

# South Korean Nationhood and Chinese Nationhood: An Ethno-Symbolic Account

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This paper contrasts the Korean ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood with the Chinese state-centered understanding. This paper also explains this contrast in a historical context. By so doing, this paper makes an effort to elaborate on Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolic account of nationhood, in which he balances the influence of the ethnic past with the impact of nationalist activities. Both Korea and China followed a similar Confucian tradition and started to build their nation-states under the threat of colonization by Western powers in the late 19th century. However, these two countries had different ethnic pasts and, thus, respectively adopted different concepts of nationhood during their nation-building processes. As a result, Koreans and Chinese hold almost opposite understandings of nationhood today.

*Keywords: Korea, China, nationhood, ethnic-centered, state-centered*

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## Introduction

Since Renan ([1882]1990) wrote "What is a nation?" in 1882, many scholars, such as Weber (1946), have tried to define a nation. However, the definition of a nation still remains one of the most obscure points in the social sciences. Yet there is no royal road to making the definition of a nation clearer. In order to do so, we have to study nations in the world in connection with issues in the nation debate. This research is an effort to develop the studies of nations by studying empirically two East Asian nations: the Korean nation and the Chinese nation. In particular, contrasting the ethnic-centered understanding of Korean nation-

hood and the state-centered understanding of Chinese nationhood, I would like to demonstrate the diversity of nations in real world.<sup>1</sup>

## **Development of Ethnic-Centered Understanding of Korean Nationhood**

Both pre-modern and modern Korean history favored constructing an ethnic-centered Korean understanding of nationhood.

### 1. Unique pre-modern conditions for building the Korea

First of all, Korea maintained a continuously unified and independent kingdom for over 1,200 years from the triumph of the *Silla* Kingdom in 668 to Japanese colonization in 1910. Only three Korean dynasties ruled during that time, and the last, the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), survived for more than 500 years. In addition, there were only minor changes in territory or in ethnic membership during these three dynasties. The central state and ruling class maintained and articulated the differences/boundaries with neighboring countries such as Manchuria, Japan, and China. Certain traditional scholars produced a historiography that Koreans were descendents of a common ancestor and emphasized the ethnic homogeneity of Koreans. This strengthened their sense of identity as a distinct people (Cummings 1997; Em 1999).

Secondly, the Joseon court stabilized Korea and the Korean people. The Joseon court set territorial borders between Korea, Japan, and China, which are still recognized by the world today. This settlement of borders was much earlier than the comparable settlement in Europe (Cumings 1997). Furthermore, China, Korea, and Japan were virtually isolated from each other until the 19<sup>th</sup> century because crossing borders was prohibited except for formal government delegations (Lee 1999). Additionally, the Joseon court adopted neo-Confucianism maintaining a centralized bureaucracy, an education system, and a common culture for over 500 years. The Joseon court actively promoted the material welfare of the population. These institutions and practices linked the Korean people to

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1. Although my analysis focuses on nationhood in South Korea, North Korean nationhood is very similar to that of South Korea.

the Joseon court. The people's collective identity in Joseon was focused on the ruling dynasty rather than on the abstract idea of Korean as a nation. Yet, this very ethnic homogeneity, loyalty to the dynasty, and culturally constructed sense of collective identity were favorable conditions for the later ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood in Korea (Eckert and Yi 1990; Lee 1999).

## 2. Building the Korean nation under the threat of colonialism

Korea entered the international order based on nation-states making its first modern diplomatic treaty with Japan in 1876 and normalizing diplomatic relations with the US, Britain, and Germany in 1882. In the face of threats from Western and Japanese colonialism, a new generation of Korean elites regarded the world order as the stage where nation-states competed with one another according to the principle of the survival of the fittest. They began to develop survival strategies for Korea in the world, making efforts to build a Korean nation based on the traditional Korean collective identity of the late Joseon dynasty. Korean elites invoked ethnic nationalism and widely used the term *minjok* (literally defined as a nation of one clan),<sup>2</sup> thereby emphasizing the ethnic-centered nature of the Korean nation. For instance, Sin Chaeho (1880-1936), a famous nationalist historian, journalist, and activist reinterpreted the myth of Dan-gun<sup>3</sup> as the history of the origin of the Korean nation and stabilized a national self-image according to which the Korean nation had a common ancestor, history, and culture (Sin 1979).<sup>4</sup> The ethnic homogeneity of the Korean people strongly favored the development of ethnic nationalism. After 1907, Korean newspapers such as *Dongnipsinmun* [Independence News] and *Daehanmaeilsinbo* [Korean Daily] widely used the term *minjok* (Bak 1998).

