

Historical Meaning of the March First Movement and the Korean National Representatives

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Abstract

The independence movement during the Japanese Military Rule during 1910s was definitively not occlusive. Movements toward Korean independence continued both within and outside the peninsula during this period, and the energy of resistance was continually accumulating. Because of capabilities for autonomy, the March First Movement could respond more efficiently to international context after the end of World War I. Compared to the May Fourth Movement of China or the Rice Riots of Japan, the March First Movement was peculiar in that it was a relatively large-scale, pan-Korean independence movement. The experience of the March First Movement for the Korean people served as the fundamental matrix of subsequent independence movements and as part and parcel of their ethno-national, historical memory, was transported through liberation from Japan's colonial rule down to today's unification movement. Analysis of the specific plans for independence movements and the actual activities of the Korean national representatives vis-à-vis records of examination from the police, prosecution, and each level of the judicial court as well as pilot studies demonstrates that at the outset, the plans for the movement did not envisage pan-Korean demonstrations or coalition with students. The limitations of the independence movements by the national representatives were in fact overcome by the actual conduct of the masses that began at T'apgol Park on March 1, 1919.

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1. Development and Historical Significance of the March First Movement

a) Capabilities of Autonomy in Independence Movements

In certain segments still remains the perspective that the Korean independence movements that proceeded under the Japanese Military Rule of the 1910s were occlusive in nature and that they were influenced by the October Revolution or the Wilsonian concept of national self-determination. However, this interpretation cannot be further from the truth. The independence movements both domestic and overseas continued, and within such movements the energy of resistance continually accumulated.

Despite overwhelming oppression, secret societies such as the Righteous Army for Korean Independence and the Society of Chosŏn remained active throughout the peninsula, and village schools as well as night schools taught ethnic national consciousness and acted as the prime educational institutions for the Korean people.

It is important to note that during this period, the Korean national movement began to turn into a movement for the working class including laborers and peasants. At the time, farmers and small business owners who opposed the land survey or a tax increase would disrupt surveys, dispute land and forestry ownership, and attack administrative offices in attempts to protest. In addition, as Japanese capital rapidly penetrated the Korean peninsula and the number of laborers increased dramatically in the wake of World War I, the number of strikes also increased sharply.

Outside the peninsula, there was a rush to establish a base for long-term strikes by the members of the so-called Righteous Army and those of the New People's Association ("Sinminhoe") who had moved to Jiandao and Siberia. Local governments, educational institutions for national consciousness, and military organizations were organized in disparate locations. In other words, under colonial rule, the Righteous Army and patriotic enlightenment movements had, before the annexation, reached the stage of joining the new, more radicalized and popularized

anti-Japanese struggle.

Because of such capabilities for autonomy, the Korean independence movement was able to respond more quickly to the international context post-World War I, including the October Revolution of Russia and the declaration of Wilsonian national self-determination.

b) Development of the March First Movement and Its Characteristics

Around this time, overseas independence groups were planning to dispatch Chosŏn delegates to the Paris Peace Conference, and in Korea, Ch'ōndogyo ("Religion of Heavenly Way"), Christian, and student organizations were working to establish plans for independence movements. Moreover, the news spread that Emperor Kojong, who had died in January 1919, had actually been poisoned by Japanese spies and deepened the national consciousness of the masses. On February 8, Korean students in Japan announced the Declaration of Independence in Tokyo and started returning to the peninsula to materialize the independence movement. In the midst of these shifts, religious leaders decided to read aloud the Declaration of Independence at Seoul's T'apgol Park on March 1. However, the religious leaders who learned that numerous students would be participating before the scheduled reading changed the place of the day's event from T'apgol Park to a restaurant in the city and upon reading the Declaration of Independence, turned themselves into the authorities. In contrast, the crowd of students and other Koreans who had gathered at T'apgol Park read aloud the Declaration of Independence and flowed into the city's marketplace. Thousands of people joined the wave in the process, turning what began as a small movement into a large-scale demonstration. At the same time, similar movements began in various cities in the north, including P'yŏngyang, Ŭiju, and Wŏnsan, and reached their zenith between the middle of March and the middle of April. Insurrections took place in almost all 218 regions peninsula-wide and more than two million people participated. In addition, overseas Koreans in places such as Jiandao also carried out their own demonstrations for independence.

