

Articles

Major Trends of Korean Historiography in the US*

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Abstract: The need for intelligence on enemy countries during World War II spurred the establishment of area studies programs in the US. In the case of Asia, these programs produced an Orientalist scholarship that was grounded in modernization theory. This article examines the major streams of Orientalist and anti-Orientalist scholarship in Korean historiography in the US. Orientalist historiography has tended to critique “internal development” theory, amounting to a revival of stagnation theory that had been propounded by Japanese scholars support by the government during the occupation period. Anti-Orientalist scholarship has used a variety of critical theories to overcome the limitations of modernization theory and to situate the

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dynamism of modern Korean history within the context of developments in the capitalist world system.

Introduction

By now, it should be no surprise to say that Korean Studies in the US is primarily a form of Orientalism. To the US, Korea has been a mysterious Other, marked by its difference with the West. Such Orientalist views were apparent in missionary works and travelogues in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the very first book on Korea was published in the US. They saw Korea as a strange barbarian land, as a “Hermit Kingdom” outside of history and cut off from the rest of the world, and it produced reactions ranging from fear to wonder. In the Orientalist worldview, the mission of the West was to civilize and modernize Korea. Korean Studies in the US has changed much during the past one hundred years, but its underpinnings remain Orientalist (corresponding to Edward Said’s distinction between “manifest” and “latent” Orientalism).¹

As Said noted, Orientalism is not just a system of representation existing within Western “consciousness;” it is also an institutional academic discipline that is designed to serve American national interest. Area studies programs in US universities emerged around the time of World War II because of the need of intelligence agencies for information on enemy powers.² After the war, the focus of these programs shifted to communism. Intelligence agencies or other state organs funded and, in some cases, set the research agenda and supervised the hiring of faculty members in these programs. The

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1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 206.
 2. Bruce Cumings, “Boundary Displacement: The State, the Foundations, and International and Area Studies during and after the Cold War,” *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999.

objective was to create think tanks that would help to produce more effective foreign policy and business strategies. That is, area studies was supposed to contribute to maintaining and expanding American hegemony. In the 1950s and 60s, the importance of Korea paled in comparison to that of China and Japan. Nonetheless, the framework for area studies programs was well established before the growth of Korean Studies programs in the 1980s.

Accordingly, Korean Studies in the US can be seen as an academic discipline for the production of knowledge on Korea in support of American national interest. While the demands of a growing Korean American population in American colleges have also played an important role, the main impetus for Korean Studies has come from the needs of the state and the economy, both requiring certain kinds of knowledge about Korea. At any given time, the state of Korean Studies in the US is a reflection of Korea's position within the world capitalist economy and of the strategic importance of Korea in US foreign policy.

Scholars in the US can be distinguished by their position toward this system, and Korean Studies in the US can be seen as a struggle between those who support it and those who oppose it. Both sides contain diverse groups of scholars, but this division is a fundamental one. With the end of the cold war, conservative scholarship became more entrenched and strengthened within the US. But, at the same time, the problems and weaknesses of the area studies paradigm became more apparent, making it possible to critique it. Korean Studies in the US is going through a transitional phase as it experiences another period of growth. The next few years may be decisive to its future as the aftermath of 9-11 may close the critical space that opened up after the end of the cold war.

To map out the possible futures for Korean Studies as a critically relevant discipline, it is important to begin with a reflection on its origins, as they are beginning to grow murky in myth as the pioneering generation of scholars in the US is retiring. Korean Studies in the US has become wide enough that it is impossible to cover,

even superficially, all the various streams within it. The objective of this article is limited to tracing the genealogy of the major trends in Korean historiography in the US.

Korean Studies within US Academia

Before moving on to the main discussion, it is important to go over the factors that enable area studies programs to produce Orientalists in Korean Studies. First, Korean Studies is not an independent academic discipline. There are no separate departments for Korean Studies in the US, and most schools have only an East Asian Studies department. The consequence is that Korean Studies is often supervised or managed by scholars whose main field of research is not Korea. The necessity to talk about Korea in a way understandable to non-specialists creates an indirect pressure to conform to existing forms of scholarship. Furthermore, much of the funding for Korean Studies comes from outside sources since American universities have not devoted much funds to area studies. The lack of internal funding enables outside foundations and the government to play an important role in Korean Studies.

Scholars become exposed to these forces beginning in graduate school. Although it usually takes six to nine years to complete a Ph.D., most programs only offer a five-year fellowship. Fellowships are crucial because virtually no one can afford to pay for graduate school on his or her own. Students have to apply for outside fellowships to do research abroad and to write up their dissertations after they return. For Korean Studies, the main organizations involved are the Fulbright Commission, the Social Science Research Council, and the Korea Foundation. Fulbright fellowships are administered by the US Department of Education and the Institute of International Education, which is the main administrator of the Fulbright Program for the US government. The SSRC is a nongovernmental organization that essentially mediates between foundations, such as the Ford

Foundation, and the universities. They committees of seniors scholars in each field make decisions on graduate student fellowships. As a consequence, the career of a graduate student at one school may be affected by the decisions of scholars from other schools.