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2. The term *minjok* (read *minzoku* in Japanese, *minzu* in Chinese) was adopted from Japanese. This term was a neologism created by Miyazaki Muryu in Meiji Japan, who translated the French *Assemblée Nationale* as *minzoku kaigi* in the early 1880s. Its meaning connoted the ethnic nation or the German *Volkschaft* because this term came from *jok*, which meant a family with a common ancestry (Chow 1997; Crossley 1999). The term *gungmin* (read *kokumin* in Japanese, *guomin* in Chinese) was also a neologism for nation, which connoted a state-centered nation, or a political community.
  3. Dan-gun was the mythical founder of the Korean nation who founded *GoJoseon* (Old *Joseon*) in BC 2,333. For the myth of Dan-gun, see Cumings (1997).
  4. Before Sin, the myth of Dan-gun was popular among Koreans. Most Korean history textbooks written in the 1900s stated this myth. However, Sin reinterpreted this as a history using more scientific methods (Han 1994; Em 1999).

After the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, an ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood became prominent among the Korean people. This was because Korea lacked an autonomous state with which Koreans could identify and thereby a state-centered understanding of nationhood lost its basis among them. For example, Korean nationalists did not use the term *gungmin* (a state-centered nation: literally, people of a country), which meant the subjects of the Japanese Empire (Park 1998). Additionally, Japan constructed its own strong ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood and its colonial policy was very racist. Japan justified its annexation of Korea by arguing that the Korean nation was racially and culturally inferior to the Japanese.

Against Japanese ethnic nationalism and colonialism, Korean nationalists created the understanding of an immutable and everlasting Korean nationhood by conflating race with nationhood. They racialized the Korean understanding of nationhood by exploiting the myth of common ancestry and invoked the sense that Koreans were members of an extended family. Korean newspapers and private schools, which were the center of the “infrapolitics”<sup>5</sup> of Korean nationalist movements, spread this ethnic nationalism over Korean people under Japanese colonialism (Cha 1999; Hangukjeongsinmunhwayeongguwon 2002). As a result, the ethnic-centered understanding of Korean nationhood became fortified.

### 3. Nationhood in the Republic of Korea

The liberation of Korea in 1945 and the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948 offered a possible chance for the Korean people to develop a state-centered understanding of nationhood. However, an ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood intensified in Korea. One of the most important reasons for this was the division of North and South Korea. On the one hand, because of the strong ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood that developed under Japanese colonialism, the South Korean government and elites regarded the reunification of Korea as the completion of the building of the nation-state. On the other hand, the government and state elites felt the goal of unification of the nation-state would confirm the legitimacy of the ROK. Therefore, they emphasized ethnic homogeneity and the longevity of the Korean nation and systematically empha-

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5. James C. Scott (1990) introduced this term meaning cultural and political resistance, but that which is not openly declared.

sized an ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood.<sup>6</sup> Exploiting this ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood, South Korean elites spread the discourse that it was the South Korean people's duty to liberate the brethren of North Korea from the communists (Park 1971; Shin, Freda, and Yi 1999; Park 1976). Up to the present, this ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood remains one of the most important repertoires that Korean elites have to consider in order to mobilize the people. However, overseas Koreans from former socialist countries such as China and Russia after the cold war started to challenge the ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood in South Korea. This is because the South Koreans realized the differences between overseas Koreans and themselves. They do not regard returning ethnic Koreans as fellow citizens and have started to reconsider their own understanding of nationhood.

## Development of the State-Centered Understanding of Chinese Nationhood

The Chinese understanding of nationhood has been state-centered. Both pre-modern conditions and modern experiences such as the Chinese Revolution and the Communist Revolution favored for the development of a state-centered understanding instead of an ethnic-centered one.

