

## "Culture" as an Imported Concept and "Korea" as a Nation-State

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### Abstract

The new term *munhwa* (文化) or "culture," that swept Korean society in the 1920s was in fact adopted as the translation of the Japanese term *bunka* in the 1910s. The path to realizing the value of the concept of "culture" in Korea could not help but be a rocky one.

This was not only because Korea was a colony, but also because the concept of "culture" itself was one re-defined by Japan for the purpose of calling its colonial ethnic groups the people of the Japanese Empire, and was formed in reference to *bunka*, the Japanese rendition of "culture."

The intellectuals of a colonial Korea attempted to form their own identity and representation through Japan's colonial discourse. If their efforts stemmed basically from implicit aspirations towards nation-state status, then the "culture" in colonial Korea can be regarded as a space in which *munhwa* confronted and vied with *bunka*, as well as a space in which *munhwa* could be absorbed by and integrated into *bunka* at any time.

**Keywords:** culture, reconstruction, nationalism, colonial subjectivity

### The Introduction of the Concept of "Culture"

Saito Makoto, the Japanese governor-general in Korea who assumed office on August 12, 1919, issued an edict in September and a directive in October of that year, each calling for "promoting Korean culture and establishing the foundation of cultural politics."<sup>1</sup> Saito's so-called "cultural politics," as signified by the inauguration of the *Dong-A Ilbo* daily newspaper on April 1, 1920 and the *Gaebyeok* (New Beginnings), an intellectual journal backed by the Cheondogyo, on June 20, 1920, was characterized by limited acceptance of freedom of speech, assembly, and publication; employment of Koreans as civil servants and their improved treatment; stabilization and promotion of public life through improved education, industry, transportation and health care; launching of research and surveys for the enforcement of local autonomy; and respect for Korean culture and customs. The term "culture" (*munhwa*), which appeared twice in the phrase, "promoting Korean culture and establishing the foundation of cultural politics," was a concept introduced to Korean intellectuals practically for the first time. Some members of the Korean literati at the time noted that the term not only signified a new phase of Japan's colonial rule of Korea, but was also used as a catchphrase to encourage "intellectual freedom and vigor," "awakening of individuality and self" and "a sense of rising anew."<sup>2</sup> The term also meant, as noted in a *Dong-A Ilbo* editorial, giving Koreans more opportunities and benefits in education and industry, a practical demand of the Koreans, whose political independence had been frustrated.<sup>3</sup>

The new term *munhwa* (文化) or "culture," which emerged in colonial Korea during the latter half of the 1910s, not only was used in varied contexts, but also represented how those uses contended with each other in reality. *Munhwa* is a translation of the English term "culture" or the German word "Kultur,"<sup>4</sup> both of which originat-

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1. Government-General in Korea (1990).
2. Kim D. (1983); Kim P. (1988); and Yeom (1987).
3. *Dong-A Ilbo*, 13 January 1921.
4. Williams (1976).

ed from the Greek *cultura*, meaning “to cultivate,” and had settled into use as a term that implied the development, cultivation, or training of the mind. But the translated word *munhwa*, in fact, originated from the phrase in the chapter “Bigua” (Trigram) of the *Book of Changes*: “. . . monitor the changes of seasons through astronomical observation and enlighten a country and lead it to perfection through the examination of culture.”<sup>5</sup> It also has the meaning of “enlightening the people without resorting to punishment and power.”<sup>6</sup> A Korean-English and English-Korean dictionary, edited by the American missionary Horace G. Underwood and published in 1890, contains the entries, “cultivate” and “cultivation,” but not that of “culture.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the term “culture” was, in effect, a foreign word until it was used in Saito’s edict or directive.

An Hwak, one of the intellectuals in colonial Korea, in his work “Joseon-ui munhak” (Korean Literature), understood literature, fine arts, religion and morals from the perspective of “civilization” or *munmyeong* (文明).<sup>8</sup> The emergence of the translated word for “culture” and the process of its establishment in the language therefore may well be regarded as a new epistemological aspect of Korean society in the colonial period. Within a decade, Korean intellectuals came to formulate modernity through the new term “culture,” which displaced “civilization” or “civilization and enlightenment,” Korea’s zeitgeist until the 1910s. Also, it was focused on “the construction of new culture on the basis of life consciousness” which included politics, religion, and the economy, as mentioned in a 1922 *Dong-A Ilbo* editorial titled “Core Concepts for the Construction of Culture.”<sup>9</sup>