The tenure process exposes young scholars to the forces of normalization not just within their schools but also from their fields as a whole. When a scholar is hired as an assistant professor, the contract is usually for six or seven years, at the end of which the school will make a decision on tenure. In the humanities, it is usual for an assistant professor to take a sabbatical in the middle of the contract period. The time is supposed to be used to finish a book manuscript and to begin a second major research project. To do so, assistant professors often have to spent the year in Korea, and again, they must apply for outside sources of funding. Because of its importance in getting tenure, the necessity of getting outside funding imposes an unspoken pressure on young scholars.

The tenure decision is not purely an internal matter of the department or the school. Perhaps the most important requirement in getting tenure is to get a book published at a major university press. This situation gives university presses significant power in the academic world in the US. To approve a manuscript for publication, university presses send it out for review to two seniors members in the field. Through the university press, established scholars are again able to exert influence over the field. For a tenure decision, a department forms a committee of senior professors to gather materials, and they ask for letters from senior members of the field throughout the country to comment on the quality of the candidate's scholarship. In this sense, academia in the US - as in other countries - can be understood as a fraternal organization that seeks to regulate membership according to conformity to unspoken norms.

While tenure does give scholars a certain amount of freedom, the institutional and organizational structure of the field continues to make it difficult to critique the prevalent Orientalist orthodoxy within Asian Studies. Perhaps the main factor is economic - the con-

stant need of area studies programs to acquire outside funding. Universities with a number of scholars specializing in Korea usually have some kind of Center for Korean Studies or, at least, a Center for Asian Studies. Though these centers do perform scholarly activities, one of their primary functions is to coordinate fund-raising activities. In fact, the way that area studies have been created in US universities has certain parallels with the economic development policies of the US toward the Third World. Funding, whether in the form of grants to schools or loans to countries, creates a situation of dependency, and the consequences of resistance to this dependency can be serious.

Orientalism in Korean Studies

As is well known, the first important center of Orientalism in Korean Studies was at Harvard University (my alma mater), and the pioneer scholar in this field was the late Edward Wagner. He first came to Korea as a soldier after World War II as part of the US occupation army. When he was drafted, he was an undergraduate at Harvard, and after his return, he began to focus his studies on Korea. By the 1950s, the foundation of East Asian Studies at Harvard had already been established by the two famous pioneers, John K. Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer. One of their main scholarly achievements was the systematic application of modernization theory in the study of East Asia, and modernization theory in area studies can be regarded as the most recent form of "manifest Orientalism" in the US.

Though modernization theory is mainly associated with Harvard and the sociologist Talcott Parsons, it was the dominant paradigm in American social science in the mid-20th century. The ascendancy of modernization theory was the result of the rise of the US as a hegemonic power, the formation of the communist bloc of states centered on the Soviet Union, and anti-colonial movements in the

Third World. As the battleground of the cold war expanded to the so-called “underdeveloped countries” of the world, it became important for the US to develop a social science that was “capable of explaining development and change ... [and] could offer an alternative to Marxis[m].”³

Based on Darwinism, modernization theory provided an “evolutionary model of growth” that would “lead to the peaceful development of capitalism.”⁴ It posited that all countries had to pass through the same historical stages to modernity (e.g., Parsons’ “evolutionary universals”).⁵ It conceived of society in functionalist terms as a holistic organism in which the subsystems - i.e., politics, society, the economy - were interdependent. It took the nation-state as the basic unit of analysis.

Modernization theory’s conception of tradition and modernity resuscitated an Orientalist worldview in the language of “objective” social science. It saw tradition as an obstacle that needs to be eliminated in the development of a modern society. The implicit assumption was that traditional societies lacked the ability to develop on their own and could not adapt to the environment produced by the capitalist world market. Fairbank and Reischauer conceptualized modern East Asian history in terms of a “challenge” and “response” dynamic in which it was in contact with the West that acted as a stimulus to change in traditional East Asia. In their view, Japan represented a successful case of adaptation, and China - at least communist China - was a failure.

It was in this intellectual atmosphere that the pioneers of Korean Studies in the US began their graduate studies and academic careers. Besides Wagner, there was also Gregory Henderson, who had been a diplomat during the US occupation and who was studying modern

3. Harry Harootunian, *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 33.

4. Harootunian, *Ibid.*

5. Talcott Parsons, “Evolutionary Universals in Society,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (June 1964).

politics. Harvard chose to give tenure to Wagner, decisively moving Korean Studies into the study of pre-modern society in its early years. The introduction of modernization theory into Korean Studies began in earnest when James Palais came to study under Wagner at Harvard in the late 1950s. In many ways, his arrival marked a turning point in the development of Korean Studies in the US.

