


Invented Traditions in North and South Korea

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This edited volume explores the development, consumption, and political uses of culture and heritage in North and South Korea. Each chapter draws influence from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's theory of invented traditions, examining "attempt[s] to establish continuity with a suitable historic past that fits with a particular contemporary sociopolitical agenda" (p. 2). Unlike previous scholarship on the topic of Korean culture, this book employs a holistic approach to understanding how invented traditions are mobilised to legitimise state structures and institutions of power. Furthermore, by adopting a comparative approach, it applied the lens of invented traditions to the cultures of non-western, post-colonial, and divided states.

In the introductory chapter, Andrew David Jackson notes that "both Koreas drew on a shared cultural legacy and selected elements that fell within their own geographical jurisdiction – such as Yi Sun-sin in the South and Koguryō in the North – to establish a cultural identity both different and superior to the other" (p. 29). However, suggesting that North Korea has not capitalised on the figure of Admiral Yi Sun-sin is inaccurate. During times of physical and psychological conflict, such as the Korean War (1950–1953), the memory of Yi Sun-sin as a military hero was used as wartime propaganda by both North and South Korea (Hall 2020, pp. 293–294). Additionally, his name is frequently invoked as a personification of opposition to foreign imperial aggression in the works of Kim Il Sung (*Kimilsŏng Chōjakchip*).

Part One contains three chapters and addresses the theme of historic and religious traditions. Remco Breuker analyses the role of questionable historic texts in the formation of popular understandings of Korean history (p. 53). He examines the *Tan'gi Kosa*, a document supposedly from the eighth century, but which is a forgery. Historical narratives written by amateur historians who cite this document evoke feelings of nationalism and have proven more commercially appealing than works by professionally trained historians. Amateur histories continue to occupy space on shelves in book shops and libraries and influence public understandings of the past (p. 52).

Andrew Logie explores the role of amateur historians, through analysing three popular theories in South Korea related to Korea's founding (empire theory, pan-Altaic theory, and traditional foundation theory). Logie describes each of these three foundation theories as pseudohistories as they lack critical objectivity, contain reductionist polemics, and manipulate sources (p. 79). Like Breuker's observation, Logie also argues that pseudohistory is damaging to professional historical scholarship as the conclusions of pseudo historians are more commercially appealing and therefore more widely read (p. 77). Additionally, as the conclusions of pseudohistorical publications generate stronger feelings of nationalism, their veneer of intellectualism can be utilised politically.

Don Baker focuses on Tan'gun and ancient Korean religions, noting that a growing number of South Koreans believe that Korea's ancestors practised a unique indigenous religion in the pursuit of immortality, and that this religious practice (*sŏn'gyo* or *sŏndo*) derived from Tan'gun (pp. 114–115). The *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk Yusa*), a thirteenth century text containing the Tan'gun myth is used to support the ancient religions hypothesis. However, Baker argues that as the *Samguk yusa* is only 800 years old, its contents are highly unreliable to construct accurate

understandings of religious practices some 3,000 years ago (pp. 144–115). Nevertheless, institutions have capitalised on this invented tradition to establish commercial businesses and even influential university research institutions (pp. 129–130).

Part Two contains two chapters and addresses the theme of language in relation to invented traditions. Through analysing the “Nation of Propriety in the East” (NPE) theory, Eunseon Kim critically assesses the “symbolic value of Korean linguistic politeness and honorifics as a hallmark of Korean ethno-national culture” (p. 150). Utilising historical documents and print media, Kim employs discourse analysis as an analytical framework to examine politeness/etiquette/propriety (*yeüi*) as an invented tradition related to a distinguishing Korean national characteristic (pp. 149, 151). Kim notes that a frequent source cited in support of the NPE theory is the *Arrayed Traditions of the Dongyi (Tongi Yölchön)*. However, this source is problematic because it is an appendix to the 1950 edition of *Tan’gi Kosa*, which Remco Breuker previously argued was a forged historical document. Further building on Breuker’s observation, Kim notes that the use of unverified historical texts and forgeries appeals to the public because they provide support for a theory with nationalist applications and are easier to access and read compared to authenticated ancient Chinese texts (p. 154).

Andreas Schirmer examines discourse on modern Korean translations of classical Chinese texts, specifically those authored by Koreans, and the reasons the translation movement gained momentum during the Park Chung-hee era (1961–1979). Schirmer briefly discusses the concept of classics (*kojön*) in western and Korean understandings of the term. By de-westernising this concept, Schirmer demonstrates that Korean *kojön* denotes an old work, rather than literary exceptionalism as it is understood in the west (p. 177). Schirmer also demonstrates that the texts do not lend themselves to the concept of invented traditions, but the art of translating them does as this supports the claim to continuity with the past through classic texts.