The epistemological shift towards looking at various aspects of colonial Korean society in the 1920s from the perspective of “culture” rather than “civilization” seems to have arisen not only from Saito’s

5. Daedong Institute for Korean Studies (1996).

6. Morohashi (1959).

7. Underwood (1890).

8. An (1915).

9. *Dong-A Ilbo*, October 4, 1922.

edict and directive. “Culture,” as the anonym of “militarism,” appears to have not only signified a shift in Japan’s policies of colonial rule in Korea, but also resulted in a kind of ideological hodgepodge by providing Korean intellectuals with diverse avenues for realizing modernity in addition to “spiritual freedom and vigor,” “awakening of individuality and self” and “a sense of rising anew.” How did Korean intellectuals envision a new age and what did they see in this state of ideological hodgepodge? A review of the main features of Korean intellectuals’ thoughts surrounding the translated term *munhwa* (culture) will shed light not only on how the concept of “culture” emerged and found its place in the language, but also on the nature of the modern intellectual history of Korea in the 1920s.

### Between “Culture” and “Reconstruction”

The term “culture” that swept Korean society in the 1920s was in fact adopted as the translation of the German term “Kultur” by Nishi Amane in his book *Hyakugaku renkan* (Links of All Sciences), the oldest encyclopedia in Japan, and by Nakamura Masanao in his book *Saikoku risshi hen* (Stories of Self-Made Men in the West) (1871).<sup>10</sup> From the late Meiji era (1867-1912) to the early years of Taisho era (1912-1925), philosophers of the Neo-Kantian school at the University of Tokyo, including Kuwaki Kenyoku and Nitobe Inazo, as well as political scientists who included Oyama Ikuo, developed the term “culture,” meaning “self-development” and “self-cultivation” in reaction to enlightenment thought centered around “civilization.”<sup>11</sup> Self-development and self-cultivation were promoted for the purpose of reconstructing national character through individual improvement at a time when the Meiji government’s goal of “enriching the country, strengthening the military” had been achieved to a certain extent. These ideas defined the use of young people’s intellects for public

10. Ishizuka et al. (2003).

11. Miki (1986); Karaki (1963); and Tsutsui (1995).

purposes, growing out of their intellectual immaturity, as the most important virtue, and presented practical methods such as the pursuit of their own life goals, occupational choices, and resolutions along the lines of courage, self-restraint, honor, frugality, and reading. These are well illustrated in Nitobe Inazo's book *Shuyo* (Self-Cultivation) (1911) and Inoue Tetsujiro's *Jinkaku to shuyo* (Character and Self-Cultivation) (1915).<sup>12</sup> Eventually combined with the discourse of "reconstruction" (*gaejo* in Korean; *kaizo* in Japanese), which was the core criticism of Western civilization advocated by Bertrand Russell, who was admired by both Japan and China, the concept of culture constituted a huge magnetic field of "culturalism" in the Taisho era.

"Culturalism" in Japan in the 1910s, a central school of thought covering diverse contexts ranging from Immanuel Kant to Bertrand Russell, was not only a complex ideology in terms of its cognitive aspects but also in its ethical practices as well. The eventual inclusion of diverse meanings extending from self-development to reconstruction in the concept of "culture" was not unrelated to the context of European intellectual history since World War I. The concept of "culture" emerged in Europe when Thomas Mann praised it as a replacement for "civilization," the value of which ended with the close of World War I. On the other hand, France's Romain Rolland and Paul Valéry criticized the concept as an idolatry of evil, devised by philosophers advocating German idealism.<sup>13</sup> Between French intellectuals' Eurocentric stance guarding the value of "civilization" and the nationalist stance of their German counterparts who denied the value of "civilization" on its peripheries, and instead attempted to prove their spiritual superiority, Japanese intellectuals in the 1920s chose the latter.

Most eminent among them was Oyama Ikuo, who regarded Germany as an ideal modern state and emphasized the German concept of "culture." "Culture," as perceived by Japanese intellectuals at the time and evident in Oyama Ikuo's "Kunkokuteki bunkakokkashugi"

