome modernity even though it may seem, on the surface, to have sought a modern political model."<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, I would also like to emphasize that the Koreans' yearning for a new state should not be reduced to a mere hope to establish a republican system. Rather, we need to pay attention to what we may even call the religious longing for a utopia that erupted during the March First, a "secular utopianism" where personal gain, national independence, and global liberation would come true altogether.<sup>36</sup> Also we need to see in this desire an explosive expression of the people's awareness of their "agency as subjects of liberation" that had been inherent but repressed until then.<sup>37</sup>

Hopes for a *kaebyöck* (開闢, a great opening of a new heaven and earth) and the philosophy of *taedong* (大同, great harmony), which had been transmitted through various folk beliefs including Tonghak, were then reborn as a longing for a new world that fueled the March First.<sup>38</sup> The protests that went on throughout March and April thus developed into a national

resistance bringing people of all classes together, from rural and urban areas alike, transforming the whole country into "a liberated zone of the self-governing people."<sup>39</sup> Unlike in China where the revolution occurred in two phases in 1911 and 1919, Korea saw the people's repressed energy erupting at once, and this eruption had a great impact. This is why the events of 1919 Korea have been remembered as showing a "great leap of spirit" and serving as a "heterotopic space."<sup>40</sup>

The experience of liberation that people gained through the March First had a great influence on the ways in which time was conceptualized in social and personal realms. The new idiomatic phrase "post-1919" (己未以後) was frequently used to signify "the never before imagined circumstances" of the time during which "numerous neologisms appear, and never-before-heard terms are employed." The March First set, in other words, an important milestone with which to distinguish different periods of national movements and/or "social movements." It was also a "temporal base point" from which time experienced by individuals could be understood.<sup>41</sup> Intriguingly, the prevalence of such an understanding of the March First made a positive re-evaluation of Korean national characteristics possible—traits that had been negatively defined prior to the March First.<sup>42</sup>

It is this confidence that gave birth to the "March First Generation." And these people, who experienced a great time of change, can be referred to as "those who saw the heaven."<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. Beyond the Success and Failure of the March First: Incremental Achievements of the Movement and Thoughts

At the Washington Conference (1921-22) where unresolved issues from the Treaty of Versailles were discussed, the United States, Britain, and Japan established a collaborative system (i.e.,

the Washington System), which initiated a “relatively stable period” during which the greater powers enjoyed assured privileges in East Asia. This development led, contrary to predictions that had been made by some of Korea’s independence activists, to the solidification of Japan’s political status. This turn of events in international politics around 1922 also dampened the hope for Korea’s independence that had been fostered by the March First movement. As the March First subsided, the populace seemed to have returned to their everyday lives. And the social atmosphere, compared to that right after the March First, was prominently pessimistic.

The primary cause of this state of affairs was the Japanese colonial government’s violent crackdown of the 1919 national rebellion. However, it should also be noted that the diverse aspirations that exploded in the form of the March First in 1919 and converged into an aspiration for the establishment of a republic started diverging again as the colonial system that systematically frustrated the realization of the envisioned republic caused contests over how it should be fulfilled. As a result of such contestations, nationalist movement forces were divided into left and right wings.

Let’s take a closer look at this situation. Peasants and workers led the movements since April 1919 when the participation of other classes of people were comparatively weakened. They initially protested the colonial rule on the basis of their lived experiences and their demands were thus confined to immediate changes in their living conditions. As they gained collective experiences of the protest and the authorities’ punishments, their national and class consciousness grew in an embryonic form. Especially, the expansion of Japanese capital investment in Korea since the end of World War 1 brought about so-called colonial capitalism and consequential class division. The Communist Party was organized in response to the situation in 1925, and the forces of national

movements were divided into the left and right in accordance with their ideological lines around this time.<sup>44</sup> Does this split, then, mean that the March First was a failure?

If we consider the March First in terms of political institutionalization, i.e., building a nation-state, which is an indicator of modernity, it is difficult to deny that it failed. The Koreans did not achieve immediate independence, nor did they establish an autonomous nation-state. Even if the significance of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea is acknowledged, it cannot be denied that it could not exert leadership over the entire nationalist movement in and outside of the Korean peninsula due to its factionalism and internal conflicts. Obviously, the situation for the Chinese was different. During this time China was seeing young students, who had experienced the May Fourth in the semi-colonial China and had become new political agents, developing a sense that they were the “selfhood for social reformation.” These students further matured into professional revolutionaries, going on to participate in the anti-imperial, anti-warlord revolution that was jointly organized by the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>45</sup>

The March First Movement provided the momentum that Japan’s Hara (原敬) cabinet needed to push the factional divisions among powerful authority groups in the direction of reforming its colonial management strategies. The March First showed that a colony could have an impact on the imperial mainland and especially its policies and institutions. One of its impacts could be seen in the change of Japan’s colonial policy from a military rule to a more lenient cultural rule, which opened up an institutional space wherein nationalist movements could unfold with vigor. This development was another pivotal achievement of the March First.<sup>46</sup>

However, the significance of the March First

should not be assessed only within the narrow scope of institutionalization. I rather suggest that we pay attention to the March First as bringing about incremental and cumulative achievements that experiences of (resistance) movements and ideas continued to develop and accumulate.<sup>47</sup> Since the 1920s, not only were youth groups organized throughout Korea but national-level organizations of peasants, workers, and women were also established. Even transnational groups (including anti-Japanese guerilla groups) were formed by Korean émigrés in China. Because of these, and other, broader developments, called The March First was called “the Great Revolution” by overseas independence activists who recognized the broader developments since 1919. It was also called “the Great Revolutionary Movement of March First” by the Provisional Government (established through the collaboration of the left and right) in 1941 and written as such in the Provisional Government’s “Doctrines for the Founding of the Nation.” Its significance continued to be emphasized by both the left and the right immediately after Korea’s 1945 emancipation. It has since the 1950s been associated with the goal of Korea’s unification of the two Koreas, and has been tied to democratization since mid 1950s, as previous studies show. Hence, I will take a more in-depth look from a civilizational perspective.