Part Three contains four chapters and addresses the theme of consumption and performance in relation to invented traditions. Using journalism, investigative reports, and interviews with craftsmen, Laurel Kendall examines bamboo combs as a case study on the memory and use of traditional culture. During the 1960s in South Korea, rapid urbanisation and industrial development created new lifestyles and a wider access to consumer goods. Traditional comb makers were out-produced and out-priced by cheaper plastic products made domestically, and cheaper bamboo products imported from China and Vietnam (pp. 233, 238). However, the domestically produced Korean bamboo comb has become a collector’s item, being present in both museum collections and modern gallery projects as well as being one of the official souvenirs of the 1988 Seoul Olympics (pp. 232, 239). Kendall demonstrates how an “obsolete object of daily use” has become a symbol of traditional culture, worthy of preservation, collection, and celebration as a “heritage product” (p. 247).

This chapter adds two new lenses to the concept of Korean-invented traditions. First, building on Eunseon Kim’s exploration of the NPE theory, material culture is connected to propriety and national culture. Second, the gendered lens through which the invention of female tradition is an important contribution, as the comb serves as a reminder of “classical Korean femininity” (p. 247).

Keith Howard examines how traditional Korean music (*kugak*) was a courtly music enjoyed by the upper classes of society, but two elements of folk music have been incorporated since 1945 in South Korea which make this musical form an invented tradition (p. 256). By focusing on two antitheses of classical *kugak*, solo melodies with drum accompaniments (*sanjo*) and epic storytelling (*p’ansori*), this chapter explores how previous class divides in music have been dismantled in the pursuit of invented traditions.

Jan Creutzenberg builds on Howard’s chapter to explore how *Wanch’ang P’ansori*, a complete *p’ansori* performance lasting up to eight hours, moved from a novel qualification to a rite of passage for musicians practising this song style. Creutzenberg argues that in response to the 1962 Cultural Property Protection Law, *Wanch’ang P’ansori* was first performed in 1968 (pp. 279–281). Through this law and the assertion of high-culturedness required to appreciate *Wanch’ang P’ansori* through its entire length, *p’ansori* was reinvented as a form of high art rather than derived from folk music.

Maria Osetrova examines how food traditions are constructed in North Korea and related to the Kim family leadership cults of personality. Through using North Korean culinary literature, Kim Il

Sung's writings on food, testimonies from defectors, and reflections on a visit to North Korea in October 2017 (p. 206), Osetrova demonstrates that food is linked directly to the leader's activities and "artificially constructs a food tradition" (p. 315). Food is used as an ideological tool to appeal to a glorious past; foods that Kim Il Sung supposedly ate as a guerrilla fighter during the Japanese colonial era (such as frogs) are championed as being cultured. In reference to highly exaggerated accounts of the Great Leader's exploits as during this period, invented food traditions evoke nostalgia among North Koreans and consuming guerrilla cuisine is a way for the state to ideologically mobilise the population to endure hardship, ostensibly like the leader did, during the 1990s famine (pp. 312–315).

Part Four contains two chapters and addresses the theme of spaces in relation to invented traditions. Specifically, it examines the building of South Korean historical sites and North Korean ideological landscapes, and how these spaces have been manipulated to control and guide the experience of its visitors.

Codruța Sintionean examines the characteristics of South Korean architectural purification projects and their wider connections to discourse on identity expressed through architecture. Utilising speeches by Park Chung-hee, project reports, scholarly publications by notable officials, and interviews, Sintionean contributes an important new perspective on the wider scholarship on landscape studies, which has remained largely centred on Europe and America.

Sintionean demonstrates how the Park government created a restrictive definition of traditional Korean architecture to serve a wider political purpose. This led to invented heritage practices with a sanitised notion of tradition (pp. 339–340). While this chapter presents an interesting new contribution to studies of space in relation to invented traditions, what could have added additional theoretical depth would have been a discussion of these purification practices in relation to political iconoclasm, the destruction (or purification) of secular symbols to serve a nationalist purpose.

Robert Winstanley-Chesters examines the 250-mile North Korean schoolchildren's march to Mount Paektu, first undertaken in 2015. This was undertaken as a recreation of the apocryphal journey the Great Leader took after being stationed at Mount Paektu as a resistance fighter during the Japanese occupation. Similar to Osetrova's examination of food in relation to the leader, Winstanley-Chesters analyses how the state utilises the memory of Kim Il Sung as a guerrilla fighter for state propaganda (p. 377). By examining the manipulation of space in the invention of tradition, this chapter demonstrates how recreating and memorialising North Korea's revolutionary past has become an invented tradition designed to promote loyalty to the state and leader.

Overall, this edited volume presents a fresh perspective on the production and consumption of tradition in both North and South Korea. By studying invented tradition, this volume examines Korean culture beyond hyper fixating on South Korean pop culture (K-drama and K-pop) and North Korean abuses (human rights and nuclearization). The use of glossaries at the end of each chapter to note people, events, objects, and places of importance is useful, especially as they are accompanied by Korean or Chinese characters.

This book would serve well on reading lists related to Korean studies specifically or cultural studies broadly. As a scope for further research on the invention of culture in Korea, what could contribute an additional layer of theoretical depth is *The Uses and Abuses of History* (MacMillan 2009), to consider contemporary political issues in the invention of the historical past and heritage practices. Nevertheless, Jackson and colleagues' book presents an interesting and well-articulated new lens through which to understand that traditions are created for consumption by both Korea's ruling elites to legitimise their state structures and exercise of power.

References

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