12. Nitobe (1911); and Inoue (1915).

13. Rolland (1959); and Valéry (1967).

(Militaristic Cultural Statism) (1916), was designed to overcome the gaps between the various classes, regions, and wealth levels among ethnic groups that were incorporated into mainland Japan, centering on the Yamato people, in the process of its colonial expansion. It also aimed at unifying national spirit within the community of a nation (*gungmin*) rather than a single ethnic group (*minjok*) and offered a lofty ideal to the nation.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of "culture" was thus an ideology of Japan's modern nation-state on the one hand and the core of an empire-building ideology on the other, with an underlying criticism of Western civilization centering on Britain and France. Reflecting this was the publication of the *Kaizo* (Reconstruction) special issue with Bertrand Russell, including interviews with him by Nishida Kitaro and others in September 1921, two months after Russell, then a visiting professor at China's Beijing University, visited Japan at the invitation of the magazine.<sup>15</sup> Saito Makoto's term "culture" arose in this context. "Culture politics," as mentioned in his edict and directive, was an ideology designed to integrate colonial Korea into Japan's nation-state and empire. But it is interesting that Korean intellectuals, including young lovers of literature, saw the possibility of modernizing colonial Korea through this logic of nation-state and empire.

Very important in this respect are the magazine *Gaebyeok* and discourses on "culture" and "reconstruction" that exercised great influence in forming the intellectual landscape of Korea in the 1920s. With the construction of a nation-state through "civilization and enlightenment" frustrated in the 1910s, Korean intellectuals at that time were searching for a central value that could solve at a stroke such diverse tasks as improvement of agriculture, educational dissemination and spiritual unification;<sup>16</sup> democratic equality;<sup>17</sup> elimination of regional gaps in daily life, conventions, customs, religion and

14. Oyama (1987).

15. Nishida (1921); and Miura (1986).

16. Yi D. (1920a).

17. Yi D. (1920c).

beliefs;<sup>18</sup> and the integration of private and public sectors through individual self-cultivation.<sup>19</sup> They also believed the culture and reconstruction discourses that swept Japan in the 1910s to be the only thing that could unite Koreans as a “nation.” One case in point is the fact that part of Oyama Ikuo’s “Militaristic Cultural Statism” was published in translation in a *Gaebyeok* series in 1924 under the title “Minjok-gwa gyegeup” (Nation and Class).<sup>20</sup> Another is the fact that Yi Don-hwa and Sin Sik, key intellectuals of *Gaebyeok*, based on Kuwaki Genyoku’s *Bunkashugi to shakai mondai* (Culturalism and Social Problems) (1920), defined the concept of “culture” as an ideal for “establishing new individual selves, new social selves, and a new group mind” through individual character development, equality, and the establishment of schools and other educational institutions.<sup>21</sup> These are all related to the fact that Kuwaki Genyoku understood “culture” from the perspective of world reconstruction and that Bertrand Russell was introduced as the latest Western thinker in the *Saishin shakai mondai juni ko* (Twelve Lectures on Recent Social Problems) (1919), authored by Ikuda Tsokowa and Honma Masao, which was used as a textbook on modern philosophy at the time, along with the *Shakai kaizo no hachi daishisoka* (Eight Great Thinkers of Social Reconstruction) (1920).<sup>22</sup> It is of great interest that the magazine *Gaebyeok* published an article titled “Introducing Bertrand Russell—A Leading Figure in the World of Philosophy” in May 1921, two months prior to his Japan visit, and portrayed his principles of social reconstruction that called for unifying individuals’ lives through their creativity and helping individuals achieve community objectives as the core of reconstruction ideology.<sup>23</sup>

18. Changhae Geosa (1921).

19. Sin (1921).

20. Oyama (1924a, 1924b, 1924c, 1925).

21. Kuwaki (1920); Yi D. (1920c); and Sin (1921).

22. Ikuda and Honma (1919, 1920).

23. Myohyangsanin (1921).

### “Culture” and the Task of Reconstructing National Character

Why diverse discourses on “culture” gained attraction can be attributed first to the fact that 1910’s theory of the “cultivation of one’s abilities” through capitalism, based on Western natural science, and individualism, based on freedom and equality, was completely discredited in the 1920s. It is also attributable to the prevailing concern among the country’s intellectuals over economic and social disruption with the introduction of socialism.<sup>24</sup> Korean intellectuals at the time, centered around *Gaebyeok*, saw reconstructing the national character of the Korean people as a means of realizing the values of “culture.” The discourse stemmed from intellectuals’ perception that Korea was over-indulging in materialism and individualism and that economic class conflicts were becoming serious. Accordingly, they asserted that the Korean people should awaken themselves by rebuilding their national character, and they upheld a restoration of “compassion for one’s countrymen” as the most important task.<sup>25</sup> Yi Don-hwa, for example, saw such compassion as a “public mind” that could be created through the dissemination of social education and elementary education. Viewing conflicts and confrontations over the material interests of all people as making Koreans more prejudiced and semi-illiterate in their economic impoverishment, he urged the Korean people to nurture their innate good abilities, conceive of themselves as the masters of their own destinies, view labor itself as happiness, choose their occupations where they could work happily, and seek the values of life not in the present but in the future.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, Myohyangsanin believed that the fundamental defects of Western civilization, which was rooted in capitalism, nationalism, and imperialism, affected Korea adversely by way of Japan; he maintained that Koreans should overcome these ill effects by developing their creative urges, namely knowledge, arts, and good will, and