First, it is significant that the Koreans sharply understood the global simultaneity of the March First within the world history. Let us examine the lines from a newspaper editorial from *Dong-A Ilbo* (*Dong-A Daily*) that clearly reveals that the Koreans knew about the March First’s impact on the May Fourth in the 1920s. Noting that “the May Fourth in China is one among all the national movements that came after our March First movement in 1919” (March 2, 1925), the writer conceived of the May Fourth as an event that was related to the March First. Furthermore, the Koreans saw the “rice riots” of 1918 that occurred in Japan as

an event interconnected with their life. These well-known “rice riots” happened due to a precipitous rise in rice prices that caused the urban poor of Japan—who had, thanks to the economic prosperity that followed WWI, gotten used to eating cooked rice—to rise up in anger. Such riots did not occur in Korea because the Koreans, who had to consume other grains due to the increase in the quota of Korean-produced rice to be exported to Japan after the annexation, were less sensitive to a spike in the rice price.<sup>48</sup> Despite this contrast, Yeom Sang-seup, a Korean novelist and essayist, still suggested that “there is no difference in the fundamental demands of the rice rioters and Korean students in Japan; their actions may differ on the surface, but their actions both call for the rights to survive.”<sup>49</sup>

The Koreans’ realization of an “interconnected East Asia” as such is especially noteworthy as it stems from a new understanding of the era and the world that derived from their local appropriation of the “global moment.” In the same vein, we must pay attention to a new perspective on East Asia that emerged during the March First. At the time when Britain and the United States sought to safeguard peace by maintaining the status quo and Japan as a challenger criticized the Euro-America centric peace, advocating instead a new order in East Asia centered on her, the Koreans exposed the contradictions in the Japanese perspective.<sup>50</sup> They betrayed in the Declaration of Independence a new perspective on East Asia that the independence of Korea, a double periphery, was “an indispensable stage in Asia’s peace that makes up an important part of world peace.” Moreover, those who experienced the March First took a step further and looked for ways to overcome modernity through such emerging perspectives.

It was difficult to take a critical stance toward Japan on the basis of the standard of “advanced civilization and technology” that it espoused during the colonial period, for the standard

emphasize only one's level of adaptation to modernity. But the Koreans brought up a new criterion of whether Japan lived up to the global trend of justice and humanitarianism in the new era of reconstruction. By this standard, Japan could be judged not only a country saddled with gender inequality, class inequality, and poor living conditions for workers and farmers, but also an unjust entity that had invaded Chosŏn and China. In other words, the Koreans constructed a new frame of reference that could evaluate Japan as inferior by the global standard.<sup>51</sup> If they had stopped at pointing out how Japan did not accomplish the achievable (and must be achieved) traits of modernity, they would not have created an opportunity to overcome modernity. But this kind of civilizational critique, if contextualized in the colonial reality of Chosŏn, could open an entire new horizon.

To illustrate this, let us delve deeper into the Korean discourses at the time. Chosŏn was able to find a shortcut to an alternative civilization without being overwhelmed by the imperative to adapt to modernity because she as a colonized nation in the world system's hierarchy was sensitive to the disparity between the global time and hers.<sup>52</sup> The passage in question reads that "while there is nothing more to say if modern civilization is the ultimate standard, there *are* certain circumstances where modern civilization must be destroyed to move beyond it." "If human beings make boundless efforts [to advance in that direction], we shall not find a greater happiness. Koreans—or nations in the same situation as they— should endeavor with no despair."<sup>53</sup> Although this quotation is just one example, the argument was tied to the core thesis articulated on the pages of *Kaebŏk*, (published from June 1920 to August 1926), a commercially successful magazine operated by Ch'ŏndoists. This idea was grounded in the civilizational transformation movement in pursuit of Ch'ŏndoism's ideal of *kaebŏk* that was tied to contemporary critiques of the

civilization (particularly, reconstructionist theories critical of the ills of the capitalism). To the extent that it resonated with the lived and felt realities of the Koreans suffering from their poor daily lives, it became the beloved ideal of the contemporaries in the 1920s.<sup>54</sup>

That the Koreans were aware of an alternative path to civilization that they should take together with other oppressed people of the world had a particular significance in the context of the heated debate about Eastern and Western civilizations that was being carried out throughout East Asia. In the 1920s, China saw a lively "debate on Chinese and Western cultures. In the debate, cultural conservatives argued that Western civilization was declining and that Chinese civilization should be regarded as its alternative for the humanity. Opposed to them were Marxists as well as a group of westernizationists (西化論者) represented by Hu Shih (胡適) who opined that China still had much to learn from the West. Baik Jiwoon, who compares the above Chinese debate with Japanese discourses of civilization appearing in *Kaizo* (*Reconstruction*, one of the most influential magazines of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Japan), points out that Japanese discussions were rather limited. According to Baik, *Kaizo* did not betray the same kind of deep skepticism toward modern civilization as shown by Chinese intellectuals; rather, it remained at the level of conveying new currents of knowledge from the West as pure theories. In contrast, Chinese intellectuals were fundamentally critical of Western civilization, but their ideas were often enmeshed with cultural nationalism.<sup>55</sup>

Korean intellectuals at this time, however, separated values of modern civilization from past imperial states to hold up the universal modern values such as liberty, equality, justice, and humanity as a basis on which to critique the Japanese imperial ideology that was buried deep in its obsession with modernization. That provided the Koreans with an intellectual

foundation on which they could relativize and criticize Japan's colonial rule for a long period.<sup>56</sup> It might be pointed out, from the perspective of the "double projects," that Imperial Japan veered toward adapting to, or rather, catching up with modernity while semi-colonial China had an interest in overcoming modernity but ended up focusing on adapting to modernity and complementing it with a cultural nationalism that emphasized the particularity of Chinese culture. Korea, which had the first-hand experience of negative consequences of the colonial modernity and thus came to be more interested in overcoming modernity, in contrast, was motivated to both adapt to and challenge modernity. The Koreans thus opened up, it might be argued, a path to go beyond the one-nation state and forge an alliance with other oppressed peoples.