Palais presents an interesting paradox. On a personal level, there are many aspects of him that are progressive. He was a critic of military dictatorship in Korea and has been firm in resisting the crude political use of government funds in Korean Studies.⁶ However, his scholarship is clearly rooted in modernization theory.

It is difficult to define a coherent methodology within modernization theory, particularly as used in East Asian Studies. At its best, it can illuminate many of the dynamic interactions among the subsystems of a country. At its worst, it falls into a crude positivism and treats each subsystem separately, merely giving a descriptive listing of its major features. In either case, there is a Durkheimian concern for showing how the subsystems succeed or fail at promoting the stability of the country. Because of the emphasis on stability, the main weakness of modernization theory is that for non-Western countries, dynamism for change must come from the outside or, at most, from the political realm. In this sense, it is logical that the focus of much of Palais' work and that of his students has been the refutation of "internal development" theory.

Palais was influenced by the work of S. N. Eisenstadt, a sociologist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Though he is not known as the most prominent modernization theorists, he has been active in US academia throughout his career. A prolific writer, he is one of the major scholars whose work extended modernization theory into the study of non-Western societies. Like other modernization theorists, Eisenstadt sees politics as one subsystem among the many interde-

6. Bruce Cumings, "South Korea's Academic Lobby," JPRI Occasional Paper #7. Japan Policy Research Institute, May 1996.

pendent ones in a country. His book *The Political Systems of Empires* focuses on the competition among the monarchy, bureaucracy, and aristocracy in what he calls “historical bureaucratic empires.” His main concern is to determine the conditions under which political systems become institutionalized in these empires, reflecting the concern of modernization theory for stability. Considering this focus, it is not surprising that Palais thought his work could be applicable to Korean history.⁷

All these elements of modernization theory were apparent in the first major work produced by Palais, *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*.⁸ It was an extensive study of the reforms of the Taewôngun, focusing on politics at the center. Palais concluded that the Taewôngun was no more than a traditional reformer and that the political system was so strong that the monarchy could not overcome the opposition of the aristocracy even to his conservative reforms. The implication that Korea was not able to reform on its own and had to wait for the arrival of the foreign powers. He did not explicitly critique the “internal development” theory, but one telltale sign was his skepticism over the research of Kim Yongsôp and other scholars whom he would identify with the theory.⁹

In the late 1970s and early 80s, a new generation of students entered Korean Studies, and unlike the earlier generation, many of them had their first contact with Korea through the Peace Corps rather than the army or diplomatic corps. Some of them ended up

7. However, in his book, Eisenstadt only claimed to be analyzing a “special type of political system” and acknowledged that his “analysis does not focus on the description and analysis of the total social systems.” I do not find the same caution in the work of Palais or his students. See S. N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires*. London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963, pp. vii-viii.

8. For an in-depth examination of Palais’ scholarship, see Kim Sông’u, “Cheimsû P’allye ûi Chosôn wangjosa insik,” *Yôksa pip’yông*, no. 59 (summer 2002), pp. 126-155.

9. James B. Palais, *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 8.

spending several years in South Korea before deciding to pursue an academic career. A good number of these students went to the University of Washington to study under Palais. They now hold positions at some of the major centers of Korean Studies in the US and are among the senior members of the field: Don Baker (Univ. of British Columbia), John Duncan (UCLA), Carter Eckert (Harvard), and Michael Robinson (Indiana University). Their published work has made an important empirical contribution to Korean Studies in the US by increasing the number of materials available in English. Eckert and Robinson collaborated with Wagner and Yi Ki-baek to write *Korea Old and New*, one of the most widely used textbooks in college classes on Korean history. Some of them now also serve as the gate-keepers of the field. They are members of Korea-related committees in the Association for Asian Studies and serve as editors for the *Journal of Korean Studies*, the most prominent of the small number of academic journals devoted to Korean Studies.

In the process of training his students, Palais, consciously or not, set a research agenda that extended the critique of “internal development” theory in two directions. First, moving further into the pre-modern period, Palais and his students attempted to refute prevalent interpretations on the *sarimp’a* and Silhak. Second, the students who did research on the modern period aimed to refute the theories of “capitalist sprouts.” The overall result was to deepen the penetration of modernization theory into Korean Studies in the US. It seems that the application of modernization theory to Korean history has resulted in the revival of the “stagnation theory” of Japanese colonial scholarship in a more robust form. For the purposes of this article, I will limit myself to noting some of the ways in which modernization theory has influenced their view of history.