24. Robinson (1990); Pak C. (1992); Kim H. (2000); and Ryu (2001).

25. Bak D. (1920).

26. Yi D. (1920c, 9-10, 16).

eventually by unifying and reforming their individual lives.<sup>27</sup>

What should be noted in such discourse on the concept of culture found in the magazine *Gaebyeok* is the fact that Korean intellectuals at the time were attempting to reorganize Korea and Koreans under the umbrella of the “nation,” while imagining a new utilitarian order of community in terms of “compassion for one’s countrymen” and the “group mind.” Also noteworthy is their perception that the spiritual crisis they saw happening in the country was not unique to Korea, but rather universal. These intellectuals therefore thought it urgent to reconstruct the national character of Koreans as a first step toward “reconstructing the world.”

Cases in point are Yi Don-hwa and Yi Gwang-su’s theory of reconstruction of national character. Yi Don-hwa, who regarded an “emphasis on character” as the core of “culture,” dealt with the theme in his article “Discussing the National Character of Korea.” Defining the character of the Korean people as “good natured,” he argued that this good nature, which had lasted from Old Joseon up until Goguryeo, had degraded into “laziness and idleness” during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). He also asserted that Korea, based on this prior “good nature,” should establish “basic common principles for the Korean people” and overcome the world’s inhumanity and injustice in the future.<sup>28</sup> Given that Yi Don-hwa’s logic,<sup>29</sup> as mentioned above, was an exact copy of Kuwaki Kenyoku’s ideas, there arises a serious problem that cannot be overlooked. That is the fact that while Kuwaki Genyoku felt the core of culturalism was the pursuit of “truth, goodness, and beauty” as a reasonable and universal value of humankind,<sup>30</sup> Yi Don-hwa believed the core of Korean culture lay in “goodness” alone. That is not unrelated to the fact that what he urged Koreans to practice was very similar to the vocational ethics Koreans had to acquire as citizens of a capitalist society.

27. Myohyangsanin (1921, 34-35).

28. Yi D. (1920b).

29. Heo (2004).

30. Kuwaki (1922, 147-150).

Underlying this was the pessimistic perception of Korean society as ethically corrupt.<sup>31</sup>

In the meantime, though he stated in the “Minjok gaejoron” (Theory of Reconstruction of National Character) that reconstruction should be ethical rather than political, Yi Gwang-su differed from Yi Don-hwa as to the starting point. Based on Gustave Le Bon’s *Les lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples* (1894),<sup>32</sup> Yi Gwang-su delved into the primary and secondary character of Koreans and attempted to present the task of reforming Koreans’ national character by looking into the historical development process of a secondary character. Koreans’ national character had degraded under the Joseon dynasty, in particular, giving rise to “falsehood,” “selfishness,” “laziness,” “lack of faith,” and “cowardice,” he said. Referring to the *Shanhaijing* (The Classic of the Mountains and Seas), he noted that the basic character of Koreans before these negative elements emerged was represented by “generosity,” “benevolence,” “courtesy,” “integrity,” “abstinence,” “self-esteem,” and “bravery.” He defined their modern counterparts as intellectual, moral, and physical education, accumulation of wealth, and a cultivated consciousness of social service.<sup>33</sup> The most important virtue in Yi Gwang-su’s theory was the discarding of feelings of inferiority, such as falsehood, trickery, hatred, anger, grudges, and jealousy; this gave rise to a call for practicing “self-cultivation,” such as seeking the truth and acting according to the truth. This moral reconstruction discourse, in keeping with Nitobe Inazo’s “self-cultivation,” gave birth to the ideas of

31. Yi D. (1920a, 9-10).

32. In April 1922, two months before his “Minjok gaejoron” was published, Yi Gwang-su published in *Gaebyeok*, Volume 4, an article by the pen name of Noa, titled, “Gungmin saenghwal-e daehan sasang-ui noryeok” (The Effort of Thought in the Life of People). As mentioned in the sub-title, the article was based on Gustave Le Bon’s *Les lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples*, more specifically on Chapter 1 “Le rôle des idées dans la vie des peuples” of Livre IV “Comment se modifient les caractères psychologiques des races.” The book was translated and published in 1910 in Japan by the Great Japan Civilization Council, chaired by Okuma Shigenobu. Yi Gwang-su appears to have read the Japanese version of the book.