The significance of this alternative civilization discourse is brought to relief when it is compared against the background of the contemporary intellectual debate in Korea. The reformists ("gaehwa-pa") who had since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century emphasized the imperative to adapt to modernity, showed a tendency to tilt toward a compromised position that advocated a colonial self-government, ignoring the colonial reality, as the force of the March First waned. The Wijöng Ch'öksa faction—which had sought to defend Confucian orthodoxy and repel western civilization—refused even to consider the positive aspects of modernity, with some participating in overseas anti-Japanese guerilla fights and others cultivating individual minds without engaging in politics. In comparison, the *kaebyök* group led by Ch'öndoists can be said to have been more responsive to the "double project" of adapting to and overcoming modernity.<sup>57</sup> After the Tonghak Peasant Movement failed, its members accommodated a part of the reformist faction and transformed Tonghak into a religious organization of Ch'öndoism. They thus contributed greatly to the March First Movement and wielded a considerable

influence in Korea's intellectual terrain by developing a discourse on an alternative civilization.<sup>58</sup>

The alternative civilization discourse was shared not only by intellectual circles but also to some degree by the populace—who had returned, after the March First, to their routine lives. Some people who had experienced an eruptive desire for liberation during March First and still had the March First spirit in their minds continued to keep the spark alive by engaging with national religions. Here we ask whether it was not riddled with its own risk to choose the transcendental religious path that relies on spiritual power when the colonial Korea was more deeply embroiled in the global market.<sup>59</sup> To find an answer, it is imperative that we disaggregate the national religions of the time.

On the one hand, Ch'öndoism's leadership was divided into old and new factions in the late 1920s and some of its factions, due to their focus on adapting to modernity, gradually complied with the modernization policies of the colonial government and ended up ultimately turning the religious organization into a supporter for Japan's war efforts. On the other hand, the Society for the Study of Buddhadharma (the predecessor of Won Buddhism that appeared after Korea's emancipation) had inherited Tonghak's theory of a "Great Opening" and combined this approach with Buddhism. This group engaged in civilization transformation movements that promoted the simultaneous pursuit of finding spiritual mindfulness and achieving social change. These movements aspired to bring about a "Great Opening" on a spiritual level that resonated with a material "Great Opening" (i.e., the coming of a material civilization). Such aspirations are noteworthy, as they made the Society for the Study of Buddhadharma the most suited of all the national religious groups to take on the "double project" of adapting to and overcoming modernity.<sup>60</sup> Of course, one

might point out that the Society had little influence in colonial Korea and that their objectives were not directly related to the more urgent task of establishing an independent nation-state. I, however, would like to add that given that Song Kyu—the second master of Won Buddhism—published the *Treatise on the National Foundation* just two months after Korea's Emancipation on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1945, the Society was internally preparing for the political task.<sup>61</sup> It is of course necessary to take a closer look at how the Society and Won Buddhist groups dealt with the tension between having to perform the “double task” of enduring colonial systems and attempting to overcome them. In addition, further discussions are necessary about how other social groups (religious, socialist, and groups grounded on other trends of thought) dealt with the said tension. These topics will be left for future projects.<sup>62</sup>

The discourses I have introduced above were the result of the rigorous ideological struggles Korean thinkers went through as they were exposed to new intellectual stimuli in the 1910s—a period that can be referred to as the “dark ages.” They were also the fruits of the experiences of the populace who saw their desires for a “new world” converge and erupt in March First, found a surge of confidence in their hearts, but saw their hopes ultimately replaced with a sense of frustration. Korea, in this respect, experienced a “new cultural movement” along a different path than China that took the route of anti-traditionalism and westernization as they critically reflected on the process by which their success in formally establishing a Republic was soon reversed by Yuan Shikai's (袁世凱) Restoration Movement of 1915.

It was due to the struggles and aspirations of the Koreans that the thoughts and resistance movement experiences of the March First could serve as a source of a continuous learning. Let us therefore listen to the words of two

intellectuals from different periods. Shortly after Korea's liberation, novelist Ahn Hoe-nam (安懷南) called for “a new March First, bigger and more powerful” than the March First of 28 years ago. Long after that, social and environmental activist Jang Il-soon (張壹淳) pointed out that calls for an autonomy of the nation were impregnated with “a spirit of non-violence” that “was the spirit of the Tonghak.” Ahn thus poetically remembered the March First as a spiritual force against everything that was anti-life.<sup>63</sup> As such, the words of Ahn and Jang reveal that the March First cannot simply be regarded as a date in history that can be made into an anniversary, but is a fountain of inspiration that continues to breathe life into new subjects of change.

## 5. A Conversation between 1919 and 2019

It seems that I must now, before concluding this paper, explore the unavoidable question of whether we should revise the term March First Movement and call it the “March First Revolution.”

It is true that the March First has since the Emancipation been referred to as the March First “movement” rather than “revolution” or demonstration. However, we must also take a look into the past, to the times before and after March First during which restrictions put on the press and a lack of publishing spaces prevented one from using the word “revolution.” Even during this time, the Korean youth who had experienced the Xinhai Revolution as a contemporaneous event and were influenced by the cultural atmosphere of the Taishō democracy in Japan, had a certain degree of understanding about the concept of revolution. Instead of being beholden to the old notion that revolution referred to dynastic changes, they interpreted revolution in a more “universal way, as the destruction of the old world.”<sup>64</sup> As mentioned earlier, March First had been called the “March First Great Revolution”

during the colonial period, and a call for this term to be readopted has been made in recent years as well.<sup>65</sup> That is to say, the term March First “Revolution” has its own epistemological genealogy.

What caused the term March First “Revolution” to garner renewed attention was the direct reference to this issue by the current Moon Jae-in administration and the ruling party. In the background was also the hot debate surrounding National Foundation Day, which occurred during the Park Geun-hye administration days. However, we should not overlook the fact that the memory of March First has been dynamically “reconstructed” during the course of Korean democratization movements by the movement’s contemporary subjects.

The significance of this issue becomes even more profound when we look at it from a broader scope and place it within the context of what is happening in East Asia today. Both China and Japan are striving to reinterpret the past one hundred years of modern history. Facing another phase of civilizational transition wherein deepening crises of the world capitalist system have muddled the existing world order and rendered developmental models feeble, they are looking back at historical paths to find new developmental models. Our attempts to put the years 1919 and 2019 in conversation will lead us to asking how we should respond to and contribute to the current trends at hand. These most important questions will need to be addressed in more depth and length, but I would like to briefly address my personal opinions on whether March First should be regarded as a “revolution.”