### 1. Pre-modern conditions for the building of the Chinese nation

Traditionally, Chinese identity was based on learned characteristics such as cultural attainments rather than fixed or inassimilable ones such as race. Thus, the traditional Chinese identity was open toward so-called "barbarians." In other words, it accepted people not born into it as part of the political community, which differs to an ethnic-centered concept (Duara 1996). The traditional Chinese identity was likely to produce a state-centered understanding of nationhood rather than an ethnic-centered one.

Actually, non-*Han*<sup>7</sup> ethnic dynasties ruled China for almost 1,000 years and

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6. Although this paper focuses on the South Korean case, the North Korean government and elites did the same for the same reason.

7. *Han* is the majority ethnic group in China. Han was a Chinese dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220)

the boundary of both China and the Chinese people notably expanded. For example, the Qing dynasty, the last Chinese dynasty before the founding of the modern Chinese nation-state, was not ethnic *Han*. The emperorship developed by the Qing dynasty embraced a concept of a political identity that went beyond a single cultural affiliation. This practice of the Qing deeply affected the nationhood of modern China (Crossley 1999). Even when the Qing was a local kingdom in Manchuria, it was a multi-ethnic regime that dominated over all people native to its territory regardless of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. After conquering China in 1644, Emperor Qianlong (1736-95) encompassed various social groups with differences in culture, religion, and economy within the Qing Empire and rather successfully developed a multi-ethnic Chinese identity. Therefore, there is at this time little evidence that China was beset by intractable ethnic animosities before the Taiping War (1850-65) (Crossley 1999).

## 2. Building the Chinese nation under the threat of colonialism

After China was defeated in the Opium War (1839-42) and the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), China fell under the threat of colonization by Western powers. In order to defend China and build a strong Chinese nation-state, a number of intellectuals including Kang Youwei (1858-1927), Liang Qichao (1873-1929), and Zhang Binglin (1869-1936) held that China had to transform traditional patriotism based on loyalty to the emperor to a nationalism based on popular sovereignty. For that purpose, some of them appealed to the ethnic nationalism of the *Han* Chinese.<sup>8</sup>

However, Chinese nationalists were realistic enough to accept that China could not become a great nation-state by excluding non-Han ethnic groups because those other groups occupied between 50 and 60 per cent of Chinese territory (Brugger and Reglar 1994; Chow 1997). Thus, when the Republic of

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noted for unifying and expanding its national territory and for promoting literature and the arts. Thus, Han originally meant the people of Han who were themselves heterogeneous. For a long time Han was the synonym for Chinese, which originated from Qin, the previous Chinese dynasty (221-206 B.C.). However, as China expanded in its territory and Chinese began including more ethnic minorities, the meaning of Han Chinese diverged from that of Chinese. In Chinese, Han Chinese is Hanzu, while Chinese is zhongguoren or zhonghuaminzu.

8. For example, Zhang Binglin tried to mobilize the Han Chinese and emphasized an ethnic-centered Chinese nationhood. See Choe (2003) and Chow (1997).

China was founded in 1911, Chinese nationalists commonly regarded the whole ethnic population in Chinese territory as the Chinese nation. For example, Sun Yat-sen emphasized “the notion of a bounded citizenry as the distinctive feature of nationhood (Chun 1996).” Sun’s successor, Chiang Kaishek, maintained Sun’s ideas of state-centered nationhood and stated that all inhabitants of China belonged to the Chinese nation (Lee 1999). The traditional inclusive political identity of Chinese reinforced the state-centered understanding of nationhood.

### 3. Nationhood in the People’s Republic of China

The Chinese Communist Party (hereafter, CCP), like the Nationalist one, saw itself as an institution for representing the nation’s various ethnic groups as a whole. However, the CCP moved Chinese nationhood a little further in the direction of state-centered understanding by pushing the concept of the Chinese nationhood beyond race and traditional culture (Fitzgerald 1963; Zheng 1999).<sup>9</sup> The founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 brought a more dominant status to this more state-centered concept of nationhood in China. The Preamble of the Constitution of the PRC adopted in 1954 revealed the PRC’s official concept of nationhood: “All nationalities of our country are united in one great family of free and equal nations. This unity of China’s nationalities will continue to gain in strength, founded as it is on ever-growing friendship and mutual aid among themselves, and in the struggle against imperialism, against both dominant-nation chauvinism and local nationalism” (China 1962). Both Han and non-Han ethnic nationalism was severely criticized (Sautman 1997). At the same time, the PRC invented common myths and historical memories to fortify their view of a state-centered understanding of nationhood. And the communist government began systematically to promulgate its state-centered concept of nationhood both to Han Chinese and ethnic minorities through the state system and the education system (Yan 1995; Schurmann 1968).<sup>10</sup>