As is well known, Wagner was the first scholar in the US to examine the *sarimp’a* issue in his book, *The Literati Purges*, utilizing genealogical data. But Duncan has provided the most comprehensive study of this issue in his recent book, *The Origins of the Chosôn Dynasty*. Based on an examination of the aristocracy before and after

the Koryo-Choson transition, he claims to have refuted the argument that Choson was founded by a new scholar-official class that came from the small to medium landlord class (in particular, his target is the work of Yi T'aejin). Like Palais, his theoretical framework was influenced by Eisenstadt's *The Political Systems of Empires*. However, Duncan applied it to an examination of dynastic change which was not a focus of Eisenstadt's work. In fact, Eisenstadt discussed change in historical bureaucratic empires only at the end of his book. Like other modernization theorists, the strength of his work is in analyzing stability, and its weakness is in explaining historical change. Eisenstadt's work unwittingly demonstrates the problematic and Orientalist nature of modernization theory's view of history.

In the chapter on change, Eisenstadt distinguishes among three major types of change: accommodable, total, and marginal. The term "accommodable change" refers to changes that can be absorbed into the existing institutions of the political system, and he saw Chinese history as a good example of accommodable change. To Eisenstadt, dynastic changes were cases of marginal change that "either evaporated or merged in the processes of accommodable change."¹⁰ Similarly, Duncan also regards the Koryo-Choson transition as another case of a marginal change becoming an accommodable change or remaining, at best, marginal. This view of history is essentially a more sophisticated form of stagnation theory; that is, the implication is that pre-modern history in China and Korea was one of change but not development (i.e., not total change).¹¹

10. Eisenstadt, pp. 313-14, 323-24.

11. Accordingly, at the end of his book, Duncan is able to claim to have refuted, simultaneously, both stagnation theory and "internal development" theory. This conclusion is possible because he essentially restricts the scope of internal development theory to the work of Lee Ki-baek (Yi Kibaek) - and Yi T'aejin - and does not undertake an examination of the emergence of the term in the work of Kajimura Hideki and the increasing ambiguity of its meaning in later scholarship. See John B. Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000, pp. 5-6, 278-79.

In his book *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*, Palais aimed to refute key aspects of “internal development” theory through an analysis of Yu Hyôngwôn’s *Pangye surok* and Chosôn period history. To simplify greatly, his conclusion is that Yu Hyôngwôn remained a Confucian reformer and that the modern tendencies ascribed to him were actually aspects of Neo-Confucianism. It seems that the reason that Palais chose to focus on Yu Hyôngwôn is that if he could show that a radical thinker like Yu was not modern, then he could also conclude that there was no movement toward a modern society during the mid and late Chosôn periods.

Palais’ book is so comprehensive that it is impossible to summarize his arguments briefly. However, his criteria for distinguishing between traditional and modern - which underlie his entire analysis - is so problematic that it threatens to undermine his arguments. Ultimately, his criteria are rooted in the ethnocentrism (Anglo-America-centrism) characteristic of modernization theory. He asks rhetorically, “what other model of modernity has there been except the path trodden by those nations on the way to modern industrial capitalism, particularly the model of the development of England?”¹² Like modernization theorists, Palais simply assumed that there is only one path to modernity. He explicitly stated the often unstated assumption that the normative case was that of England (and America). What is problematic is that his view of modernity fails to take into account the very historicity of capitalism. That is, he ignores the fact that the rise of capitalism in one country changed the conditions for its later development in other countries. Max Weber was aware of this point, and in *Religion of China*, he predicted that China would become the next great capitalist power (which is seeming less ridiculous now). This point is also one of the central insights of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems analysis. In the end, for Palais, a coun-

12. Palais, *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996, p. 355.

try cannot exhibit modern traits unless it imitates the West - a view that is in agreement with the arguments and policy proposals of modernization theory.

Although Robinson's book came out first, Eckert's book, *Offspring of Empire*, was the first book on the modern period that sought to refute the "capitalist sprouts" theory. It was a pioneering case study of the Kyôngsông Spinning and Weaving Company which he used to try to prove that Korean capitalism had its origins during Japanese colonial rule. While Eckert's work made an important empirical contribution to our understanding of the colonial period, it was based on a fundamental misrecognition of the nature of capitalism. This symptomatic misrecognition was typical in modernization theory. Eckert stated that "capitalism as an economic system cannot be separated from industrialism," and he even mobilized Marx to defend his non-Marxist emphasis on the "crucial relationship between capitalism and technology."¹³ His conception of capitalism effaces the fact that capitalism also brought about a transformation of human relations. By shifting the emphasis away from human relations to factories and machinery, Eckert is able to privilege the role of outside forces and to construct a narrative of capitalism in which exploitation and human suffering are viewed as an aberration, as an unfortunate side-effect and not as a fundamental aspect of capitalist development.¹⁴ In a similar manner, Reischauer viewed Japan's fascist period and the Pacific War as an aberration in its otherwise peaceful development of capitalism.