When dealing with this issue, we must be somewhat free from textbook (or dictionary) definitions of the word “revolution.” Of course, this is not to say that we should arbitrarily expand the meaning of revolution or abuse

history by overrating the meaning of March First. However, it is certainly necessary to redefine the concept of “revolution” as we compare cases from world history. At the same time, we need to discuss this point rigorously from the dimension of Korean history. We need to balance our vision of the present-ness of the March First Revolution, as well as the perceptions of the Koreans in the 1919 revolution, who recognized revolutions “from a more universal manner, seeing them as ways to destroy the old world.” I define revolution as an extensive transformation shifting the whole of society rather than an event that ends with the subversion of an existing regime. I thus refer to revolutions of which the results reveal themselves through incremental achievements as “revolutions that continue to be learned” or “on-going revolutions.” For the March First to be recognized as such a revolution, three criteria have to be met.<sup>66</sup>

First, it needs to be confirmed whether there is a clear continuity between the objectives of the March First Revolution and the historical challenges we have taken on today. The tasks of achieving national autonomy, integration, and democracy still remain relevant to Koreans today, who have lived through periods of colonialism and the Cold War. These tasks are in fact becoming more important as reconciliation processes between South and North Korea develop further and we aspire to map out a new Korean peninsula community.

Secondly, we must ask the question whether the March First was associated with a desire to change historical currents on a fundamental level, i.e., a desire to change the world on a “revolutionary level.” The people’s radical break from monarchism, pursuit of republicanism, and recognition of civilizational transitions, all of which were expressly revealed through phrases like the “destruction of the old world” or “coming of a new era,” have significance not only in the history of Korea but also in global history as signals of

revolutionary change. The March First's significance additionally lies in its having occasioned the Koreans to acquire ideas while under the colonial condition, ideas that could be used in resolving the exigent task of tackling the "double project of modernity." The experiences of March First wherein paths to overcome the colonial condition were sought, can be said to have historical significance today, as they indicate the ways in which people undertook this "double project of modernity." This meaning of March First becomes even more apparent when we examine the ways in which Korea was interconnected with Japan. "Finding a way to aptly respond to the March First Movement" was for Japan a critical test that could well determine "the future of both its domestic social reform movements and its colonial establishment."<sup>67</sup> During the era of the Taishō democracy (1905-1932), however, Japan failed to respond effectively to March First, either from the perspective of the social movements or the establishment. The Japanese ended up settling for a limited form of social reforms consisting of an establishment of constitutionalism at home and continuing to run and expand their empire abroad.<sup>68</sup> As such, the March First can be understood as a decisive historical event through which we can reassess the last hundred years' history of interconnected East Asian countries including Korea. Japan as a core country seemed to have adapted successfully to modernity as it (empowered by its victory in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars) forcibly annexed Chosŏn in 1910, experienced 3.1, and made a slight concession to its control of Chosŏn. In reality, however, Japan did not pay enough attention to overcoming modernity as it devoted much of its energy to adapting to modernity, and the "national interests" it pursued were in the long run neither beneficial for all the Japanese people nor sustainable. In contrast, the semi-colony of China supported the March First and followed it up with its own May Fourth, thus making a mark in terms of historical transitions

and participating in a "global moment."

Lastly, it should be confirmed whether this seminal movement that started with the March First has persistently maintained its core. The endeavor to revolutionize society and reach a new world inherent in Tonghak has remained the dynamic energy that fueled Korea's modern history. The history can be characterized by "incremental achievements," demonstrated from the struggles of March First (1919) through April Nineteenth (1960), May Eighteenth (1980), and finally, the Candlelight revolution (2016) (that these Korean transformations can be characterized as an incremental and cumulative process of "persevering through impossibility" with constant twists and turns becomes evident when we compare Korean history to the history of China or Japan<sup>69</sup>). The subjects of this history are the people who overcame the despair of colonization and experienced the light of the March First with their entire existence, that is, the ones who "saw the heaven." The longing for a "new world" that involves more than a mere reform of political institutions/systems connects the years of 1919 and 2019.

Since the March First meets the "criteria for a revolution," it thus deserves such titles as "a revolution that continues to be learned" or "an on-going revolution." If an agreement cannot be reached on this, it is acceptable to call it the "March First Movement." Nevertheless I would like to emphasize that it was at least a revolutionary phenomenon with the characteristics of a revolution.

Would the South and the North, however, be able to share this historical perception as the reconciliation and unification process progresses? A division definitely exists between the North's understanding of March First as "the People's Uprising of March First"—which is based on the North's reading of history according to its ideology of "Juche"—and the South's understanding as "the March First

Movement” (the same can be said of their assessments of the Provisional Government). The memory of 3.1 is, however, still valuable, for it offers the nation and democracy as the shared topics in the journey toward historical reconciliation that must actively take advantage of the divergent historical perceptions as a productive catalyst to transform the current coexistence of differences to the more advanced “sharing of perceptions.”<sup>70</sup>

The experiences of 3.1 constitute a contemporary history whose lessons we continue to learn. Molding this new remembering into a commons (without being embroiled in legitimacy controversies associated with a particular administration) is a world-history project that must be achieved together by historians and ordinary citizens who once again “saw the heaven” during the Candlelight Revolution.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The special issue of *The Quarterly Changbi* (Spring, 2019) as well as *Ch’otpurüi nunüro 3.1undongül poda (Looking at March First Through the Candlelight Revolution)*, ed. Lee Ki-hoon (Seoul: Changbi Publishers, 2019) answer such calls for reexamining the March First Movement.

<sup>2</sup> Han Sünghun, “‘3.1undongüi segyesajök üüü’üi purwanjönhan chöngnipkwa kyunyöl” (“How the meaning of the March 1st movement in ‘World history’ was incompletely established and then stuck”), *Yöksawa hyönshil (Quarterly Review of Korean History)* 108 (2018): 238-39.

<sup>3</sup> Im Hyöngt’aek, “1919nyön tongasia, 3.1undonggwa 5.4undong: tongashia kündae ikkiüi pangbömnonjök sööl” (“East Asia in 1919, the March First Movement and May Fourth

Movement: An Introduction to Methodologies in Reading East Asian Modernity”), in *1919 nyŏn 3wŏl 1ire mutta (Inquiries on March First, 1919)*, ed. Park Hŏnho and Ryu Junpil (Seoul: Sŏnggyun'gwandaehakkyoch'ulp'anbu, 2009), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Baik Youngseo, *Haekshimhyŏnjangesŏ tongasiarŭl tashi mutta (Rethinking East Asian History from Core Locations)* (Seoul: Changbi Publishers, 2013), 318.