33. Yi G. (1922).

the Heungsadan (Society for the Fostering of Activists) through the magazine *Gaebyeok*, and the inauguration of the Suyang Dongmaenghoe (Society for Promoting Self-Improvement) in December 1922.

Yi Gwang-su's logic bears considerable resemblance to Kantian concept of "enlightenment" (*Aufklärung*) in that he defined the reconstruction of national character as "establishing an objective, treading a planned course in order to achieve that objective, and measuring one's speed from time to time." Yi's logic did not distinguish "reconstruction" from "enlightenment." He claimed that the primary national character of Koreans coincided with the "five constant virtues" of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity, as referred to by Mencius and Dong Zhongshu's concept of human nature. He also used as practical guidelines Johann H. Pestalozzi's advocacy for intellectual, moral, and physical education and An Chang-ho's devotion to seeking the truth and acting according to the truth. This ideological hodgepodge reflected the sense of crisis held by the intellectuals of *Gaebyeok*. This crisis resulted from the criticism that because Joseon society was ethically corrupt, Joseon could not advance to the rank of a civilized state, to say nothing of a modern nation-state based on capitalism, without reform of Korean national character. The fact should not be overlooked, however, that Korean intellectuals' sense of crisis at the time coexisted with a perception that a crisis of Western civilization was taking place in Korea as well. Korean intellectuals constantly compared Korea's particular situation with that of the world in general.

Furthermore, this logic for advocating a reconstruction of Korean national character placed the West, Japan, and Korea in the same time-frame in spatial-temporal terms. This logic also depended on the historical perception, in chronological terms, that in the course of Korean historical development, the Joseon dynasty should have been overthrown so that the past could be restored. Although Yi Don-hwa and Yi Gwang-su used different rationales in calling for reform, they shared the common historical perception that Korean society had developed positively as a nation from ancient times through the medieval period, but that the Korean people's earlier traditions were

degraded by the hidebound ideology and culture of the Joseon aristocracy that was imbued with Neo-Confucianism, transplanted from China. This historical perception was in fact an ideological feature of Korean intellectuals in the 1920s.

### People's Arts as a Means of Implementing "Culture"

The advocacies for the reconstruction of national character, centered on the magazine *Gaebyeok*, are important not only because they all affirmed individuals' and the nation's creative urges, but also because they regarded these urges as the root of reform for individuals and the nation. The logic that individuals' lives had to be reformed and consolidated by developing Koreans' creative urges—knowledge, arts, and good will—was premised on the perception that education and arts are the roots of reform. Yi Don-hwa, too, arguing that differences in national characters lie in their artistic colors, attempted to prove that Korea's "emphasis on kindheartedness" is displayed in "poems and songs." Though he did not mention reforming poems, songs, and the arts for the sake of reconstructing national character, his perception that poems and songs reflected the common nature of a nation is quite significant in that it provided a glimpse into the literary viewpoint of the *Gaebyeok* intellectuals, and was linked with the journal *Joseon mundan* (Korean Literary World)'s argument that Korean national poems and songs, rooted in folk songs and *sijo* (a kind of short lyric poem), must be elevated to the ranks of world literature.<sup>34</sup>

It was Hyeon Cheol who took the lead in a new arts drive for the sake of reconstructing national character, the clarion call of Korean intellectuals at the time. He was one of many Korean intellectuals at the time who most completely embodied the concept of "culture." He knew very well not only that the "culture" Korean intellectuals were

34. Ku (2002, 2005).

fond of discussing then was a rendering of the German term “Kultur,” as well as of the English word “enlightenment,” meaning “education,” “refinement,” “moral cultivation” and “culture”, but also that the German term “Kultur” meant the perfection of individuality and personality on the basis of all mental pursuits, such as arts, science, morality, and religion.<sup>35</sup> Hyeon Cheol also agreed with Yi Don-hwa and Yi Gwang-su that Korean society was corrupt and impoverished, as it was mired in serious class conflicts. He argued that unless it pursued the creation of a new culture at breakneck speed, a corrupt and impoverished Korean society would not be able to confront the West at all. Therefore, he advocated the dissemination of people’s theaters and dramas that would help “cultivate” the largest possible number of Koreans within the shortest possible period of time with the aim of replacing such deplorable mores and vulgar conceptions as “falsehood,” “class,” “wealth and poverty,” “confusion,” and “jealousy” with the healthier notions of “truthfulness,” “equality,” “mutual aid,” and “mutual cooperation.”<sup>36</sup>