There are other scholars who fall into this tendency, and there are some scholars who began in this tendency and changed later or whose position became ambiguous. Their work has certainly made

13. Carter J. Eckert, *Offspring of Empire: The Koch'ang Kims and the Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism, 1876-1945*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1991, p. 4.

14. For a detailed analysis of Eckert's work, see Chông T'aehôn, "K'at'ô Ek'ôt'û ûi Han'guk 'minjokjuûi' insik pip'an," *Yôksa pip'yông*, no. 59 (summer 2002), pp. 156-174.

important contributions to Korean Studies in the US, but my purpose was to just use a few representative works to demonstrate the influence of modernization theory.¹⁵

Critical Korean Studies

While World War II led to the creation of area studies programs in the US, it was the Vietnam War that catalyzed the development of a critical scholarship opposed Orientalism in Asian Studies. A new generation of graduate students and scholars who were radicalized by the antiwar movement came to realize that the cold war necessitated the US's support of repressive political regimes in Asia and that modernization theory provided the means for the US to justify its policies. The Vietnam War "forced the confrontation of issues of academic complicity" in US foreign policy and, concomitantly, the government's involvement in area studies programs.¹⁶ In 1968, they organized the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), which began publishing its own journal in the same year. While the group did not share a common research methodology or theoretical perspective, they had in common a desire to interrogate the relation between academia and the politics of the cold war. One of their early successes was the movement to protest the establishment of the Vietnam Center at Southern Illinois University in the early 70s. The CCAS organized chapters at all the main centers for Asian Studies, and their participation involved risks because their teachers were often leading figures in Orientalist Asian Studies. Many initially could find jobs only in second-tier schools that were in a marginal

15. For a more comprehensive survey of scholars active in the US, see Henry Em, "Miguk nae Han'guk kûnhyôndaesa yôn'gu tonghyang," *Yôksa wa hyônsil*, No. 23 (March 1997).

16. Douglas Allen, "Antiwar Asian Scholars and the Vietnam/Indochina War," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 21, Nos. 2-4 (April-Dec. 1989), p. 115.

position in Asian Studies, and some even paid for their involvement with their careers and had to find work outside the US, such as Frank Baldwin. Nonetheless, their work was important in opening a critical space within Asian Studies.

The late 1960s was also the time when the University of Chicago (where I did my graduate work) began to emerge as a center of critical Asian Studies. It could be said that while the CCAS focused on the political struggle against Orientalism, scholars at Chicago focused on the intellectual struggle against modernization theory. The key moment was when Harry Harootunian joined Tetsuo Najita in the history department there in the late 60s. Although Harootunian and Najita had come out of two of the major centers of Orientalist Asian Studies (Univ. of Michigan and Harvard), they both rebelled against how modernization theory privileged a linear, evolutionary view of history centered on Western experience. While modernization theory had put Asia outside of history, they sought to discover the dynamism of East Asian history. Instead of a smooth evolutionary growth, they emphasized the disruptions and conflict inherent in the transition to modernity in Asia. Their work became a target of virulent criticism because Japan, the main focus of their research, was regarded as the most prominent success that proved the validity of modernization theory.¹⁷

Harootunian and Najita were also opposed to the area studies approach to Asian Studies that was espoused in the major centers of Orientalism. The area studies paradigm emphasized gathering specialists in a variety of fields on a single country who focus on increasing empirical knowledge of its subsystems; i.e., a multidisciplinary approach. In contrast, Harootunian and Najita introduced innovative theoretical approaches into the study of Asia in order to produce more politically-informed analyses of East Asian history and to overcome the isolation of the field by engaging in a dialogue with other disciplines. They began a rigorous study of new theoretic-

17. Harootunian, *Ibid.*, p. 34.

cal work coming out at the time by scholars such as Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Hayden White, and Edward Said - in a search for new ways of writing the history of East Asia. At the same time, they conducted extensive research that spanned both the Tokugawa and modern periods, making their critique harder to ignore.

Until the 1970s, Asian Studies in the US had been a virtual monopoly of a few centers that produced most of the scholars in the field. With the rapid expansion of Asian Studies in the 1980s, it became impossible for those centers to continue to monopolize the field. This expansion provided an opening for scholars critical of Orientalism and the cold war to move into elite universities. Harootunian and Najita had been active in training students throughout the 70s and 80s, and their students now occupy positions in universities such as Cornell, University of Michigan, University of Illinois, UC-Irvine, and UCLA. Despite strong attacks and criticism from traditional Orientalists, they were able to establish an informal academic network that has functioned as an alternative to the existing institutions of Asian Studies. They publish articles and books, work on journals, and organize conferences in a relatively more open atmosphere than had existed in the 60s and 70s.