<sup>5</sup> A colony refers to a country that is under direct rule of another country and is deprived of its sovereignty. A semi-colony is not directly ruled by another, but its sovereignty is restricted by foreign powers that exert power through unequal treaties or by partitioning spheres of influence.

<sup>6</sup> See my article that compares March First and May Fourth. “Yŏktonghanŭn dongasiaŭi 1919: hyŏngmyŏngŭi gijŏmŭrosŏi 3·1undonggwa 5·4 undong” (“East Asia on the Move in 1919—The Revolutionary Movements of March 1st and May 4<sup>th</sup>”), *Kaenyŏmgwa Sot'ong (Concepts and Communication)* 23 (2019): 7-37.

<sup>7</sup> Double Project theory is a creative theory that seeks to transcend the dichotomy between two attitudes toward modernism: modern characteristics are either seen as positive values that must be attained (modernism) or as old legacies that should be discarded (postmodernism). This theory contributes to overcoming simplistic interpretations of “invasion vs. resistance” in our understanding of history. For more information, see Paik Nak-chung, “The Double Project of Modernity,” *New Left Review* (September/October 2015).

Song Hogŭn et al., *Shiminsahoeŭi kihoekkwa tojŏn (The Programs and Challenges of Civil Society)* (Seoul: Minŭmsa, 2016). Paik Nak-chung et al., *Munmyŏngŭi taejŏnhwanŭl kongbuhada (Examining the Great Shifts of Civilization)* (Seoul: Changbi Publishers, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of March First, Korean historians published the definitive book on the movement that interprets the event in accordance with the common people’s views on history. (See *3.1 Minjok'haebangundong yŏn'gu (Studies on the National Liberation Movement of 3·1)* edited by Han'gukyŏksayŏn'guhoe (Korean History Society) and Yŏksamunjeyŏn'guso (The Institute for Korean Historical Studies) (Seoul: Ch'ŏngnyŏnsa Publishers, 1989). However, changes have taken place in the study of the March First Movement since the 1990s as postcolonial and postmodern frames of reference dominated the field of history. This change brought about the so-called cultural historical turn, which led scholars to emphasize the individualized and polyphonic subjectivity of the populace. These scholars highlight the lived realities of the people as well as the media that represented such realities. [See Heo Youngran, Han'gug kŭndaesa yŏn'guŭi “munhwasajŏng chŏnhwan”: Yŏksa taejunghwa, shingminji kŭndaesŏng, kyŏnghŏmsegyeŭi yŏksahwa (“A ‘Cultural Historical Turn’ in the Study of the Early Modern History of Korea - The Popularization of History, Colonial Modernity, and the Historicization of the World of Experience”), *Minjongmunhwayŏn'gu* 53 (2010): 92-93]. Although I utilize the results of these previous studies on March First that have generated a diverse understanding of the event, I am wary of the current scholarly trends’ lack of structural consciousness, which might lead to overlooking colonial contradictions and making light of previous experiences of movements and thoughts.

<sup>9</sup> Min Tu-ki, *Chunggugŭi konghwahyŏngmyŏng (The Chinese Republican Revolution)* (Seoul: Chishiksanŏpsa, 1999), particularly the first section of the conclusion. He reads the 1911 Revolution and May Fourth as the first and second Republican Revolution, i.e., as revolutions on a continuum.

- <sup>10</sup> Kwon Tae-eok, “1910nyöndaee ilcheüi ‘munmyöngghwa’ t’ongch’iwa han’gugindürüi inshik: 3.1undongüi ‘köjoksöng’ wönin kyumyöngül wihan hanaüi shiron” (“The Civilization’ project of Japan and Koreans’ perception in the 1910s: how the March First Independent Movement could become nationwide”), *Han’gungmunhwa (Korean Culture)* 61 (2013): 357-59.
- <sup>11</sup> Cha Seung-ki, “P’yehöüi sasang: ‘segye chönjaeng’ kwa shingminji Chosön, hokün ‘pujae üishik’e taehayö” (“Thoughts in a Wasteland: World War I and colonial Korea, or regarding ‘absence-awareness’”), *Munhakkwa sahoe (Literature and Society)* (2014): 406-431, 411.
- <sup>12</sup> Lee Taehoon, “1910–20 nyöndaee ch’o che 1-ch’a segyedaejönüi sogaeyangsanggwa nonüijihyöng” (“Attitudes and Perceptions about the First World War by Members of the Joseon Society during the 1910s and 20s”), *Sahakyön’gu (The Review of Korean History)* 105 (2012): 187-227, 213.
- <sup>13</sup> Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 9, 13.
- <sup>14</sup> Cha Seung-ki, *Ibid.*, 411.
- <sup>15</sup> Song Jiye, “‘Minjokchagyör’üi suyonggwa 2.8 tongnibundong” (“The Translation of ‘Self-Determination’ and the Feb. 8th Independence Movement”) *Tongyangjöngch’isasangsa (History of East Asian Political Thought)* 11, no. 1 (2012): 179-209, 199.
- <sup>16</sup> “Moon Changhwan Shinmunjosö” (“Interrogation Report on Moon Changhwan”), *Hanminjoktongnibundongsajaryojip (Anthology of Historical Documents on the Korean Independence Movement)* 13 (Seoul: Kuksap’yöngch’anwiwönhoe, 1990), 158.
- <sup>17</sup> Chung Yong-wook, “3.1undongsa yön’guüi ch’oegün tonghyanggwa panghyangsöng” (“Recent trends and directionality in historical studies on the March First Movement”), *Yöksawa hyönshil (Quarterly Review of Korean History)* 110 (2018): 269-304, 295.
- <sup>18</sup> Jang Seokman, “3.1undongesö chonggyonün muöshin’ga” (“Religion and March First”), in *1919 nyön 3wöl 1ire mutta (Inquiries on March First, 1919)*, *Ibid.*, 211.
- <sup>19</sup> Most Korean history textbooks used in high schools offer this particular narrative. Lee Jeongeun, *3.1tongnibundongüi chibangshiwie kwanhan yön’gu (A Study on the Demonstrations in the Rural Regions during the March First Movement)* (Seoul: Kuk’akcharyowön, 2009), 340.
- <sup>20</sup> *Mansei* was the rallying cry of March First; it can literally be translated as “ten thousand years” or “long live [Korea].” Bae Seongjun, “3.1undongüi nongminbonggijöng yangsang” (“The Aspect of Rural Uprisings during the March First Movement”), in *1919 nyön 3wöl 1ire mutta (Inquiries on March First, 1919)*, *Ibid.*, 297.
- <sup>21</sup> Kim Youngbum, “3.1undongesöüi p’ongnyökkwa kü hamüi” (“Violence during the March First Movement and its Implications”), *Chöngshinmunhwayön’gu (Korean Studies Quarterly)* 41, no. 4 (2018): 67-104, 86, 93.
- <sup>22</sup> For discussions on “peace from below” rather than “top-down peace,” see the Kwon Heonik interview “1919 nyönüi segyesajök üimirül toesaeginün ‘p’yöngghwa yön’gu’ p’iryo” (“‘Peace Studies’ That Need to Reconsider the World Historical Significance of 1919”), *Han’györe (Han’györe Daily)*, September 14, 2018.
- <sup>23</sup> Kwon Bodürae, “3.1undongüi pam” (“The Night of the March First Movement”), in *Tongashiaüi ‘kündaee’chegam (“Modern” Experiences of East Asia)*, ed. Park Gyeongseok (Seoul: Han Ul, 2018), 82-109, 102.
- <sup>24</sup> Cho Kyöng-dal, *Minjunggwa yut’op’ia (The Populace and Utopia)*, trans. Heo Youngran