After economic reform began in 1978, a new concept of nationhood was propagated by the PRC. It began emphasizing the biological ties between ethnic

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9. For the general linkage between revolutionary and state-centered nationalism, see Hobsbawm (1990).

10. The PRC regarded Taiwan as a temporarily lost territory like Hong Kong. The impact of the establishment of the ROC (Republic of China) in Taiwan the Chinese state-centered understanding of nationhood was minor.

groups in China and national sovereignty. The rise of a new nationalism in China should be regarded as a response to the weakening of central power and the decline of national solidarity. The reforms and subsequent rapid economic growth weakened Chinese central state power and its national solidarity. First, decentralization transferred power from the central government to local governments and the welfare of local Chinese people gradually relied on these local governments. Therefore, the national government lost connection with its local people, whose loyalty to the PRC weakened. Thus national solidarity and unity became problematic (Zheng 1999; He and Guo 1999; Sautman 1997). Second, the national government lost its most effective means to regulate or subordinate local society since the belief in Marxism and Maoism declined among the people. Lastly, the rapid growth of China threatened many world powers, which could potentially and actually restrain China from modernization. Thus, the PRC became afraid that some world powers might try to interrupt its process of modernization (Zheng 1999).

In order to fortify national solidarity, from 1980s the Chinese government emphasized the purported common ancestry of China's different ethnic groups, a pan-Chinese nationhood, and the necessity of maintaining the territorial and sovereign unity of China (including Taiwan). For example, the Chinese government compelled the mass media to spread the discourse that various ethnic groups were descendants of a common ancestry.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese government also began to extol historical persons who had been denigrated as traitors by Han-ethnic nationalists. In addition, the Chinese government made the Great Wall into a pan-Chinese national symbol beginning in 1984 (He and Guo 1999; Sautman 1997).

China's traditional understanding of Chinese-hood and its contemporary experiences such as the Communist Revolution both contributed to spreading a state-centered understanding of nationhood over China (Kim and Dittmer 1993; Karl 2002). For instance, the Chinese Revolution in 1911 and the Chinese

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11. The emphasis of a common ancestry, blood ties, and a long history of a single race are unique characteristics of racialism, which is exploited to support an exclusive ethnic nationalism in general. This racism is primarily used to identify those who cannot belong to a nation instead of defining one (Christie 1998). However, the PRC elaborates upon who *is* Chinese rather than who is not. Thus, the racialist discourse is exploited to include a variety of ethnic groups and to fortify an inclusionist, state-centered understanding of nationhood in China (Sautman 1997; Choe 2003).



Communist Revolution in 1949 verified its state-centered concept of nationhood. In this vein, the concept of “state-centered nationalism” or “patriotism” (in Chinese, *aiguozhuyi*, literally the “ideology of loving the country”) is more useful than the term “nationalism” to express Chinese nationhood (Hunt 1993).

## Conclusion

In this paper I try to contrast the Korean ethnic-centered understanding of nationhood with the Chinese state-centered understanding. I also try to explain this contrast in a historical context. By so doing, I make an effort to elaborate on Anthony Smith’s ethno-symbolic account of nationhood, which is devised to balance the influence of the ethnic past and the impact of nationalist activities (Smith 2000). Both Korea and China followed a similar Confucian tradition and started to build their nation-states under the threat of colonization by Western powers in the late 19th century. However, these two countries had different ethnic pasts and, thus, respectively adopted different concepts of nationhood during their nation-building processes. As a result, Koreans and Chinese uphold almost opposite understandings of nationhood today. Recently, these two countries encounter domestic and international challenges such as international migrations and globalization that push them to change their understandings of nationhood, but they cannot change their understandings according to their will without considering the dominant understandings of nationhood. When we deal with the debates on the historiography between Korea and China, we have to consider their different understandings of nationhood.

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