Needless to say, as he saw that “educating everyone, including noblemen and commoners, wise and illiterate, old and young” embodied the very meaning of “Kultur,” he demanded that Korean national character be reconstructed through the arts, while referring to Koreans as *minjung* (people). As he mentioned in his article, Hyeon Cheol’s points of argument mostly stemmed from the cultural research group of Waseda University, led by Tsubouchi Shoyo, or from the cultural drama theory, coined by Simamura Hogetzu.<sup>37</sup> They asserted that Japanese sentiments and thoughts should be reformed, and that Japanese culture should be restructured through the construction of public theaters and citizens’ theaters. Given the fact that the Waseda University’ theory of cultural theater emerged against the background of Romain Rolland’s “le théâtre du peuple” which had gained popularity with the restoration of the Taisho era’s

35. Hyeon (1921, 108-109).

36. Hyeon (1921, 112-114).

37. Eda (1955a).

culturalism and democracy, Hyeon Cheol’s idea of drama based on reconstruction should also be seen as having lain in the orbit of Rolland’s “le théâtre du peuple,” as well as the people’s arts that gained influence in Japan’s theater and literature circles during the Taisho era.

It is thus evident that the theory of education- and arts-centered reconstruction by Bertrand Russell, from which the *Gaebyeok*’s reconstruction theory stemmed, was linked with the people’s arts that were popular in Japan during the Taisho era. In this respect, it is necessary to review Yi Gwang-su’s article, entitled “Yesul-gwa insaeng” (Arts and Life) (1922), printed prior to the publication of his article “Minjok gaejoron” (Theory of Reconstruction of National Character). In the former article, Yi demanded that Koreans achieve moral as well as artistic reform. In other words, he claimed that Koreans should develop an attitude of viewing nature and human beings, as well as themselves, as artistic works. What Koreans needed to achieve in reconstructing their life and elevating their moral standards, according to Yi, was an arts tradition that the all people could enjoy. Arts that responded to such a demand most adequately were poems and songs. Grounded on this stance, he condemned the increasing popularity of popular songs through the sale of gramophone records and the so-called “new literature” as unworthy of being included in the category of true people’s arts.<sup>38</sup> Yi Gwang-su’s logic was related to not only Romain Rolland’s, but also Japan’s people’s arts in the 1910s, and particularly to the literary theory of Osugi Sakae and Kawaji Ryuko. Yi Gwang-su’s main points of argument in his article “Arts and Life” corresponded exactly with Osugi Sakae, who pointed out a lack of contact with reality on the part of symbolic or naturalist literature and asserted the significance of the people’s arts as the arts of a new age in a new world,<sup>39</sup> Yi’s argument agreed with the assertion of Kawaji Ryuko<sup>40</sup> who envisioned the possibilities

38. Yi G. (1922).

39. Osugi (1917); and Endo (1982, 28-29).

40. Kawaji (1918); and Endo (1982, 49-50).

of poetry as the people's arts through the historical development of folk songs and poetry.

What should be noted in Yi Gwang-su's "Arts and Life," however, is that he did not confine his argument to theater, as was the case with Hyeon Cheol, but to the arts in general. He diverted his argument to the logic of reforming not theater, but poetry and song. He was able to do so because Japan's people's arts in the 1910s covered a considerably wide spectrum, ranging from Honma Hisao, who first referred to Rolland's "le théâtre du peuple," and literature scholars such as Osugi Sakae and Kawaji Ryuko, to Tsubouchi Shoyo, the founder of a modern Japanese theater, and Osanai Kaoru, the most eminent proponent of Japanese theater in the 1910s. Among them Yi Gwang-su was very interested in Honma Hisao and Tsubouchi Shoyo, who adopted the logic of educating society and the people,<sup>41</sup> and Kwaji Ryuko, who embraced that of reforming poems and songs.