(Seoul: Yöksabip'yöngsa, 2009), 243.

<sup>25</sup> Kwon Bodürae, “‘Manseüi yut'op'ia: 3.1undonge issö pokkukkwa shinsegye” (“The Utopianism of *Manse* – The Restoration of Sovereignty and the Idea of a New World during the March First Movement”) *Han'guk'akyöng'u* (*The Journal of Korean Studies*) 38 (2015): 193-226, 204.

<sup>26</sup> Lee Ki-hoon, “3.1undonggwa kitpal” (“The March First Movement and the Flag”), in *Ch'otpurüi nunüro 3.1undongül poda* (*Looking at March First Through the Candlelight Revolution*), *Ibid.*.

<sup>27</sup> Im Hyungtaek, “Han'gungmunhaksarül sagohanün hanaüi kil: minjungundong, kongnonjang” (“Another Way to Consider the History of Korean Literature – The Minjung Movement, Public Sphere and Justice”) *Han'gukkojönmunhakyöng'u* (*The Study of Korean Classical Literature*) 54 (2018): 5-24.

<sup>28</sup> Cho Kyöng-dal, *Ibid.*, 240; Bae Seongjun, *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>29</sup> Chun Junghwan, “Somun, pangmun, shinmun, kyöngmun: 3.1undong shigiüi midiówa chuch'esöng” (“Rumors, Gossip, Newspapers, and Appeals: The Media at the Time of the March First Movement and the People's National Subjecthood”), in *1919 nyön 3wöl lire mutta* (*Inquiries on March First, 1919*), 247-288, 259.

<sup>30</sup> Kim Heungkyu, *Kündaeüi t'ükkwönhwarül nömöso* (*Beyond the Privileging of the Modern*) (Seoul: Changbi Publishers, 2013), 179.

<sup>31</sup> Lee Ki-hoon, “Ilche shigi konghwadamnonüi hwakchang: (minjong)taep'yoüi kwannyömül chungshimüro” (“The Growth of Republican Discourse during the Japanese Imperial Period: With ‘National Representation’ as a Core Concept”), (paper in conference volume, Socheon Center for Korean Studies at Seoul National University, Seoul, November 30, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> See Baik Yongseo, “Jungguk Hyundaesaeseoui Minjujuewa Gukminuiheo Undong” (“Democracy and the National Congress Movements in the Modern History of China”), *Inmungwahak* (*Journal of Humanities*) 84, no. 10 (2002): 161-180. In this article, I argue that East Asian scholars interested in the National Congress movements start off their research by “criticizing the representative democracy that we see today, in lieu of the unique realities in which they live,” and are often motivated by “their own desire for an alternative model for democracy” (169). See also Yu Yong-tae's “20segi Jungguk'üi Minjujüi Gusang,” *Noksaekpyungron* (January-February issue 2018): 21-33. Yu re-examines China's democracy and suggests that the professional representative system can be regarded as more faithful to the principles of democratic republicanism as it enhances the representativeness and directness of democracy.

<sup>33</sup> Kim Jeong-in, “3.1undonggwa imshijöngbu pöpt'ongsöng inshigüi chöngch'isönggwa hangmunsöng” (“The Politicalness and Scholarliness of the March First Movement and Provisional Government Legitimacy Awareness”), *Söulgwa yöksa* (*Seoul and History*) 99 (2018): 206-242, 234; Kong Im-sun, “3.1undongüi yöksajöng kiökkwa paeban, kürigo kyesüngül tullössan inyömjöngch'i : 3.1undongüi pop'yön(juüi)jöng chip'yönggwa kwaso/gwaingüi taep'yosöng” (“Historical memory and the betrayal of the 3.1 Movement, and ideological politics about its succession”), *Han'gukkündaeunhakyöng'u* (*Korean Modern Literature Studies*) 24 (2011): 197-236, 221.

<sup>34</sup> Kim Jeong-in, *Onülgwa majuhan 3.1undong* (*The March First Movement Face to Face with Today*) (Seoul: Ch'aekkwahamkke, 2019), 202-208.

<sup>35</sup> Lee Nam-ju, “3·1 undong, ch'otpulhyōngmyōng gūrigō ‘Jilisagōn’” (“The March First Movement, the Candlelight Revolution, and ‘the Event of Truth’”) *Ch'anghakkwabip'yōng (The Quarterly Changbi)* 47, no. 1 (2019): 61-78, 187.