1. Bruce Cumings

Within Korean Studies, the most prominent progressive scholar is, of course, Bruce Cumings, author of the two-volume study, *The Origins of the Korean War*. Also a Peace Corps veteran, he was a graduate student at Columbia in the late 1960s when Mark Selden (now of Binghamton University) came to organize a chapter of the CCAS. Cumings became a member of CCAS, and his time at Columbia was decisive in the development of his political consciousness. He actually did not enter academia with the intention of going into Korean Studies; he received his Ph.D. from the political science department. He may be better understood as both a Korea historian and an international historian who focuses on the political economy of East

Asia.

Cumings' *The Origins of the Korean War* is one of the most influential works on Korea published in the US. It was crucial in enabling the rise of critical scholarship within Korean Studies because it challenged both modernization theory and the US's cold war orthodoxy on Korea. His thinking was greatly influenced by Wallerstein's 1974 book *The Modern World System*. Wallerstein viewed capitalism as a unified world system structured according to an international division of labor that enables core regions to establish dominance over the periphery. In contrast to modernization theory's focus on the nation-state, world systems analysis emphasized that national development can only be understood in the context of a country's position within the world economy. However, like other contemporary critics, Cumings realized that Wallerstein's framework, though powerful, did not take into consideration the geopolitical-military competition among states nor the internal class dynamics within each nation-state.¹⁸ To overcome these weaknesses, he turned to the work of scholars such as Barrington Moore, Karl Polanyi, Franz Schurmann, and Perry Anderson.¹⁹ Despite their differences, these thinkers opposed modernization theory in their general agreement that there were many historical paths to modern society. Cumings' combination of analyses of the world-system, class, and international geopolitics provided an alternative to modernization theory that saw political actors as representatives of specific socio-economic trends and examined them in the context of the world system.

The Origins of the Korean War demonstrated that the US bore much responsibility for the division of the country and for the installation of a repressive dictatorship, in the form of Syngman Rhee, that lacked popular support. He supported his findings so meticulously

18. Giovanni Arrighi, "Capitalism and the Modern World System: Rethinking the Non-Debates of the 1970s," paper presented at the American Sociological Association Meeting, New York, August 16-20, 1996.

19. For more on Cumings' intellectual influences, see "Miguk Asiahak ùi pip'anjòk kòmt'o," *Yòksa pip'yòng*, no. 54 (spring 2001).

with archival materials that it was difficult to dismiss his work. His research was revisionist in the sense that it put equal blame on the US for the start of the cold war. However, Cumings was innovative in that he showed that the US state was split between two main approaches to foreign policy, which he labeled “rollback” and “internationalism” and that they reflected different conceptions of political economy. Though they often were in contention, they agreed on the importance of creating a regional economy in Asia centered on Japan and thus supported the war in Korea. Despite severe criticism from both historians and social scientists, Cumings was able to survive in academia because Palais, sympathetic with his intellectual objectives, arranged for him to be hired at the University of Washington, where he eventually taught for ten years.

Another one of Cumings’ contributions to Korean Studies has been to treat North Korea as an object of serious academic inquiry. During the cold war, just the fact that he took North Korea seriously was enough to make him a target of attacks. The main tendency of American scholarship was to conflate the North’s ideology with its “real” politics and to see it as an irrational and barbarian Other. By contrast, Cumings always emphasized the necessity of recognizing that it does have its own politics and rationality and of developing theories to explain its behavior. He was also the first scholar to include a chapter on North Korea in a general history of Korea (*Korea’s Place in the Sun*).²⁰ His work has helped to lay the foundation for the increase in studies on North Korea after the end of the cold war.

Cumings’ work is also significant because his positions seem to be compatible with those of “internal development” theory. For one thing, he does not see the Choson period as stagnant, seeing dynamism in the rise of peasant resistance and peasant nationalism.

20. There are no chapters on North Korea in either the translation of Yi Ki-baek’s *A New History of Korea or Korea Old and New*. For a analytic comparison of introductory textbooks on Korean history, see Pak T’aegyun, “Miguk ūi Han’guksa kyojae punsôk,” *Yôksa pip’yông*, no. 54 (spring 2001).

He also argues that commercial development, while not at the level of Japan, did bring about changes that contributed to later capitalist development.²¹ Cumings' work was initially more influential on the study of postwar South Korean history than on the study of pre-1945 Korea. Since the publication of volume 1, there have been numerous studies of South Korean economic development that have also used a political economy approach. However, the focus has tended to be on external factors rather than internal ones. Even Cumings' own work leaves room for further exploration of the internal dynamics of Korean society. Even now, there still is no work on pre-1945 Korean history that is based on or extends "internal development" theory.