### Conclusion: "Culture" and Formation of the Notion of "Nation"

It is interesting to find that the evolution of the discourse on the concept of "culture" in colonial Korea was similar to the so-called "return to Japaneseness" in the 1920s, represented by *wakon yosai* (Japanese Spirit, Western Technology) while assimilating Western civilization.<sup>42</sup> As is well known in modern Japanese intellectual history, Japan's ideological trends from the Meiji era repeated a 20-year cycle of Westernization and a return to Japaneseness. A similar ideological track took place in Korea in the 1920s. The culture discourse in colonial Korea and the "return to Koreanness" that arose from it were clearly revealed in "Joseon munhwa gibon josa" (A Basic Survey of Korean Culture), a series published in the magazine *Gaebyeok* from January 1923 to September 1924. The first modern ethnological

41. Kawaji (1918, 49-50); Tsubouchi (1919); Kay (1922); and Eda (1955b, 84-93).

42. Kamiyama (1972, 190-191, 369); Kato (1980); Yamamoto (1985, 175-177); and Nishikawa (2001).

account done by Koreans, the survey covered a broad range of topics, touching on society, the economy, and culture.<sup>43</sup> The survey is significant, above all, in that it presented their own method of understanding their own cultural identity through explorations and travels by Koreans themselves, and also in that it was an attempt to understand the essence of Korean culture through the exploration of oral genres such as folk songs and tales.<sup>44</sup> This meant that the editorial staff of *Gaebyeok* felt a strong conviction about the identity and commonality of Korean culture, which transcended era and regional difference, and the intent to revive it. Such an intent was not only the expression of a historical perception—that the archetype of Korean national traits lay not in medieval and modern times but in ancient Korea—but also arose from the aspirations of Korean intellectuals at the time to see Koreans as members of a shared cultural and linguistic community. When a community undergoes a major political, social, or cultural upheaval, its members endeavor to locate their cultural identity in their ancient narrative and musical sensibility. Such efforts played a core role in forming the notion of modern nation and ideologies in the West as well.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, "A Basic Survey of Korean Culture" by *Gaebyeok* was essential to defining Koreans as members of a national community, along with the theories of reconstruction of national character and people's arts, by creating symbols of their cultural identity. In short, the *Gaebyeok* cultural discourse enabled the emergence and the formation of the notion of a modern nation and national ideologies.

43. Major items of exploration presented by the magazine *Gaebyeok* were (1) the causes and trends of social problems, (2) introduction and criticism of central figures and major institutions, (3) true or false human sentiments and customs, (4) the status of industry, education, and religion, (5) an exploration of historical sites and legends, (6) observation and criticism of other general situations. "A Basic Survey of Korean Culture—Publication of Provincial Editions," *Gaebyeok* 31 (January 1931) and "A Basic Survey of Korean Culture," *Gaebyeok* 33-36 (March-June 1923).

44. This, I think, is not unrelated to the full-scale emergence of travel accounts in the 1920s. Refer to Ku (2004).

45. Anderson (1991); and Morgan (1992).



The way in which the discourse of *Gaebyeok*, which centered around the imported concept of “culture,” discovered and reproduced the historical identity of Korean community through the oral genre, was considerably similar to that of German intellectuals prior to and following World War I, who defined the value of German culture under the yardstick of localness, and who, based on that value, pursued the integration of national culture and enhancement of national consciousness as their top priority.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the situation was quite similar to the thoughts of the literature scholars and writers of Japan, who were all graduates of the College of Literature at Tokyo University: Ueda Bing, Maeda Ringai, Haga Yaichi, and Sida Kishu. Referring to the German case, they attempted to reveal the essence and historical nature of Japanese national character by exploring, collecting, and studying folk songs.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, the discovery and introduction of folk songs by “A Basic Survey of Korean Culture” and *Gaebyeok* faithfully realized the concept of “culture” and its values.

The evolution of the concept of “culture” and the subsequent culture discourse in colonial Korea in the 1920s is also important in that it enabled the emergence of national literature, a main trend of modern Korean literature in the 1920s. After 1924, a group of writers, including Kim Eok, Yi Gwang-su, Ju Yo-han and Choe Nam-seon, rejected the achievements made by new literature until the 1910s, and discovered and reevaluated folk songs and *sijo* as the origins of modern literature while demanding that Koreans voluntarily devote themselves to such transcendent values as the “Korean spirit,” “Korean ethos” and “Korean sensibilities and ways of thinking.”<sup>48</sup> This situation was deeply related to the formation of the concept of “culture” in the colonial Korea of the 1920s. In particular, at that time, there was an attempt to return to “Koreanness” from the Western orientation of modern Korean literature in the 1910s. Also, while the aestheticism sought by modern Korean literature of the 1910s

46. Hermand (2002).

47. Shinada (2001, 190-200).

48. Ku (2002).

emphasized only autonomy in individuals’ aesthetic, political, and ethical consciousness,<sup>49</sup> the Korean writers mentioned above stressed the literary representation of what Kant called “*Gemeinsinn*” or “common consciousness,” in other words, the concept of a community such as a nation. This, above all, could be attributed to the concept of culture and the subsequent culture discourse.