<sup>36</sup> Kwon Bodūrae, “‘Manseūi yut'op'ia: 3.1undonge issō pokkukkwa shinsegye” (“‘Manse’ Utopia: Restoring the Nation and the New World during the March First Movement”), 212.

<sup>37</sup> Cho Kyōng-dal, *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>38</sup> Some regard the significance of March First as an occasion during which Confucianist universalism—which has its roots in hopes for an ideal society of great harmony— i.e., “civilizationism” and national self-determinism converged. See Miyajima Hiroshi, “Minjokchuūiwa munmyōngjuūi: 3.1 undonge taehan saeroun ihaerūl wihayō” (“Nationalism and civilizationism: toward a new understanding of March First”), in *1919 nyōn 3wōl 1ire mutta (Inquiries on March First, 1919)*, op. cit., 67.

<sup>39</sup> Kim Jeong-in, “3.1 undongūi minjujuui hyōngmyōngsōng munje” (“The Question of a Democratic Revolution during the March First Movement”), (paper in conference volume from the March First Revolution 95th Anniversary Academic Conference, Center for Historical Truth and Justice, Seoul, February 26, 2014), 139.

<sup>40</sup> Kim Jinho, “3.1chōlgwa ‘t’aegūkki chip’oe’: irōbōrin minjungūi kiōk” (“March First and the ‘Taegukgi Demonstrations’: The Forgotten Memories of the Populace”), in *Ch'otpurūi nunūro 3.1undongūl poda (Looking at March First Through the Candlelight Revolution)*, *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Ryu Si-hyun, “1920nyōndae samirundonge kwanhan kiōng: shigan, changso, kūrigō ‘minjong/minjung’” (“Memories of the March First Movement in the 1920s: Time, Place, and ‘Nation/Masses’”), *Yōksawa hyōnshil (Quarterly Review of Korean History)* 74 (2009): 183-185.

<sup>42</sup> “Ilbonch'in'guyō(sang)” (“Dear Japanese Friends, Volume 1”), *Tongailbo*, March 4, 1921; *Ilcheha tongailbo apsu nonsōlchip (Collection of Dong-A Ilbo Editorials Seized under the Japanese Empire)*, (Seoul: Tongailbosa, 1978), 30; Ryu Sihyun, *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>43</sup> Paik Nak-chung, inspired by Sin Tongyōp’s poem “Who Says that He Saw the Sky” where the poet sees the Tonghak resistance movement and the April 19<sup>th</sup> Revolution as related events. He uses the term “people who saw the sky” to describe the primary agents of the Candlelight Revolution of 2016-17. Paik Nak-chung, “Hanūrūl pon twie muōsūl halkka” (“What to Do After Seeing Heaven”), *Ch'angbijugannonp'yōng (Creative Criticism Weekly Commentary)*, December 27, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Han'gukyōksayōn'guhōe (Korean History Society) and Yōksamunjeyōn'guso (The Institute for Korean Historical Studies), *Ibid.*, 256-257, 425-429.

<sup>45</sup> See Baik Youngseo, *Chungguk'yōndaedaehangmunhwayōn'gu (A Study of China’s Modern University Culture)* (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1994). The conclusion is particularly relevant here.

<sup>46</sup> I must of course note that the Japanese government, which experienced WWI as a total war, gravely felt the need to establish a stable resource pipeline in the 1920s. This was a major reason Japan took to a more conciliatory approach to colonial rule. However, this does not mean that the influence that the Korean resistance had on Japan was less significant.

<sup>47</sup> Paik Nak-chung, “[South Korea’s Candlelight Revolution and the Future of the Korean Peninsula](#),” *The Asia-Pacific Journal:Japan Focus* 16, no. 23 (2018): n. pag.

<sup>48</sup> Cho Kyōng-dal, “Shiberia shuppei to komesōdō” (“The Siberian Expedition and the Rice Riots”), *Reikishi chirikyōiku (History Geography Education)* 880 (2018): 4-9, 6-8.

<sup>49</sup> Yeom Sang-seop, “Choyaüi chegongege hosoham” (“A Plea to Everyone in the Whole Nation”), in *Yömsangsöm munjang chönjip 1: 1918-1928 (The Complete Works of Yeom Sang-seop, Volume 1: 1918-1928)*, ed. Han Kihyung and Lee Hyeryeong (Seoul: Somyöngch’ulp’an, 2013), 48.

<sup>50</sup> Irie Akira, *20segiüi jönjaenggwa p’yunghwa (War and Peace in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century)*, trans. Cho Jin-gu and Lee Jong-guk (Seoul: Yeonam Publishers, 2016), 105, 106.

<sup>51</sup> Ryu Sihyun, *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>52</sup> Hō Su, “Che1ch’a segyedaejön chongjön hu kaejoronüi hwaksan’gwa han’guk chishigin” (“The Dissemination of Post-World War I Reconstruction Discourse and Korean Intellectuals”), in *1919 nyön 3wöl 1ire mutta (Inquiries on March First, 1919)*, 151.

<sup>53</sup> Unknown author, “Munjeüi haegyörün Chagyörinya t’agyörinya” (“Whether the solution of the problem will be determined by ourselves or by others”), *Kaebiyök (Great Opening)* 33 (1923): 6-13, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Choi Suil, *‘Kaebiyök’ yön’gu (“Great Opening” Studies)* (Seoul: Somyöngch’ulp’an, 2008), 399-403.

<sup>55</sup> Baik Jiwoon, “Munmyöngüi chönhwan’gwa Segyeüi kaejo: 1ch’a taejön chik’u “K’ajjoo”üi Munmyöngnon” (“Toward a Transformation of Civilization and the Reconstruction of the World: Civilization Discourses of Kaizō right after World-War I”), *Tongbanghakchi (The Journal of Korean Studies)* 173 (2016): 135-159, 156.

<sup>56</sup> Lee Taehoon, *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>57</sup> For this three-party aspect, see Paik Nak-chung et al., *Ibid.*, 242; Jo Sunghwan, *Han’gung kündaeüi t’ansaeng: Kaehwaesö kaebiyöküro (The Birth of Korean Modernity: From Reform to the Great Opening)* (Seoul: Moshinünsaramdül, 2018), 109-110.