Post-World War I, the March First Movement was the first large-scale

anti-imperialist movement, which then propelled other national movements around the world such as the May Fourth Movement. Shocked by the intensity and sheer scale of the Korean independence movements, Japan had no choice but to change its policy of colonial rule to the so-called Cultural Rule in the 1920s.

The March First Movement is often understood as a culmination of popular movements in East Asia, in the same vein as the Japanese Rice Riots and the May Fourth Movement of China. However, what distinguishes the March First Movement lies in its breadth as a popular movement. Compared to the Rice Riots and the May Fourth Movement, the March First Movement was expansive, a veritable pan-national movement for independence. Though violent suppression by the Japanese led to numerous deaths, most of the perished were unnamed commoners. The sixteen-year-old Yu Kwan-sun was, and is, a symbol of these people.

c) Japanese Oppression and Taishō Democracy

For Japan, it was not enough to only employ the existing devices of violence at the disposal of its Government General of Korea; the colonial power increased the troops and military personnel from the Japanese archipelago and engaged in a total repression on the Korean people who had absolutely no means to fight back. The numbers—approximately 7,500 deaths and 46,000 arrestees—are themselves enough to illustrate the severity of the violence of what appeared to be the frontline of a battle. Such logic of oppression by Japan was perpetrated again during the Jiandao Massacre and the Kantō Massacre. Conventional understanding periodizes Japan at this time as Taishō Democracy. However, from the perspective of the entirety of Japanese history that includes not just the archipelago, but also its colonies, the narrative is completely different. In fact, for the people of Korea, the Taishō period proved to be the most violent and oppressive.

Yoshino Sakujo, who is said to be the architect of Taishō Democracy, showed compassion for the Korean people, but did not deny colonial rule itself. Majority of the Japanese at the time understood the March First Movement as a nuisance, and their xenophobic distrust of Koreans deepened. Such a perspective was realized

in the Kantō Massacre, in which Japan carried out a violent massacre of the Korean people through the trinity of its military, police, and self-defense militia.

d) Historical Significance

The historical significance of the March First movement is as follows. First, the Korean independence movements transformed from a nationalist movement to a socialist movement upon March 1. The change did not occur overnight, however. As can be seen in the Battle of Ch'ōngsalli and the establishment of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, the first half of the 1920s was a period of transition, and independence movements were growing acute. In this period, independence movements and political struggles still tended to be centered on ethnic nationalism, while socialist movements were gaining momentum by engaging in struggles focused on economic issues. It was after the establishment of the Communist Party of Korea in 1925 that socialist movements began to lead independence movements.

Second, the Korean experience of the March First Movement became the origin of the independence movements thenceforth. For example, examining the biographies of the independence activists Kim Il Sung, Kim Gu, Lee Kanghun, and Kim San demonstrates that the experience of the March First Movement propelled them to involve themselves in independence movements. In the case of Japan, however, rare were popular movements that were expansive enough to be considered the origin of people's movements. For example, the Rice Riots, which is widely acknowledged as the decisive moment in the history of democracy movements in Japan, was limited to the lower classes, with the middle and upper classes as well as the intelligentsia remaining uninterested.

Third, it is noteworthy that the March First Movement still serves as the matrix of Korean nationalism. The historical experience of the March First Movement is a "national memory," which, transported through liberation from Japan, is still alive and intimately tied to the current unification movement. In other words, the task of independence before liberation ("March First Ideology") and the task of unification after liberation ("Unification Ideology") overlap at all times. In this

sense, the March First Movement can be described as living history that requires uninterrupted reflection by all of us who share this contemporaneity.

2. Evaluation of the Thirty-Three Representatives

a) Problem of Conventional Interpretation in the Studies on the Thirty-Three Representatives

Studies on the March First Movement are the most extensive of all studies on modern Korean history. Though issues dealt with are wide-ranging, there are characteristically conflicting views, as can be seen in the understanding surrounding the arguments between Kang Töksang and Park Kyöngsik regarding the evaluation of the national representatives. National representatives are the thirty-three men from the Religion of Heavenly Way, Christianity, and Buddhism who signed the Declaration of Independence and identified themselves as national representatives. Though both Kang and Park agree that the national representatives established the foundations of the March First Movement, Kang emphasizes the representatives' foreign dependence and elitism. On the other hand, Park espouses the view that the perspective such as Kang's is akin to dogmatism and ignores the subjective and objective conditions of the time. Park forwards that the Declaration of Independence was a politically advanced document and that nonviolent resistance was the most popular and creative form of resistance at that time. Such a conflicting assessment have existed since the 1920s, with the ideological confrontation between the socialists and the nationalists.