Here we should not overlook the fact that the concept of “culture” in colonial Korea assumed the dual tasks of pursuing as well as denying and transcending modernity that was born in the Western context. These did not differ much from the German and Japanese cases. When taking a colonial Korea into account, the imported concept of “culture,” which was at the center of theories criticizing world civilizations and calling for reconstruction, was itself an impossible ideal and proof of the superficial ideality of Korean intellectuals at the time. It also exposed an ideological hodgepodge accommodating not only Japan’s discourses on culture and people’s arts after the Meiji era, but also Western discourses on national character and criticism of Western civilization. But more important were Korean intellectuals’ aspirations for a nation-state. Korean intellectuals, in identifying a nation in the modern sense and defining a state, had to use *minjok* (ethnic group/race) and Joseon in the place of *gungmin* (nation) and *gukga* (state). Under colonialism the basis of this “appellation” and “definition” was the imported concept of “culture” and their aspirations for a nation-state. It is no exaggeration to say that their aspirations provided strength to nullify any unrealism or ideological hodgepodge in the process of evolving the concept of “culture.”

Nonetheless, the path to realizing the value of the concept of “culture” in Korea could not help but be a rocky one. This was not only because Korea was a colony, but also because the concept of “culture” itself was one re-defined by Japan for the purpose of calling its colonial ethnic groups the people of the Japanese Empire, and was formed in reference to *bunka*, the Japanese rendition of “culture.”

49. Ku (2000).

The intellectuals of a colonial Korea attempted to form their own identity and representation through Japan's colonial discourse. If their efforts stemmed basically from implicit aspirations towards nation-state status, then the "culture" (*munhwa*) in colonial Korea can be regarded as a space in which *munhwa* confronted and vied with *bunka*, as well as a space in which *munhwa* could be absorbed by and integrated into *bunka* at any time. Evidence can be found in the fact that the magazine *Gaebyeok* carried out "A Basic Survey of Korean Culture" in an attempt to devise and revive Korea's cultural identity that transcended space and time, and at the same time translated Oyama Ikuo's "Militaristic Cultural Statism" under the title "Minjok-gwa gyegeup" (Nation and Class) with an urgent call for Joseon society to realize the democratic value of equality.

As often mentioned in post-colonialism discourse, this situation reminds one of the fate of intellectuals in colonial countries, who have no choice but to formulate their own identity and representations while mimicking the culture of their colonizer. Needless to say, numerous Korean intellectuals who contributed to the emergence, circulation, and growth of the concept of "culture" since the 1920s would not have foreseen such a fate. But this fate was evident when the literary critic Choe Jae-seo, on the occasion of the fall of Paris in June 1940, asserted that Korea should discard modern literature's cosmopolitanism, which was a relic of Europe's renaissance and romanticism, and instead join the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere and further proposed that Korean literature be advanced as the literature of great Asian nations as a part of Japanese culture.<sup>50</sup> Choe Jae-seo's logic, which criticized world civilization and advocated for the literature of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, was exactly an extension of the logic of criticizing world civilization, part of the cultural discourse in the 1920s, and advocacy of national literature. This was not confined to Choe Jae-seo. After the total mobilization system of the 1930s when the "colonial subject" was

50. Choe (1941, 1942).

formed while appropriating and internalizing the colonizer's discourse, and the 1940s when the theory of Eastern culture and the discourse on overcoming the modern emerged, this pattern was frequently found among the intellectuals of colonial Korea, who willingly adapted themselves to the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere logic.

The formation of the concept of "culture" and its discourse in the colonial Korea of the 1920s constituted one of the starting points of "colonial subjectivity." In this aspect, that can be said to be a touchstone in the history of modern Korean thought.

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**GLOSSARY**

Bigua		賁卦
<i>bunka</i> (J.)	▶ <i>munhwa</i>	
Cheondogyo		天道教
<i>Gaebyeok</i>		開闢
<i>gaejo</i>		改造
<i>gukga</i>		國家
<i>gungmin</i>		國民
Heungsadan		興士團
<i>minjok</i>		民族
<i>minjung</i>		民衆
<i>munhwa</i>		文化
<i>kaizo</i> (J.)	▶ <i>gaejo</i>	
<i>Shanhaijing</i> (Ch.)		山海經
Taisho (J.)		大正
<i>wakon yosai</i> (J.)		和魂洋材

(Ch.: Chinese; J.: Japanese)