<sup>58</sup> Hur categorizes discourses about alternative civilization as a branch of cultural reformism, and points out that advocates of such discourses did not do enough to pave the way to realize an alternative civilization through preparing necessary systems and resources. However, he does suggest that such past discourses on alternative civilization can be understood as precious theoretical assets. Hur Soo, “20 segi ch’o Hanguk’üi P’yönghwaron” (“The Theory of Peace in Korea in the Early 20th Century”), *Yöksabip’yöng (Critical Review of History)* 106 (2014): 37-68, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Cho Kyöng-dal 趙景達, “Dogmas and Practices of Buddhist Society in Colonial Korea” 植民地朝鮮における佛法研究會の教理と活動, in *War, Disasters, and Popular Religions in Modern East Asia 戦争・災害と近代東アジアの民衆宗教*, ed. Takeuchi Husasi (Tokyo: Yujisa, 2014). Cho categorizes the religions of the time into four types: those involved in the great revival movement, those that reinforced apocalyptic superstitions, those that carried out a political movement, and those that performed the simultaneous tasks of saving the inner world and enabling social contributions.

<sup>60</sup> Paik Nak-chung et al., *Ibid.*, 243, 245-48.

<sup>61</sup> Paik Nak-chung, “T’ongilsasangürosöüi songjöngsanüi kön’gungnon” (“Song Jeong-san’s Treatise on Nation Building as an Ideology for Unification”), in *Munmyöngüi taejönhan’gwa huch’ön’gaebiyök (The Great Shift in Civilization and the Great Opening)* (Seoul: Moshinünsaramdül, 2016).

<sup>62</sup> See Paik Nak-chung, “3·1 gwa hanbandosik naramandülgi” (“March the First’ and Nation Building Korean-Style”), *Changgakkwabip’yöng* 47 no. 2 (2019): 314-17. This article proposes

a transformative middle way—distinguished from both extremes—that fundamentally changes, rather than reforms, the Japanese colonial order/system (so that the change would result in Korea’s independence).

<sup>63</sup> Ahn Hoe-nam, “P’okp’ungüi yöksa” (“A Tumultuous History”) (April, 1947), in *Han’guksosölmunhaktaegy* (*An Outline of Korean Novels*) 24 (Seoul: Tonggach’ulp’ansa, 1995), 527; Chang Ilsun, “Sangdaerül pyönhwashik’imyö hamkke” (“Changing the Other and With the Other”), in *Nanün mich’ö mollanne küdaega nayöttanün kösül* (*I Had Not Realized, Thou Was I*), ed. Kim Ik-rok (Seoul: Shigolsaenghwal, 2012), 113.

<sup>64</sup> Kwon Bodürae, “1910nyöndaeeüi ‘hyöngmyöng’: 3.1undong chönyaüi kaenyömgwa yongböbül chungshimüro” (“The Transformation of ‘Revolution’ in 1910 Korea”), *Kaenyömgwa sot’ong* (*Concept and Communication*) 15 (2015): 47-81, 68-69, 76.

<sup>65</sup> Lee Junsik, “‘Undong’inga ‘hyöngmyöng’inga: ‘3.1hyöngmyöngüi chaeinshik” (“‘Movement’ or ‘Revolution’?: Rethinking the March First Revolution”), (paper in conference volume from the March First Revolution 95th Anniversary Academic Conference), 42-56.

<sup>66</sup> This notion is indebted to Paik Nak-chung who puts much emphasis on the current nature of the April 19 Revolution (1960) and thereby calls it an “Unfinished Revolution.” He addresses three criteria as the basis for his argument. See Paik Nak-chung, “4.19üi yöksajök üüüwa hyönjaesöng” (“The Historical Meaning and Presentness of 4·19”), in *Pundanch’eye pyönhyögüi kongbugil* (*Studies on the Transformation in the Division System*) (Seoul: Ch’angjakkwabip’yöngsa, 1994), 49-67, 53-54.

<sup>67</sup> Matsuo Takayoshi, “Taishö Demok’ürashiwa 3·1 dongnip’ undong” (“The Taishö democracy era and the March First Independence Movement”), in *3·1 undonggwa 1919nyönüi segyesajök’ üimi* (*The March First Movement and the World Historical Significance of 1919*), ed. Geng Yunzhi et al. (Seoul: Dongbugayöksajaedan, 2010), 125-142, 126.

<sup>68</sup> Cho Kyöng-dal 趙景達, “Shiberia shuppei to komesödö” (“The Siberian Expedition and the Rice Riots”), 8. It should be noted that there were activist forces like Yoshino Sakujooh (吉野作造)—or enlightenment clubs he led such as 黎明會—who tried to understand the two movements and argued for a reformation of the empire. These people thus showed an exceptionally international “sense of the other.” The historical meaning of their existence must be acknowledged. Some scholars argue that their arguments for a reformed Japan and an alliance in East Asia should be appreciated. See Yonetani Masafumi 米谷匡史, “The March First Independence Movement, May Fourth Movement and the Democracy of Imperial Japan” 三・一獨立運動, 五・四運動と帝國日本のデモクラシ, *Yoksajirigyoyuk* (*Journal of History Education*) 891 (2019): 28-33, 33.

<sup>69</sup> Meng Zhen (Fu Sinian) 孟眞(傅斯年), “Chaoxian-duliyundongzhongzhi-xinjiaoxun” 朝鮮獨立運動中之新教訓 (“The New Lessons of Korea’s Independence Movement”), *Xinchao* (新潮) 1. 4 (April 1, 1919). Meng Zhen was the leader of the student movement at Beijing University. He evaluated the March First Movement as an “epoch-making revolution,” which left us three lessons: it was a non-violent revolution, you can actualize a revolution in spite of knowing that it is impossible, and it was a pure student revolution.

<sup>70</sup> See To Chinsun, “Yöksawa kiök: kön’guk’yöndowa yöngo, kü chöngch’ijök’ hamüi” (“History and Memory: The Era Name, National Foundation Year, and Its Political Implications”), *Yöksabip’yöng* (*Critical Review of History*) 126 (2019): 393-422. Doh notes that the March First Movement, the establishment of the Provisional Government, and the founding of the Republic of Korea are “separate issues in different dimensions” when we examine them from

the “wider perspective of the entire Korean peninsula.” He further notes that we must ponder ways to remember the three events from a more open and broader perspective—a perspective that will enable the South and North to communicate better.