Part of the reason is that Cumings did not begin to train his own students until he moved to the University of Chicago in 1987. While he was at the University of Washington, he did work with many of Palais' students, but they followed Palais' understanding of capitalism and history rather than that of Cumings. Since 1987, he has trained a few students in modern Korean history, but their research does not focus on political economy or international relations. Influenced by Harootunian and Najita, they mainly work in intellectual and socio-cultural history. Their research focuses on 20th century history; so far, none of Cumings' students has worked on the 19th century or earlier periods. However, they are still too few in number to function as a semi-autonomous, informal network within Korean Studies. Their presence in the field is still small because they have not yet begun to publish their works. The next few years will determine whether they can establish a firm foundation within Asian Studies in the US; the future will also reveal the extent to which they incorporate "internal development" theory into their work.

21. See Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, chapters 1 and 2 as well as *Korea's Place in the Sun*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

2. Postmodernism and Korean Studies

The “New Left” of the 60s began to decline after the end of the Vietnam War, even as many of the academic New Left obtained permanent university positions. A new generation emerged in the 1980s that began to reflect on the successes and failures of the previous generation as conservative administrations took power in the US and Britain. In their search for new forms of activism, they undertook theoretical work of texts from abroad that were increasingly being translated into English. It was at this time that postmodernism and, a little later, postcolonialism became major forces in academic discourse.

As is well known, postmodernism was an attempt to analyze what its theorists saw as new configurations of capitalism after 1960s; namely, its increased globalization and its deepening penetration of social life. In their analyses of consumer and popular culture, they found some of the factors behind the growing conservatism of society and the increasing difficulty of organizing resistance against capitalist states. Rejecting earlier forms of political action associated with socialist movements, they felt that the changes in global capitalism required new forms of resistance. On the level of ideology, it sought to critique the Enlightenment, rejecting all forms of essentialism.

In relation to historiography, postmodernism has meant the rejection of all meta-narratives whose focus is the homogeneous nation-state. Postmodern scholars have drawn attention to the oppressed groups who were excluded from representations of the nation. They have stressed the multiplicity of identities within the nation, and their conception of resistance also focuses on multiple arenas of action, rejecting earlier calls to create a single, unitary resistance movement.

Similarly, postcolonialism emerged as a reflection on the failure of colonial liberation movements to give formerly colonial regions true autonomy. Postcolonial theorists built on the insights of the

work of writers such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, which had gained attention in the US during the civil rights movement. Their work demonstrated that the elites that came to power after liberation often ended up forming an alliance with foreign capital in order to maintain their rule, suppressing the democratic aspirations of the former liberation movements. Like postmodern scholars, postcolonialists emphasize the multiplicity of colonial identities in an effort to find sources of resistance against postcolonial states that have usurped the mantle of nationalism and turned it into an instrument of domination.

Part of the initial appeal of both postmodernism and postcolonialism was their potential to break disciplinary boundaries. In the process of their institutionalization in the US, postmodernism gave new impetus to cultural studies. Though the early theorists of postcolonial studies emerged from the French empire, postcolonialism in the US became ensconced in English studies with many of its major theorists coming from formerly British colonies.²² Their introduction into US academia also held the promise of providing an alternative to area studies just as the number of ethnic minorities and other minority groups in colleges had grown to the point where they could no longer be ignored. Their presence and their movements put pressure on universities to revise their curriculums and offer courses on marginal groups and “marginal” regions of the globe. By the early 1990s, the numbers of scholars working on postmodernism and postcolonial studies reached a critical mass as many of them gained academic positions.

In 1993, young scholars from several universities joined together to found the journal *positions: east asia cultures critique*, which has become a leading journal for the application of critical theory to Asian Studies. It has encouraged dialogue among scholars working on all Asian countries as well as between Asian Studies and ethnic

22. H.D. Harootunian, “Postcoloniality’s unconscious/area studies’ desire,” *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 2, No. 2 (July 1999), p. 142.

studies; it also plays an important role as a forum where young scholars can make their academic debuts. But one striking characteristic of the journal is the non-participation of many scholars of the previous generation. It can be seen as a sign of a generational difference within critical Asian Studies.²³

The apparent success of postmodernism and postcolonialism in US academia has produced some skepticism among progressive scholars who argue that their critical edge has been blunted.²⁴ In fact, it has been argued that postcolonialism has not so much critiqued area studies as come to resemble it.²⁵ Following Foucault, practitioners of cultural studies have located power everywhere and, by extension, find the potential for resistance everywhere. In Asian Studies, such views have led to the argument that non-Western societies are somehow inherently anti-Western and anti-capitalist, thereby recouping the essentialism they claim to oppose. Another common critique - and another aspect that resembles area studies - is its tendency to fall into "present-ism;" that is, a reluctance to engage in historical criticism. The exceptions are scholars outside the US or those who do not work on East Asia, such as, most notably, Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies collective.²⁶