b) Equating the National Representatives and the Ethno-Nationalists

There are two problems in the controversy over the evaluation of the national representatives. The first is equating the national representatives with the nationalists in general. In terms of the anti-imperialist, anti-Japanese struggles that can be defined as the lifeline of independence movements immediately before and

after 1910, the independence movements on the Korean peninsula began to diverge into two camps, namely the compromising and the uncompromising. The latter struggled uncompromisingly to achieve full independence of Korea, but the former gradually withdrew from the independence movements, instead focusing on achievement of independence after growth of capabilities and respect for lawfulness. For example, the leadership of the Great Han Association and the Religion of Heavenly Way embraced the ideals of modernization and sought to achieve autonomy within the existing system. Following the annexation of Korea by Japan, the uncompromising camp moved their activities abroad to Jiandao and Siberia. The compromising camp, on the other hand, continued to engage in various religious and educational activities on the Korean peninsula. The national representatives belonged to the compromising camp in the 1910s. One can already see the nascence of the movement to reform the Korean people and nation under the Cultural Rule of Japanese colonial regime in the 1920s.

c) Realities of the Independence Movements of the National Representatives

Second point worth noting is the mistaken but generally accepted interpretation of the independence movements of the national representatives. Previous studies have summarized their movements as follows: 1. writing and proclaiming the Declaration of Independence; 2. dispatching statement of opinions to the Japanese Government and the Government General, and a petition to the President of the United States; 3. planning pan-national demonstrations; 4. coalition of the three religions, i.e. Religion of Heavenly Way, Christianity, and Buddhism; and 5. collaboration with students. Such studies then interpret the national representatives' change of the designated place of the independence proclamation from T'apgol Park to T'aehwagwan, a Korean restaurant, on March 1 as a result of their concerns for public safety due to heightened risks of violence and sacrifice of the masses. There is an inherent contradiction in this understanding, however. Had there already been plans for 3 and 5 delineated above, there would have been no need for the deliberate change of venue.

Up to date, no study has provided satisfactory explanation of this change because research on the independence movements of the national representatives has been greatly influenced by the sources used. For example, official records and court decisions minimize the motivators of the March First Movement to the confines of religious groups, and the national representatives described themselves as the movers and shakers of the March First Movement through their memoirs. They are depicted as such in biographies as well. In other words, a significant problem exists in the sources conventionally used.

However, with the interrogation records from each level of the judiciary that became available in the 1980s, research on the March First Movement obtained some of the most crucial data. A detailed examination of the interrogation reports shows that in fact, the national representatives had no plan for a pan-national movement or coalition with Korean students. Instead, their movement encompassed a fundamentally compromising nature, which called for independence or autonomy vis-à-vis appeals to the rationality of Japan. Moreover, the national representatives' independence movement demonstrates dependence on foreign powers in its reliance on the sympathies of such powers. Their movement was also exclusive, confined to the elite in-group composed of themselves.

d) Ch'oe Namsŏn and Han Yong'un

Kang Jaeŏn examined the guiding ideology of the March First Movement by focusing on the idea that the *Writings on Korean Independence* by Han Yong'un is the materialization of the "Declaration of Independence" by Ch'oe Namsŏn. However, the validity of such an approach must be questioned here.

Considering the "Declaration of Independence" by Ch'oe Namsŏn warrants another document penned by him, namely his petition to Woodrow Wilson. Han Yong'un was surprised by and heavily criticized the extremely entreating tone Ch'oe had used in the petition. On the other hand, Han argues in his *Writings on Korean Independence* that realization of justice, peace, and national autonomy began with the revolutions in Russia and Germany and that such ideals are in the process of being further substantiated by the oppressed peoples of world. Han also

argues that Wilson's principle of self-determination is but a reflection of such movements in world history. The difference in the two documents in their approach in terms of the anti-imperialist, nationalist standpoint of autonomy is stark; the trajectories of Han's and Ch'oe's lives also clearly illustrate such divergence.

The limitations of the independence movement by the national representatives was overcome by the actual actions of the masses starting from T'apgol Park on March 1.

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