In Korean Studies, a younger generation engaged in cultural studies has published a significant amount of work in the 1980s and 90s on modern Korean literature, cinema, and other kinds of cultural critique as well as human rights issues such as the comfort women tragedy. However, there are still no monographs on Korea written by scholars influenced by postmodernism or postcolonialism. Up to

23. For more on the generational differences, see "Miguk Asiahak ûi pip'anjôk kômt'o."

24. For instance, see Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20, No. 2 (Winter 1994).

25. Harootunian, "Postcoloniality's unconscious/area studies' desire."

26. A notable exception within China Studies is Leo T.S. Ching, *Becoming "Japanese": Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001.

now, such work has been limited to journal articles and collaborative projects such as organizing conferences and later publishing a conference volume. And indeed, with a few important exceptions, their work has mainly focused on the postwar period. But recently published work suggests that research is expanding into the colonial period and perhaps even earlier.²⁷ Again, the next few years should reveal how fruitful this paradigm will be in Asian Studies in the US and how large a role these scholars will play in the field.

Conclusion

During the past two decades, the major developments and crises on the Korean peninsula have driven the growth of Korean Studies in the US - such as economic growth, the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the North Korea nuclear crisis, the North Korea food crisis, and the IMF crisis. Korean Studies programs now exist in virtually every region of the US. Korean Studies is strongest in the east and west coasts as well as Hawai'i, and it is getting stronger in the Midwest and beginning to have more of a presence in the south. Much of this growth has been accomplished with the support of the Korea Foundation which, in recent years, has been having an increasingly positive impact on Korean Studies in the US and other countries. Now the field has grown to the point that it might begin to experience some growing pains.

Despite such growth, Korean Studies still has a small presence even within Asian Studies. There are few journals devoted to Korean Studies, and sometimes, they have trouble publishing every year. In other Asian Studies journals, articles on Korea appear only occasionally, though with greater frequency lately. The same is true of conferences. There are few conferences devoted solely to Korea, and

27. For example, see Kyeong-Hee Choi, "Impaired Body as Colonial Trope: Kang Kyônggae's 'Underground Village,'" *Public Culture* 13-3 (Fall 2001).

most of them focus on contemporary politics and economy. At the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, there are many fewer panels on Korea than those on China or Japan. Korean Studies remains an isolated and marginal field in US academia, lagging, in some ways, behind Korea's status in world politics and the world economy. As the field grows, it will become more difficult to maintain its isolation, and during the next few years, it will be interesting to see if the field can open up and become "globalized."

With a few rare exceptions, there have been no serious intellectual debates involving Korean Studies in the US. Part of the problem is the lack of interest in Korea within America, but part of the problem is also the lack of ambition among many Korean Studies scholars. Rather than concentrating efforts on a few specific issues, scholars have tended to divide up the field, so that it is still rare to find two people working on the same topic. If Korean Studies is to raise its profile and to be taken seriously, it needs to grapple with issues that are of interest to the larger academic community. My argument is that this process must begin, at least in part, with an examination of the assumptions underlying Korean Studies by reflecting on the nature of Orientalism.

A related issue is that Korean Studies in the US has operated in relative isolation from the Korean academic world. Of course, many scholars have established personal relations with scholars in Korea, but intellectual collaborations have been infrequent. In Korean Studies journals, it is rare to see a translation of an article by a scholar in Korea. To this day, the most important works on Korean Studies in the 20th century remain untranslated, with the notable exception of Yi Ki-baek's *A New History of Korea*. Only recently have scholars from Korea been more active in academic conferences in the US. The problem is not one of language; scholars from Japan and China have been active in the US for years despite lacking fluency in English. It is long overdue for Korean Studies in the US to work more closely with academics in Korea - as well as in Japan and other countries with Korean Studies programs. Such collaboration holds the promise

of creating a critical community that can stimulate the development of Korean Studies on both sides of the Pacific.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Korean Studies in the US may be on the verge of turning its quantitative growth into qualitative development. Palais retired last year, but it has long been clear that a single program or scholar no longer has the ability to dominate the field. There are several small-scale centers which are distinguished by their politics and theoretical orientation. The heyday of Orientalist empire is over, and an era of feudalism seems to have begun. In the next few years, there may be a lively struggle among contending conceptions of Korean Studies or even continued isolation that maintains the status quo. The outcome may depend on the ability to articulate a research agenda that does not seek to unify the field through conquest but rather aims at a fundamental transformation of how Korean Studies is conducted, ushering in a completely new era.